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English C Essay
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**“Without contraries there is no progression”:
The Paradoxical Heterogeneity of Identity in Sinead O’Connor’s
Poetic Expression**

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Without contraries there is no progression. Attraction and repulsion,
reason and energy, love and hate, are necessary to human existence.
William Blake, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

What do a trade unionist, a Tory, a Christian, a wife-beater and a
consumer have in common?
They can all be the same person.
A riddle (in Sarup 57)

Introduction

According to Baudrillard, the postmodern theorist, in the modern society, characterized by excessive consumption, media orientation and bureaucratization, the notion of a stable identity is not only threatened, but in fact ceases to exist. The processes which contribute to the formation of the so-called mass or global society have also produced a new model of a subject. The nature of this postmodern subject is decentred, multi-fold and self-contradictory, and as such denies all fixity (Kellner 143-145). The aim of this essay is to argue that the awareness of such fragmented identity and the anxiety induced by this state are substantial motifs of the lyrics by Sinéad O'Connor, an Irish song-writer, well-known for her career as a rock musician.

The analysis undertaken here focuses mainly on the inner conflicts the subjects of O'Connor's texts experience while being exposed to the reality of the outer world, its systems of values and beliefs. In my view, this general theme of Self versus the Other is one of the keynotes of her writing. Its recurrence will be observed in one of O'Connor's earlier lyrics, namely "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got" from the musical album bearing the same title (1990), as well as in more recent ones: "What Doesn't Belong to Me," "The Healing Room" and "The Lamb's Book of Life" from the album *Faith and Courage* (2000).

Characteristically of the poet in question, in these lyrics the world is perceived as a realm of hostile falsity, which needs to be exposed, rebelled against, or even reshaped. Whether the source of such perception is a pure willingness to rebel or a deep egocentric contemplation, whether it bears traces of self-assurance or an inability to define the Self, the main aim here is neither to answer these questions nor to utter any evaluative judgments. Instead, what is proposed is a general lens to see these matters through, namely the notion of "the crisis of identity" understood, simply, as a lack of coherent identity (Sarup 42). However, what needs to be regarded is the fact that such crisis does not equal a failure or a powerlessness of any kind: it signifies the state the identity is in.

Sinead O'Connor: The Popular Image

Sinead O'Connor is commonly recognized as an icon of the contemporary pop culture. Famous for her phenomenal angel's voice, she is considered an expressive performer, a scandalous religious activist, as well as a provocative sex symbol and a loving mother at the same time. From the mid 1980's the artist has often been commented on and criticized, the position resulting in a proliferation of many-sided reputations, partially due to her shocking straightforward acts and statements, yet chiefly owing to the success of her albums. As Elizabeth B. Cullingford points out in *Ireland's Others. Gender and Ethnicity in Irish Literature and Popular Culture*, O'Connor "has been written off as unstable, self-destructive, egoistical, manipulative and spoiled" (256). Thus, it may seem that the extent of shocking revelations about the singer has put all substantial and authentic aspects of her music in their shadow.

Although it is her popular image that is most often deliberated by numerous journalists and authors, this paper aims at analyzing the aspects of O'Connor's artistic expression that seem to have been widely neglected or avoided in discussion, namely the lyrics of her authorship. The lyrics are considered the inseparable constituents of her art, recorded by the creator and invariable, and as such may give a desired insight into the artist's intended meaning. Hence, at this point, I would like to accentuate O'Connor's status in this work as a writer, whose lyrics, notwithstanding their neither being widely acknowledged nor included in anthologies of poetry, are sporadically published, read and analyzed in this form.¹

The Heterogeneity of O'Connor's Speaker

Taking into consideration the singer's stardom and her constant active participation in her argument with media, it might prove difficult to distinguish the speaking subject in the lyrics from the author herself. However contradictory her own statements on the precise issue are, the artist often admits her songs are personal (Cullingford 246). Considering this confession, in the following analysis of her songs I regard O'Connor's statements and biographical facts as

¹ In fact, each of O'Connor's albums is followed by a publication including the lyrics. It is also worth noticing that her poem "The Last Day of Our Acquaintance" is included in the selection *Ireland's Women Writings Past and Present* compiled by Katie Donovan, A. Norman Jeffares and Brendan Kennelly (London: Kyle Cathie, 1994). Amongst others, one reading of O'Connor's song that deserves attention is Elizabeth B. Cullingford's analysis of "Three babies," focusing on its motifs of abortion and its aftermaths, as compared to Seamus Heaney's poem "Limbo" (246-247).

significant for their meticulous reading, as the facts constitute discursive support of certain interpretive arguments. My attempt is to establish a compromise between the absolute identification of the personae with the author and the detachment of the two positions by acknowledging their entanglement.²

The opinions Sinead O'Connor's receivers express about her delivery very often elaborate on its heterogeneity, which is well exemplified by the entry in *Encyclopedia of Popular Music* where we read about "the strength and vulnerability which are pivotal elements in the singer's delivery" (3997). Equivalents of the duality of her expression can be found among the many revolting events that mark her career. For instance, the two acts that made her a page-oner were the tearing up of the Pope's picture during her performance on *Saturday Night Live* in 1992 and, the more recent one, O'Connor's ordination as a priestess in the Latin Tridentine Church of Mater Dei, a Christian order. This involvement with the Catholic Church seems paradoxical in the light of the strict canon of orthodox Christian behaviour, especially in her homeland, Ireland. O'Connor's confession that she "always knew that God was there despite religion and [that she has] always been interested in rescuing God from religion" (Cullingford 256) may indicate a mature consciousness of a discontinuity between her own understanding of the ultimate power and the way it is exercised by the masses. On the other hand, it can simply be a statement of dissent, an attack on the dominating system of beliefs. In a similar way, one can read one of her lyrics, namely "All babies," as she writes:

All babies are born saying God's name
Over and over,
All born singing God's name
All babies are flown from the Universe
From there they're lifted by the hands of angels
God gives them the stars to use as ladders
She hears their calls
She is mother and father
All babies are born out of great pain
Over and over
All born into great pain
All babies are crying
For no-one remembers God's name
(*Universal mother* album)

These lines may be read as an expression of this attitude towards the Christian image of God for they seem to present the deity in an ambivalent manner. God is the ultimate guide who "gives

² In the interview by Dedek for *Reflex magazine* Sinead O'Connor talks about a similar agreement between her own life and the topics she touches on.

