Penelope in Three Movements: A Reading of Dorothy Molloy's 'Waiting for Julio'¹

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*The Mai set about looking for that magic thread that would
stitch us together again and she found it at Owl Lake, the most
coveted site in the country.*

Marina Carr

The epigraph that opens this essay, from Marina Carr's celebrated tragedy *The Mai*, binds together the attributes associated with the mythical character of Penelope, namely those of waiting and weaving. Although Carr's play is not a direct retelling of Homer's *Odyssey*, the trope of the woman waiting for her husband to return home after a long absence, and that of her dedicated needlework while he is away are skilfully woven into the main action, showcasing the playwright's overt interest in Greek myths and tragedies. When Millie, the daughter of Carr's eponymous character and also the narrating voice of the play, talks about her mother's waiting for her beloved Robert, she does so in terms that necessarily bring to mind the queen from Ithaca: 'The Mai sat in front of this big window here', explains Millie, 'her chin moonward, a frown on her forehead, as if she were pulsing messages to some remote star which would *ricochet* and *lance* Robert wherever he was, her eyes closed tightly, her lips forming two words noiselessly. Come home—come home' (emphasis added).²

The gender pattern in the classical story is a rather easily identifiable one: Odysseus goes away into his world of risk-taking and adventures—be they personal or public—while Penelope is relegated to the domestic space—risk-free and secluded—where the main (non-)activities she engages in are, on the one hand, her stubborn waiting for someone who may or may not return and, on the other, her weaving and unweaving. The twenty years of Penelope's waiting have intrigued scholars, writers and visual artists alike. How can someone keep her faith in the return of their beloved for so long? What exactly were the corporeal and sexual implications of such a long wait? Did she ever consider any of her suitors as an alternative for her seemingly paralysed affective life? How did she perceive herself—in body and mind? Was her needlework a source of enjoyment and creativity, or rather the only available outlet for her existential boredom? These unanswered mysteries have been extraordinarily fertile ground from whence to revisit and retell the story of Penelope and Odysseus over the centuries.

Greek mythology is still venerated as the epitome of civilisation, as if in its engaging plotlines there laid the key to solving our contemporary conflicts and identity issues. Evidence of this is the frequency with which the classics have been, and continue to be, revisited, rewritten and/or translated in world literatures, to the point that these stories have become what Marcel Detienne has often termed 'available signifiers', that is, the visible surfaces upon which to discuss matters of contention not necessarily relevant for the classics, but compelling for the contemporary audiences in question. As Michael Walton has put it, myth 'becomes personal by virtue of its universality, inviting

¹ Financial support for the research carried out for this essay was provided by the R&D Project FFI2013-45642-R and the Research Group *Intersecciones* (GrupIn14-068).

² Marina Carr, *Marina Carr: Plays 1* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999), 111.

decodings tied to each new occasion or circumstance'.³ Ireland is no exception in this respect. Writing about the twentieth-century literary output of the country, Marianne McDonald has contended that 'there seem to be more translations and versions of Greek tragedy that have come from Ireland than from any other country in the English-speaking world. In many ways', she goes on to argue, 'Ireland is constructing its identity through the representations offered by Greek tragedy'.⁴ Irish Antigones, Medeas, Iphigenias and Phaedras multiply in twentieth and twenty-first century Irish literature—in poetry, drama and fiction—as do, among others, Irish Penelopes, Helens of Troy, Yocastas and Cassandras. Sometimes these female characters retain their names and their original temporal and geographical locations—providing authors with a comfortable distance at which to discuss the present—and other times their names and contexts are changed, quite often Hibernicized in the case of Irish literature. Marina Carr, for instance, has shown a tendency to bring the classical characters to the contemporary context of the Irish Midlands, changing their names accordingly (Iphigenia becomes Ariel, The Mai is a Penelope of sorts, and Portia Coughlan can be read as a version of Antigone),⁵ while Michael Longley, who has written extensively about his passion for Homer, prefers to retain the names and contexts of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in his poems in order to 'keep at a distance whatever political parallels the story may suggest'.⁶