[the babies] stars to use as ladders” and the natural protective force which evokes the impression of safeness in the lines “She hears their calls/She is mother and father.” Yet, at the same time, God may also be a source of suffering for “All babies are born out of great pain.” The misery, the punishment inflicted on the babies because “no-one remembers God’s name,” may suggest that certain rules, obligations exist which have to be exercised if one is to be included in the Church of God. Interestingly, O’Connor describes the divine as female, adding to the originality and the discontinuity of the representation.

As O’Connor’s lyrics touch on various aspects of an individual’s being such as the spiritual values one holds, origin and tradition or self-reliability, combined with existential contemplations on how the identity strives to establish inward and outward balance, the subject projected seems neither in a direct accordance with the two-fold perception of it nor the multilayered one. One possible way of describing the subject would be to combine both adjectives. Taken together, O’Connor’s approach to identity may be described as one remaining within the ongoing movement of decentring and deconstructing identity as an entity. Therefore, we may find throughout her songs the echoes of Freud’s ideas on the primarily dualistic nature of views, which has accelerated in its constant disintegration process with time (Kristeva 169).

The tendency of dismemberment is further maintained, and abolished at the same time, by the poststructuralist theory of Derrida who argues that the Self undergoes the evolution of fragmentation as the binary dualities within the human subject are proved to contradict and undermine each other (Eagleton 115). In the further development of the idea, while the modern identity sees its destruction as a basis for the production of new facets, the identity simultaneously doubts its existence altogether (Kellner 142). A poetic illustration of such a view may be the chant-like sequence of statements the speaker recites in O’Connor’s text entitled, “I am Enough for Myself”:

I am enough for myself
 I am in your heart
 I only can have that part
 I am in your dreams
 I only can touch these things
 I am who gives the breath
 I am your nakedness
 I am nothing at all
 And I am singing your soul
 I am that am I
 I am that am I

I am that I am
 I am enough for myself
 (*Gospel Oak* album)

On a first consideration, the lyric may be read as a litany-shaped expression of some spiritual, mystical truth. However, if read as the speaker's reflection on the nature of being, on the search for solidity, certain shifts and inconsistencies indicating doubt can be detected. The song begins with the titular self-directed, self-encouraging assertion. Still, in the next line an assumed recipient appears which may indicate the subject's need to be heard. The words "I am in your heart/ I only can have that part" as well as the two lines following not only imply the shift of focus but also alter the initial tone turning the self-encouragement into a manifest of power which has its peak in the line "I am who gives breath." The "nakedness," possibly a symbol of truth, seems to prepare the recipient referred to as "you" for its revelation, which is finalized in the words "I am nothing at all." The emptiness beheld at this point affects the entire poem, presenting the search for Self as an effort in vain. The repeated "I am that am I" constitutes a new attempt to identify oneself, yet it ends merely with the confirmation of existence. The repeated titular line appears to be like a curing dose of self-assertive placebo when it is needed. However, the words "I am enough for myself" might also signify the renewing qualities of achieved emptiness. All in all, the text may be interpreted either as an attempt to define oneself which is destined for failure, but also as an intended failure marking a new beginning. Hence, the identity remains unstable as, in both readings, the search for unity turns out to be more like a vicious circle than a destination-oriented journey.

O'Connor's Lyrics and the Postmodern Self

In the course of time and thought, this, as one might call it, trend of identity fragmentation pushes the question of Self further into the extreme point of the fixed-fluent continuum (if such a point exists at all). In its recent stages, with the spread of postmodern ideas, identity is even compared to a myth or illusion (Kellner 143). Furthermore, postmodernism addresses the contemporary issues of media-ruled society and culture. In so doing, it accounts for the growing complexity of self-reference witnessed, and treats the changes which affect a subject's identification with the generally understood context of ethics, ethnicity, etc. In this light, the lyrics of Sinéad O'Connor, a celebrity whose communication reaches the listeners and readers not only by the unaggressive means of literature, but mainly through the overwhelmingly present

mass media, may seem as one bearing traces of the postmodern lack of stability. Against this background, O'Connor's art may be seen as, in Charles Russell's words, the postmodern "art of shifting perspective, of double self-consciousness, of local and extended meaning" (Hutcheon 11). Irrespective of the theory applied to this question, the postmodern context of the image-producing, culture-mingling discourse seems to be connected with the contemporary songwriter's expression. However, the intention here is not to put an absolute equation mark between O'Connor's split subject and the one proposed by postmodernists. While anxiety in self-reflection is one feeling that can be identified in the lyrics discussed, the criticism in question claims that the contemporary self "no longer experiences anxiety and no longer possesses . . . depth and substantiality" (Kellner 144). My point here is to emphasize the consciousness of the unstable Self in the texts, which provides the key to the emotions that are expressed, although the postmodern culture denies them.³

Two modern phenomena worth mentioning here because of their media-based functioning are the interactional character of the singer's art caused by the contemporary, increased "Other-directness" (Kellner 142), as well as the production and mediation of the artist's identity. Inasmuch as O'Connor's "messages" are sent within the frames of popular music and culture, there exists a possibility that these two processes affect the lyrics in question. A curious example of the former one is the reaction of the vocalist's American fans to the *Saturday Night Live* performance. As Cullingford notices, a lot of people hated her for it, although few understood or even tried to understand her act. Some of her listeners believe that the lyrics to "The Lamb's Book of Life" are an apology directed to those offended by her act (256). In spite of the fact that this interpretation is one of many possible ones, it can be regarded as a demonstration of how the response might have affected O'Connor's expression and views, and as such the text will be discussed further in this paper. Again, this brings to mind the idea of the fragmented subject being an effect of or constrained by discourse (Alvesson 50). The second process mentioned above, namely the media-produced image of the artist, I feel, is less significant to the discussion, since it does not refer directly to the lyrics in question, but focuses on the primarily commercial aspects of reception. Therefore, the process will not be of much concern in the following analysis. Nevertheless, it needs to be borne in mind that it is one of the

³ With a similar aim, Douglas Kellner undertakes an analysis of a popular American TV series, entitled *Miami Vice*, in which he argues against the common perception of the cynical nature of the postmodern Self as illustrated by the characters of the detectives Crockett and Tubbs (148-158).

ways in which the entertainment business might affect O'Connor's writing, as well as the interpretation of her songs. As observed by Negus, a performer's identity is communicated "through a process in which the intentions of the artist are mediated [via performative texts such as interviews, videos, public actions] to various interpreting audiences" (178).

The Ambiguity of Structural Division

The construction of the following analysis attempts to mirror the multilayered, heterogeneous identity manifested throughout O'Connor's lyrics. The basic division between the Self, meaning the personae in her texts, and the aspects of identity emerging as effects of various interactions and relations with others, is a rather loose one, for the two components are connected with the common focus on discourse-produced heterogeneity. Thus the division, despite its existence, is merely a flexible boundary. It refers to the concept of polar opposites such as the Self and the Other, which may have marked one of the initial stages of the process of identity deconstruction. This contrasting, however, is considered unsuitable to present the significant interrelation between these oppositions, which, according to Derrida, who calls them respectively the centre and the supplement, mutually need one another to define and confirm the identity, as the latter marks what the former lacks. Yet the centre is also involved in a struggle with the overwhelming supplement (Sarup 141). This duality struggle is similar to the one current between an individual and the context he/she tries to escape from. Likewise, as Laclau points out, while identity tries to distinguish itself from the context, it cannot achieve the goal without asserting the context at the same time (Sarup 59). Thus, the two interweave in order to define the subject fully.

The discussion of identity is subdivided into specific polarities of self-possession and the lack of it, as read in two of O'Connor's lyrics: "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got" and "The Healing Room," and rootedness/escape from origin as observed in the lyrics to the song "What Doesn't Belong to Me." As far as the question of a more direct conversation with the Other that O'Connor's subject engages in is concerned, the textual basis is provided by the text "The Lamb's Book of Life." This division of the identity into specific polarities refers back to the notion of a binary struggle as well as to that very concept of discourse as crucial in creating the postmodern fragmented identity. Following the idea of identity positioning, which describes application of diverse, role-like standpoints depending on the requirements of discourse, whether it involves the individual's sexuality, social status or origin (Alvesson 150-151), we may identify

certain positions the personae of O'Connor's songs hold at the moment of expression. Consequently, the identity, or identities, presented become multilayered, each of the layers having its own division, simplified for the purpose of this reading to a dual one. Hence, O'Connor writes about her Irish roots, which she seems to accept and reject at the same time. Correspondingly, when she admits the rebellious side of the speaker's nature, this attitude may appear as a willingness to withdraw from the outside world, the world of the Other, and as a realization of the impossibility of this step as well.

Sinead O'Connor and the Self

During initial stages of analyzing the problem of identity in O'Connor's lyrics, certain questions may arise on the purpose of her "self-contemplative" writing. One possible answer is suggested by the journalist Simon Reynolds. While accounting for the survival of the psychoanalytic "talking cure" idea, despite postmodern deconstruction of this concept among others, he sees it as a kind of therapy against the overwhelming doubt saying:

Postmodern thought has undermined the idea that 'the truth' can be grasped in language. But the notion of authenticity continues to thrive in mainstream culture. . . . we live in a culture of confession, where to speak your pain and passion is considered the first step towards emotional health. (249)

It is this "first step" as well as the ones that follow that we can witness in O'Connor's work, her lyrics in particular, which, as she herself evidences, constitute a "spiritual journey" in the direction of the true Self (Doyle 44).

As mentioned earlier, the structural division of the analysis performed here may be considered rather dubious.⁴ Justifying the choice of the spiritually inclined "lost or found" aspect of self-confidence and self-possession as the first one to elaborate on becomes, therefore, equally problematic. However, my argument for this choice is that the condition may, indeed, constitute a starting point, a basis for the consequent dualities, as it is linked to the more general notion of

⁴ In the light of the postmodern disbelief in the stability of identity, where "one is never certain that one has made the right choice, that one has chosen one's 'true' identity, or even constituted an identity at all" (Kellner 142), any classification introduced in a discussion on these interweaving aspects of Self may become subject to dispute.

mental state, signifying a certain attitude about the other, more specific aspects. Bearing this assumption in mind, let us observe how O'Connor's speakers' "spiritual journey" begins.

Spiritually Lost or Self-confident?

There is often a tension present throughout her performances, between a more vulnerable and uncertain voice, and a more imperative and assertive voice.

Keith Negus (181)

Considering the above statement and other analogous comments on the ambivalent reception of the artist's articulation of self-assurance and her own evidence on the "Self-search" nature of her work, I suggest analyzing the aspect of identity in question on the basis of two texts, comparable and contrasting at the same time; the first one entitled "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got," and one "published" ten years after, namely "The Healing Room." The reading applied here aims at revealing the speaker's awareness of discrepancies within her insight into the possession of individuality.

The "spiritual journey" begins with the contemplative verse of "I do Not Want What I Haven't Got" which introduces the reader into the hardship of it:

I'm walking through the desert
And I am not frightened although it's hot
I have all that I requested
And I do not want what I haven't got

The speaker appears to be wandering through a void land, moving constantly despite the troubling heat and the lack of shelter. The reader can "sense" the determinateness of the steps taken by the subject, as in the line "And I am not frightened although it's hot" her strong self-reliance is stated. This initial impression may become disturbed when the attention is brought to the use of the word "want," which does not imply a need but is a statement of free will expressing individualistic desire and communicating the probable, rebellious function of the verse. The reader's doubt and the speaker's anxiety that might appear at this point are proved to be justified further as the recollection of mother comes forth:

I have learned this from my mother
See how happy she has made me
I will take this road much further
Though I know not where it takes me

Initially, the image of mother may seem to bear positive connotations of a teacher, a mentor, an authority the subject wishes to follow. Yet, with the words “See how happy she has made me,” again, we might find ourselves confused and somehow deceived, since the juxtaposition of the experienced discomfort and happiness marks the verse with irony. Still, despite the apprehension about achieving her goal and the doubt in its actual existence the speaker states “I will take this road much further,” introducing a more optimistic tone into the depiction of her quest.