The aim of this essay is to close-read Dorothy Molloy's poem 'Waiting for Julio'⁷ under the spotlight of the Homeric characters of Penelope and Odysseus/Ulysses. In Molloy's text, the constant emphasis on clothes, textiles and the washing and scrubbing carried out by the female protagonist will add one important layer of meaning to the palimpsest of readings of the Greek myth. Although feminist interpretations of the waiting trope, the weaving and the refusal to remarry on the part of Penelope are far from scant,⁸ the reading (and rejection) of strong gender asymmetries into Homer's plotline—what we could call 'victim narratives'—has been pervasive both in criticism and in artistic revisions of the myth. Thus, the critical assessment of this poem will necessarily be enriched by the tradition of interpretative frames for the Homeric story. I will also place Dorothy Molloy's poem in an international context of revisionist myth-making and, specifically, will connect it with a long list of Penelopes and Odysseuses recreated by contemporary Irish women poets who thus contribute to the debates on gender politics in the context of contemporary Ireland. This close reading will be

³ Michael Walton, 'Hit or Myth: The Greeks and Irish Drama', *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, eds. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (London: Methuen, 2002), 4.

⁴ Marianne McDonald, 'The Irish and Greek Tragedy', *Amid Our Troubles: Irish Versions of Greek Tragedy*, eds. Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton (London: Methuen, 2002), 37.

⁵ Carr has also used the original names and settings of her classical heroines in *Phaedra Backwards* and *Hecuba* (Marina Carr: *Plays* 3. London: Faber and Faber, 2015).

⁶ Michael Longley, *One Wide Expanse* (Dublin: UCD Press, 2015), 34.

⁷ Dorothy Molloy, *Long-distance Swimmer* (Clare: Salmon Poetry, 2009), 26-27.

⁸ See, for example, Lillian Doherty, *Siren Songs: Gender, Audiences, and Narrators in the Odyssey* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Patricia Marquardt, 'Penelope "Polutropos"', *The American Journal of Philology* 106.1 (1985): 32-48; Melissa Muller, 'Helen's Hands: Weaving for Kleos in the Odyssey', *Helios* 37.1 (2010): 1-21; Sheila Murnaghan, *Disguise and Recognition in the Odyssey* (Plymouth: Lexington Books, 2011, 2nd. Edition); and 'Breaking with the Victim Narrative: Representations of Women in the Trojan War Tradition and Feminist Scholarship'. Web blog post. *The Trojan War: A Blog for Discussion and Research*. 10 May 2012. Web. 22 Sept. 2016.

structured in three sections that account for the three themes that are paramount both in Molloy's contemporary text and in the related episodes in the *Odyssey*: love and its institutionalization, the long wait with its strong relationship to clothes and textiles and, finally, the return of the hero.

'Waiting for Julio' is part of *Long-distance Swimmer*, Dorothy Molloy's third—and, sadly—last collection of poetry.⁹ In her three published books the poet covers a wide range of themes that encompasses the deconstruction, even demonization, of romantic love, female sexuality, patterns of abuse within family circles,¹⁰ the interaction between humans and non-humans, illness and also life in the diaspora. Between 1964 and 1979 Molloy lived in Spain, mainly in Barcelona, where she became intensely involved in the artistic scene of the city, becoming a visual artist of some recognition. Spain and the Mediterranean feature quite strongly in her published work, which she wrote, principally, after moving back to Ireland. In *Long-distance Swimmer* seven of the poems relate to Spain in one way or another, 'Waiting for Julio' being one of them. The names of the protagonists (Maria and Julio) and the reference to the Civil War—one of the most traumatic episodes in the history of Spain—together with Molloy's own interest in and deep knowledge of all things Spanish necessarily bring to mind a Spanish context for the action narrated by the poetic persona of this text. But apart from the names and loose historical reference, the theme of the poem is universal enough not to be circumscribed to the specificities of any given Civil War or political conflict, and the naked action connects us with classical Greece as much as with a modern European scenario. The plotline of the poem can be summarized as follows: a woman is left behind by her husband, a soldier who must comply with what is expected of him in a time of war. The story then revolves around the (non-)activity of the waiting woman and the final return of the hero to his home when the war ends.

Movement 1: Love at First Sight?