After this addition of the personal factor, intensifying the impression of the journey’s hardship, the following verses may be interpreted as the return to the initial decision of self-reliance in endurance:

I have water for my journey
I have bread and I have wine
No longer will I be hungry
For the bread of life is mine

I saw a navy blue bird
Flying way above the sea
I walked on and I learned later
That this navy blue bird was me

I returned a paler bluebird
And this is the advice they gave me
"You must not try to be too pure
You must fly closer to the sea"

So I'm walking through the desert
And I am not frightened although it's hot
I have all that I requested
And I do not want what I haven't got

Further into the journey, when the “explorer” watches “a bluebird/Flying way above the sea” and she discovers that it is an image of herself, the moment reflects a realization, an emphasis of the transcendental aim of the journey enterprise. The appearance of “bluebird” may correspond both to the freedom inherent in artistic license as well as to the persona’s own remoteness from reality. Looking at herself from an observer’s point of view, she employs a different lens to her self-contemplation, which thus becomes enriched. When the search for Self comes to an end, “the bluebird” is “paler,” as if being commonsensically enlightened after the reflective journey. Nevertheless, it still is a bird, able to fly by means of its own “wings.” However, this remaining spirit is further exposed to “their” advice to “fly closer to the sea,” another intervention from the outside, the Other. “Their” piece of advice, with its decisive and imperative tone, disrupts the self-realization by attempting to dominate the direction of this process as well as to convince the

“bluebird” to lower the flight and abandon her desire. The surface of “the sea” appears to be the dividing line between her and “them,” yet it also signifies the danger of an unwanted, alien influence which may terminate hope and ambition. The next journey, although described in similar words, cannot be a similar experience; the “paler bluebird” knows now how to fly according to “their” expectations, but at the same time seems more ensured in its defiance as the speaker repeats the initial manifest of self-reliance.

All in all, in the course of “the journey,” a sacrifice of the inner, original richness is required. Still, the subject, conscious of this fact, strives to keep “the spirit” firm against conformity. She remains strong until she reveals her vulnerability when encountering “the voices from the outside”: the hurtful memory of mother and those who wish to change the persona. Against them, a wall of determination, of consciousness is raised in order to protect the fragile artistic, bird-like personality. The wall, however, is not impenetrable, as it allows for the alterations to take place inside the Self as a result of the actions of the Other.

The song entitled “The Healing Room” may be considered a continuation of this journey or an announcement of reaching its destination. Thus, the reader may have the impression that the setting for the lyrics is inside those mentioned walls, which mark the limits of the speaker’s most personal space:

I have a universe inside me
 Where I can go and spirit guides me
 There I can ask oh any question
 I get the answers if I listen

I have a healing room inside me
 The loving healers there they feed me
 They make me happy with their laughter
 They kiss and tell me I'm their daughter
 I'm their daughter

Analogously to the previous one, in this text the personal niche is resided by someone or something besides the persona. Nevertheless, this time “They” are not the intruding voices of the outside, but “the loving healers” able of feeding her with inner strength, solving any uncertainty and curing any confusion. They are a source of simple love and childlike happiness. The rebellious tone hidden in the previous lyric diminishes here, as the titular “healing room” occurs as the resting-place after the journey taken in “I Do Not Want What I Haven’t Got.” Yet, what is maintained is the common motif of the need for acceptance, received here in the form of “the

loving healers” that the speaker perceives as the guardians who “kiss and tell me I’m their daughter.” Thus, as the speaker succeeds in finding the accepting agent in the entity of the Self, the inner medium functions as a substitute for the Other.

Whether it is the end of the journey, whether the destination is truly reached, and how is it to be determined, these are the questions raised further in the analysis of the conversational character of O’Connor’s lyrics. Returning to the text above and the persona discussed, while deciding on own self-reliance, the speaker decides to acquire a preacher-like tone, spreading her enthusiasm to others who need it:

You have a little voice inside you
It doesn't matter who you think you may be
You're not free if you don't know me

See I'm not the lie that lives outside you
And it doesn't matter what you think you believe
You're not free if you don't know me
If you don't know me

Thus, we find out that the guiding spirit is inherent in one’s centre; it signifies a universal component of every receiver, irrespective of “who you think you may be,” the formulated self-definition or the identity chosen by means of beliefs. As we read further, however, we encounter the danger of the Other again, when it takes the shape of “the lie that lives outside you.” It seems to correspond to the destructive, alternating force “They” hold in the first song discussed. But it is once more opposed by the resistant willingness to become free from it. The liberation from “the lie outside,” from the hurt it conveys, requires the consciousness of the spirit which is spoken out in the line “You’re not free if you don’t know me.”

Both lyrics manifest the subject’s distrust of the outer world and describe the steps taken in order to find a shelter “underground,” in the space of the personal niche. The Other is always there; ready to provide the Self with false advice and the illusion of approval, the fake confirmation of the individual’s value. With the subject’s realization comes the strength needed to separate oneself from the outer world. The liberation, however, is born out of disappointment and doubt of the Other. The established confidence designates a desperate move towards the inner world which is most often associated with the illness of schizophrenia. However, as discussed in postmodernism, this move is not equal to alienation. In the age of postmodern thought, alienation would provide an escape from any problem and, what’s more, it would presuppose a coherent rather than a fragmented sense of selfhood. As Sarup concludes, “there is

good reason, then, to believe that alienation of the subject is being displaced by fragmentation of the subject” (97). Supposedly, in support of this observation, O’Connor’s writing expresses the feeling of being split between the hailing outer world with its readily established, false advisory and mothering agency, and the inner withdrawal which might be the rebellious response of the fragile subject. Nevertheless, according to Derrida, the escape from these aspects of the outer system that form the deceitful meanings and values is not possible, since the tendency to establish and maintain such principles is inherent in every human being (Eagleton 114). Therefore, the consciousness developed as a result of the journey in search of a self-confident identity, may be exposed as nothing more than a realization of the fact mentioned. Additionally, it may result in another duality, namely the combination of the loss of initial innocence and the gain of the awareness of this experience, the potential source of change.

The fact that the creator of these lyrics is a public person, a popular artist involved in the machinery of the contemporary image-producing music industry allows a reading more focused on the perception of the persona as a troubled artist. Seen from this point of view, the insecurity of the subject may be caused by the requirements and obligations the broadly defined media impose upon her, and which aim at altering the original message of the artist. Indeed, O’Connor often gives her receivers this hint when speaking about the detrimental effects the media’s and music industry’s co-operation has on her expression as well as mental well-being.⁵ It is interesting to observe that applying the singer’s opinion on the media to her work would mean withdrawing from the music business and abandoning her career. Yet, although several times she declared the willingness to do so, O’Connor has kept her fans in suspense for almost two decades now and is still considered a prolific and a devoted artist. This contributes only to the divergence of her overall expression.

As much as the question of establishing an internal spiritual confidence may be seen, as O’Connor puts it, as an “attempt to be true to myself” (Doyle 44), in her poetry she also seems to be addressing the question of origin with a corresponding aim. The justification for this idea of the connection between the notions of identity and rootedness is well expressed by Sarup, who uses the simple, yet emotionally evocative concept of “home” and establishes a definition common to both notions as “the story we tell of ourselves and which is also the story that others

⁵ It is one of the main themes touched on in the interview with O’Connor by Tom Doyle (*Mojo Magazine*).

tell to us” (3). On initial consideration, the characterization includes a hidden paradoxical hint. By juxtaposing two diametrical sources of origin in his definition, the theorist avoids giving an unambiguous answer to the question of whether this aspect of identity belongs to a person, or is it the person who belongs to her/his origin. Hence, what is proposed is the recognition of both contradictory possibilities, for the agencies of the Self and the Other appear to be intertwined. By analyzing O’Connor’s lyrics, entitled “What Doesn’t Belong to Me,” I wish to illustrate how that paradox can function in the realm of the Self in process.

Deeply-rooted or Rootless?

To recall Laclau’s idea of identity versus context, in the course of forming individualistic distinctness, a selfhood manifests its distressing position of being conditioned by the context, which, at the same time, prevents the constitution of individuality (Sarup 59). Since, by definition, the term “context” is a very broad one,⁶ my aim here is to apply Laclau’s theory to Sinead O’Connor’s Irish background, origin and upbringing, as it is presented in her lyrics.

Numerous articles treating the various aspects of the artist’s career repeatedly refer to her strong, emotional connection with the Irish land and nation as well as to the witnessed evidence of it in her artistic message, often prompted by the singer’s own statements. It is argued that while the incorporation of lines in the Irish language into several of her lyrics is a straightforward proof of the attachment, she also manifests it in the musical arrangements of her songs, for instance “the impression of being caught out in a slashing storm on a wintry Irish coast” in the song “Jackie” from her first album *The Lion and the Cobra* (Prendergast 253). Not surprisingly, O’Connor herself is reported to have said that the intention behind the making of this album was to counteract the representation of Irish stereotypes by “not sounding like a wistful female Irish singer” (Negus 185). Cullingford undertakes the difficult task of providing an explanation of this dichotomous attitude by linking the poet with the trend of “critical nationalism” popularly employed by many Irish authors. The main characteristic of this “attitude policy,” according to her, is the maintenance of traditional images, even despite their origin being often identified as nationalistic, with the presumption that they have their righteous role and place in the general

⁶ The Free On-line Dictionary of Computing (Denis Howe, 1993-2005) defines context as “That which surrounds and gives meaning to.” 8 Oct 2005 < <http://foldoc.doc.ic.ac.uk/foldoc/Dictionary.gz>>.

course of Irish experience (Cullingford 257). Although the idea is already twofold in itself, O'Connor's texts seem to add one more suggestion to the mentioned discussion, namely the need for self-encouraged reflection on the question of Irish origin and the consequent change in its perception. Again, the background for the appearance of the ideas is the search for identity and the state of anxiety caused by its fragmentation.

One of the lyrics in which the concern in question may be identified is the song "What Doesn't Belong To Me." In its opening, a sequence of descent is recited, which resembles an introduction into the historical and mythical background of the Irish:

The woman named Iris gave birth to the goddess
In her son who can't say her name

In Iris the listener may, simply, recognize an Irish woman. Her origin is additionally emphasized by her name, the equivalent of this nationality term in the Irish Gaelic tongue. Iris is human, an earthly being, yet her delivery of a goddess brings a supernatural, unreal element into the song. It may reflect the conventional perception of the way folk legends are created: "born" out of an urge to establish a heritage they are fictional conceptions of common people. "The goddess" here is a particular one. She seems to symbolize the land, yet adds a new, visionary dimension to its definition. Nevertheless, with the second line, a negative flow interferes with the mythical realm. A shameful descendant appears, "her son who can't say her name," the Irishman who cannot speak Irish, who thus signifies the coming of whole generations of such traitors to their own roots. The juxtaposition of "Iris gave birth to the goddess/ In her son," signifies the paradox of the relation the descendant has with his mother. The belief in the mythical origin of Ireland is "in" him. Hence, he identifies himself with the "romantic," folk vision of Irishness, yet he does not follow his human ancestors and fails to practice their original culture. The linguistic component of origin, the genuine heritage of language has ceased to be the determinant of rootedness. What is claimed instead is the tradition, the history, the fairytale of "the goddess" Ireland. In other words, this short fragment may account for the abstract character of the contemporary Irish, which demonstrates nothing more than the praise of the past, while overlooking the present. Being, as O'Connor states in an interview, "obsessionally attached to [their] past [and] addicted to [their] history" (Brzozowicz), the Irish seem to become passive and lose control over the survival of their rootedness.

After this expressively sonorous introduction, the speaker turns to the Self in order to present her inner conflicts provoked by the condition:

I miss you but I'm glad you're gone
 I want you but I'm not alone
 I'm haunted by you
 But I'll get you gone if it takes me all my life long

The listener may interpret it as a discourse in which the angry speaker talks to her own Irishness like a betrayed woman talks to the lost lover whose vision is still tempting her. She feels affected by it and, in a way, cherishes the past experience, possibly the lost state of unawareness when she says "I miss you," yet her disappointment is stronger as she decisively states "but I'm glad you're gone." The longing is disconnected; despite her ambivalent feelings, what dominates is the satisfaction of a conscious choice. Saying "I'm not alone," the subject manifests her independence, as she has chosen her own ideology, her own path. Still, regardless of how autonomous she decides to be, O'Connor's speaker is "haunted" by the condition of her nation. It is not stated whether the reappearing pain is caused by an outer agency or is it self-inflicted; possibly both sources act here. Yet, despite the realized effort, a strong decision is taken to eliminate this element from the Self in the line "I'll get you gone even if it takes me all my life long." In order to establish the desired identity, it has to be cleared of the corrupt roots.

As if immediately introducing the decision into life, the speaker utters a series of strong, imperative sentences:

You take back the pain you gave me
 You take back what doesn't belong to me
 Take back the shame you gave me
 Take back what doesn't belong to me

I'm Irish, I'm English, I'm Moslem, I'm Jewish
 I'm a girl, I'm a boy
 And the goddess meant for me only joy

Again, the emotions are the driving force here, as the listener can almost hear her shouting the statement out. The repeated verb "take back" indicates that the unwanted lie of origin was imposed upon the subject, that she was once submerged in it, which marked her Self with "pain" and "shame." The chant is like a series of spells with which she wishes to eradicate this negative influence, the whole of "what doesn't belong to [her]." In an outburst of liberation, generalizations, including nationality and gender become deconstructed, since claiming all of them she claims none. Concluding with "And the goddess meant for me only joy" the subject

refers to the intention behind the creation of the mythical, historical heritage, which is seen here as positive, joy-giving in its original shape. Yet, in the course of the nation's history it became contaminated with hatred and pain.

Still, the speaker expresses a belief in the revival of the origin in the shape of the universal opponent of all conflict-compelling emotions, namely the simple and unspoiled feeling of love:

And real love requires you, give up those loves
Whom you think you love best
Love puts you through the test
And only loyal love will bring me happiness

In her seemingly idealistic vision, she desires Irishness to be a part of her emotional life, her identity, yet only if it is as pure as "real love." Moreover, in the phrase "real love requires you," she appears to address her compatriots, emphasizing with the word "real" the difference between the origin she proposes and the one they represent. This love is, however, presented as a conditional one. What it "requires," what it needs to be nurtured with is a deep engagement, internalization of its pure qualities, as opposed to the surface-manifested illusion of love, which hides hostility and anger underneath. That is why the love demands to eliminate the negative flows of "those loves/ Whom you think you love best." The speaker's vision of immaculate love is also challenging since "it puts [one] through the test." Thus, "only loyal love," faithful to its essence, is the right one, the one which cures the accumulated pain and thus can "bring happiness." Anxious to clear herself of the past, the subject will take the challenge in order to feel more complete, to become at peace with this element of her identity. In so doing, she does not adjust herself to the common national context, but tries to adapt the origin to the context of her Self.

As much as the subject in "What doesn't Belong to Me" experiences the hardship of the task of overthrowing the influence of national experience, she seems to consider it cathartic, as an exorcism and a baptism at the same time. There is a deep concern over O'Connor's home country in the lyrics, but the concern over the fragile and sensitive Self is given more significance. The sensitive consciousness is the key to the realization of the hurting reality. But it is also a blessing, since it leads to the discovery of a cure for the pain it causes. Hence, the speaker wishes to remain Irish, yet with self-defined roots.

The solution O'Connor's speaker finds is to "repossess" the origin and become the creator of own roots.⁷ Nevertheless, accomplishing it requires an act resembling betrayal. Foucault described this modern search for descent as "the opposite of erecting foundations [with the aim] to disturb the immobile, fragment the unified and show the heterogeneity of what was thought to be consistent" (Sarup 72). Thus, only after destroying the ideologies that, generally speaking, push the idea of origin into the wrong direction, and ceasing to mourn the past, only then can one find the answer to the question of one's rootedness. Recognizing this task, O'Connor's persona decides to undertake it. Split between the heart-warming idea of belonging and the firm self-consciousness, she chooses the purity of love to be the determinant of her new Irishness. The resulting identity, although somewhat new, is ideologically explained as coming back to the true intention, to the authentic Irish roots.

Up to this point, the analysis attended to those aspects of O'Connor's texts that touch on the speaker's endeavors to build an inwardly balanced identity, firm and assertive against the consequences of the aggressive influence of the Other. As much as the following section constitutes a continuation of this discussion, the lyric read here, namely "The Lamb's Book of Life," I believe, requires the listener to consider it as seemingly and comparatively different in its focus and purpose from the previous text. Once more, O'Connor's Self turns against the adversary of the Other, which is represented here by the subject's/ the artist's audience. However, when reading these lyrics one may have the immediate impression that the song serves as a part of an already established, direct dialogue between the two sides of the conflict.

The Self Versus the World: Provocative, Shocking or Acceptance-seeking?

Revisiting the question of seeking affirmation by the confused Self, analyzed earlier in O'Connor's "I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got" and "The Healing Room," it was argued that

⁷ An analogous anxiety over the tradition of the people of Eire is described by Eavan Boland. Although, as a "full-time poet," Boland mainly refers to the difficulties she experiences while facing the Irish literary tradition, similarly to O'Connor she decides not to come to terms with the way this tradition functions. Both poets evidence the overwhelming pressure of the imposed national character and admit they have felt entrapped in it. Still, as a consequence, they both acquire the strength to redefine it (Kirkpatrick 6).

an intimate realm is established within the identity, a source of self-acceptance and a cure for the falsity of the outside. This would imply that, as a result, a satisfactory state of inner peace is achieved, which also encourages the subject to boldly disallow the influence of the Other. However, as, according to Kellner, the modern self still remains within “the structure of interaction with socially defined . . . norms, customs and expectations . . . in a complex process of mutual recognition” (142), I will attempt to prove that the internal balance is still a matter of negotiation with the outside. The traces of this reciprocal mechanism will be studied in O’Connor’s “The Lamb’s Book of Life.” Sufficient attention will also be given to the fact that “the story of the song” is connected with O’Connor’s status as a public person.

As pointed out by Cullingford, the following text was interpreted as an apology for the artist’s audacious appearance in the popular American TV programme *Saturday Night Live*. As much as I regard the lyric as a response to the public vilification she experienced after the performance, I believe that a close reading may reveal that O’Connor is, in fact, far from regretting. One may easily be misled by the text’s straightforward tone and surface content, resembling a public statement. Yet, the text, rich in meaning, is much more than that. Following this reasoning, I suggest reconsidering the song and perceiving it neither as an admission of weakness nor guilt. Instead, “The Lamb’s Book of Life” is to be explored as another act of inconformity supporting the previous one. What is more, I feel, the lyrics constitute O’Connor’s call for the public to open their minds to her delivery.

In the opening lines of “The Lamb’s Book of Life” the attention is drawn to the situation that led to an apparent conflict:

Out of Ireland I have come
Great hatred and little room
Maimed us at the start
And now home just breaks my heart
To America I have come
I hope to bring your preacher men
Home to show my people how they can
Get their names back in the book of life of the lamb

Ireland, the subject’s home country, is described here as the place where “Great hatred and little room” are juxtaposed, which points to the hermetic character of the Irish nation O’Connor often emphasizes as well as, possibly, the (religious) conflicts Irish people have maintained among themselves. The fervor of such ideological dispute “maimed” the people, leaving them blind and disabled in the sense of lacking awareness of the limitations their situation brings. When the

persona says “now home just breaks my heart,” she poses herself as the conscious one, the one who somehow manages to separate herself from her background enough to take the role of an (almost) reserved story teller. As an enlightened individual, she directs her steps to America, associated with its historical symbolism as a New Land, the land of hope and a new beginning. The tone of the words directed to its inhabitants (O’Connor’s offended audience), namely “I hope to bring your preacher men/ Home,” suggests a certain admiration for the faith they hold. This is, however, disturbed by the expression which, I feel, provides the key to the proper sense of the whole poem. The preacher men are to “show [her] people how,” to catechize, to open their eyes to the genuine worship by helping the lost ones “Get their names back in the *book* of life of the Lamb” (emphasis mine). The contrariness of the assumed message is revealed here. By using this phrase, paradoxical in its religious essence, the speaker aims at showing that the waves of limitation and institutionalization of beliefs which drove her from home have touched the listeners as well. The very image of God, or Jesus Christ as “the lamb,” to be consistent with Christian symbolism, settling upon his faithful by means of a register, “the book,” deconstructs the whole idea of spirituality. Thus, seeking support from the “preacher men” is hoping in vain, since deep within they carry the same lie.

After this shocking statement, the persona decides to soothe the harm done by uttering words of explanation, formed in a manner typical for an act of apologizing:

I know that I have done many things
 To give you reason not to listen to me
 Especially as I have been so angry
 But if you'd knew me maybe you would understand me
 Words can't express how sorry I am
 If I ever caused pain to anybody
 I just hope that you can show compassion
 And love me enough to just please listen

Expressing awareness of the aggressive character of her acts the speaker acknowledges the hearers’ antagonism towards her message. Yet, the purpose for the introduction of this seemingly self-explanatory description is more egoistical that it appears to be. Saying “if you knew me maybe you would understand me,” she accounts for the public’s lack of interest in the impulses that led to the offensive performance in the first place, its true meaning. Thus, she splits the blame in two between herself and them. Their effortless, surface-focused reception contributes to the misunderstandings in interaction. Similarly to the concluding line in the first part of the text, the aim is to expose the imperfection of the other side of the dialogue.

Additionally, the speaker brings attention to the deficiency of language; not only does it fail to convey the intended meaning as in “Words can’t express how sorry I am,” but, consequently, it also constitutes another obstacle in interaction. Hence, both sides fail to establish a link of understanding. After expressing her own emotions, she emphatically turns to the emotional side of the public. Assuming that there is “pain” caused by her words, the persona hopes to open the hearers for her message asking them to “show compassion/ And love [her].” Once more in O’Connor’s writing, these feelings appear as the universal healers of all pain, which in the case of this text, I believe, is inflicted by the conventions and rules turning spiritual values like faith or empathy into false systems like those she observes back home as well as in America. After the speaker’s attempt to open the channel of emotional communication, the peacefully uttered request “please listen” comes. The hearers are prepared now to internalize the meaning conveyed by the poet. What follows, although the remaining part of the lyrics is not included here, is a circular repetition of the whole fragment discussed, with particular words slightly changed, which suggests that the speaker’s aim is to emphatically reinforce the message.

On the one hand, the fact that this poetic statement appears to be directed to the offended Americans shows that the identity projected by O’Connor is, indeed, concerned with the reactions of the others. Admittedly, the condition makes the subject dependant upon people’s recognition. On the other hand, however, the statement is not accompanied by any willingness to change. Quite on the contrary, the identity strives to remain consistent in the convictions held, thus it seeks emotional appreciation in the opponents referring to their Self.

Touching on the disagreements and misunderstandings in the writer-reader/singer-hearer connection, the artist expresses linguistic anxiety as observed in the post-structural theory of Derrida, who argued that signs like words are never in accordance with their meaning (Eagleton 111). Therefore, any verbal utterance is subject to inexhaustible interpretation. Another aspect worth considering is the means by which O’Connor communicates her message. As explained by Baudrillard, mass media cause disturbance in distinguishing between the real and the performed, therefore even an authentic meaning conveyed by the media does not become internalized, it remains unreal (Sarup 112). The theory may clarify the rather unanimous and unreflective reaction viewers of *SNL* demonstrated. Whereas O’Connor stated that, generally, she destroyed Pope’s picture to make others realize “we all need to fight for self-esteem” (Doyle 42), the popular opinion was that “a gigantic misguided ego [was] at work here” (Buckley 704).

In summary, a conclusion may be drawn on the contribution of these obstacles to the formation of identity. Yet, the question of whether it is provocative, rebellious, or rather submissive cannot be solved in an uncomplicated manner. To my mind, one of the characteristic themes of O'Connor's texts is the inability to cope with two dimensions of living, the public and the intimate one, which is apparent specifically in "The Lamb's Book of Life." The confusion results in a dichotomy of identity, which acts boldly in an act of disobedience against "what doesn't belong to [it]," yet needs sufficient appreciation in order to have strength and opportunity to speak it out. Thus, O'Connor's persona places herself somewhere in the middle, between the two extremes. That is where she may expose the evil of the Other by reflection coming straight out of the Self and thus be a "mirror that everyone [can] see their madness in" (Doyle 42).

Conclusion

Cut out the poetry

Let's hit the main artery

"I'm Not your Baby" (Collaborations album, lines 22-23)

Upon analysis, it may be concluded that the search for identity presented in O'Connor's lyrics, or as she calls it, the "spiritual journey," is a struggle for emotional autonomy in a world where emotion has become systematized and artificial. As a result, institutions of religion, nationality or family have lost their pure essence. The apparent unawareness of the general surrounding maintains this situation. Still, the subjects O'Connor projects, although overwhelmed by the influence of this condition, are "gifted with" the consciousness of the emptiness of values offered, longing for a space of their own, their own individualistic identity. In order to stand firmly against the threatening outside, they desire to establish self-possession and self-confidence in order to oppose the conventions imposed upon them.

This characterization of the Self does not come purely from poetic imagination. The concerns that O'Connor touches on seem to be corresponding to her own experiences, and, more importantly, mark genuine problems an individual may experience in the contemporary reality, where the omniscient popular culture and globalization prompt free exchange of ideas and cultures, where everything is exhibited and emotions are simulated. As argued by Baudrillard, the surface is no longer distinguished from the depth (Sarup 112), and if so, one can doubt the existence of a dividing line between those dimensions of meaning. The world is not one

O'Connor created for the purpose of her art; this is the world where the singer manages to sell millions of records, gain thousands of devoted enthusiasts of her expression and still be "banished" from the scene by her audience. It is the reality which created the paradoxical phenomenon of a civil war. For a subject submerged in contradictoriness and confusion of thought, establishing a concrete identity is as challenging as possible, yet the result may constitute a promise of protection against or liberation from these circumstances.

Nevertheless, regardless of the effort made, the subject is constantly accompanied by the inseparable dilemma of remaining under the control of the outside, considering only the fact of living and engaging in reflective reception of the surrounding context. Thus, the resulting fragmented identity undermines the whole idea of unity it desires to achieve. As a product of the world, O'Connor's speaker is culturally conditioned and, to its despair, responsive to the reality as illustrated in the lyrics to "What Doesn't Belong To Me." However, she is consistent in her struggle to become self-defined. Caught in an unlivable space between the Self and the Other, facing the paradox of her own position, she feels "poisoned" and seeks an "antidote." Realizing the desire would require the impossible enterprise of becoming "acontextual or unsituated entity" (Norris 83). As a natural consequence, generally speaking, serious doubts appear.

While experiencing this disorientation, O'Connor's speaker clutches to one certainty which for her is the realm of emotional reception. Convinced that she can trust the self-emitted, pristine feeling of love, she nominates it the determinant of authenticity, a "testing device" for all phenomena, as analyzed, for example in "The Healing Room" or in "What Doesn't Belong To Me." That is how the subject establishes the ethics understood by Foucault, simply, as the "Self's' relation to itself" (Sarup 87). Thus, the desire for identity becomes substituted by the desire for inner authenticity. The Other may only be internalized by passing this test for genuineness, while the Self is internally guided by it. Authenticity, as Reynolds argues, is the notion which thrives in the contemporary popular culture, contradictorily to the observed disbelief in an objective version of truth (249). Sinead O'Connor being, inarguably, a significant contributor to the culture, bases her "spiritual journey" on this pure concept. Only by employing it as a fundament may the subject of her lyrics find solutions to the paradoxical heterogeneity of her identity.

The postmodern theories, which I largely used as background argumentation for the analysis of the artist's songs, however, do not support the idea that authenticity may exist in modern times. In fact, postmodernism decisively "rejects authenticity and replaces it with practices, discourses and textual play" (Sarup 96). Nevertheless, my primary goal while discussing O'Connor's subject in this light, was to prove that an identity, or rather the Self can counterattack the postmodern condition of the world it lives in. It is still subject to ongoing fragmentation as the falsity of the surrounding affects it. However, O'Connor introduces an active persona, who consciously processes the reality and has the self-created ability to identify the lies "conceived by one part of mankind and blindly repeated by another" (Dedek). Observing both the Self and the Other, the speaker experiences anxiety and establishes a strong, emotional stand against this state of things. It may be paralleled with the way O'Connor uses her power and status as a pop icon to raise serious social and political issues (Cullingford 256). Although the media contribute to the breakdowns in her interaction with her audience, the vocalist hopes to reinforce her message, simultaneously deconstructing the medium. Admitting she has much to say, the Irish "bald-headed banshee" (Buckley 704), confesses "I've created the circumstances where I can say it" (Reynolds 252).

Elaborating on O'Connor's expression, Reynolds makes a point about the personal-cum-political content of her lyrics: "O'Connor's conviction [is] that putting her own emotional house in order and setting the world to rights [are] inextricably intertwined facets of the same quest for truth" (251). In his criticism he even suggests that "Sinead wants to be the Queen of Truth [whose] vision emphasizes the monarch's duty, not self-indulgence" (251). I only wish to comment that while her achievements may be considered a source of power, the power seems to be devoid of any traces of superiority. Suffering the same condition as others, she distributes "the truth" to others in the form of forceful and shocking performances. Admitting her weakness, the artist hopes her "mission" will provoke change, not only reproduce the reality. Referring to O'Connor's lyrics and public acts as well, Cullingford expresses her optimistic view that the singer does succeed in reaching the hearers with her awareness-raising message saying "Twenty years from now, O'Connor, despite her personal fragility and career-threatening displays of idealism, will look more like a pioneer than an eccentric" (257).

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