'Waiting for Julio' opens with a succinct outline of the relationship between Maria and Julio. In seven lines Molloy skilfully reproduces a pattern of interaction between the sexes that is easily recognizable in social practice, mythology, world literature, popular culture and the visual arts alike. Although described as 'love at first sight',¹¹ the two lines that follow introduce us into the almost immediate institutionalization of their initial experience of love: 'He made friends with her father, put a ring on her finger / and gave her a son'. The emergent comradeship between Maria's father and her boyfriend—the mother figure completely absent from the narrative—and the social compulsion towards marriage, symbolized here by the ring on *her* finger, place Maria in a secondary

⁹ Dorothy Molloy (Ballina 1942—Dublin 2004) published three poetry collections: *Hare Soup* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), *Gethsemane Day* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) and *Long-distance Swimmer* (Clare: Salmon Poetry, 2009). Even though Molloy revised the galley proofs and was there for the whole process of putting the first book together, strictly speaking the three collections could be considered posthumous, since her untimely death took place, poignantly enough, days before *Hare Soup* came out. Thanks to the volume of finished poems she left behind, the second and third collections could also be published.

¹⁰ For an interesting analysis of (violent) sexuality in Dorothy Molloy's poetry, see Ailbhe Darcy (2014). In her essay, Darcy locates Molloy's work within the tradition of the Gurlisque to show how Irish society is 'disentangling itself from the structures and institutions of the Catholic Church' (319).

¹¹ *Long-distance Swimmer* 26.

position within a patriarchal establishment. The perpetuation of this male-oriented economy in the experience of love is symbolically guaranteed by the gender of their offspring, a son who, as Molloy's syntax evidences, Julio 'gave her'. The male appropriation of procreation that transpires through the construction of this sentence, where Julio is the active subject and Maria is conceptualized as the passive, receiving vessel, reinforces the dominant male-ness of Maria's world. The next two lines picture Julio at war, sending letters to Maria 'from the Front'. In the epistolary relationship that ensues, we only access Julio's representation of reality—his admiration of his wife-muse ('he called her "My Jewel"') and the kisses sent to 'the boy'. Moving as this may sound, the silence of Maria and her portrayal as merely a memory of beauty in Julio's imagination once again reinforce the male domination in this clearly recognizable tale. The formulaic content of the letters suggests that the gender distinctions in representations of love have a strong performative nature by means of which socially-learned values and patterns of behaviour—such as the male assuming the role of the warrior/soldier and the female that of silent domesticity and motherhood—pass off as naturally given.

It is not infrequent to find in Dorothy Molloy's *oeuvre* a poignant critique of the dire consequences that the institutionalization of love means for women. In 'Eternity Ring'¹² the poet focuses on the eponymous object that the poetic persona has acquired in the course of her marriage. While the 'eternity' of the title of the poem would suggest the enduring nature of romantic love, as the lines progress such an idealization is transformed into never-ending damnation for the protagonist, who will find it impossible to get rid of both the object and what it symbolically signifies. This reversal of meaning for the 'eternity' of her ring is poignantly pictured through images of violence and physical pain: 'the ring set with stones that eat into // my flesh', explains the woman. In an attempt to undermine the cannibalistic effect of the object on her own corporeality she tries different remedies, from the more aggressive—'fretsaws and slashers / and pneumatic drills'—to religious antidotes and widespread popular solutions—'Fatima, / butter and soap. Lard'. The violence increases further when none of these work, including the risk of even losing her own finger in the pursuit of freedom: 'I rode a tank over my knuckles, // I dropped a bomb onto my hand', only to find that '[t]he ring is still grand'. The futility of women's attempts at breaking loose from the institution of marriage is also dealt with in Molloy's 'Le Grands Seigneurs',¹³ where the poetic persona describes her relationship with men as one of light enjoyment: 'Men were my dolphins, my performing seals' ... 'They were the rocking-horses / prancing down the promenade, the bandstand / where the music played', she states. In all of these descriptions the hetero-normative economy is perceived as one of inequality between men and women, the woman situated on the favoured side of the dichotomy. However, the poem emphasizes that both the playfulness in these exchanges and the sense of the woman's control over the sexual interactions are performative in nature, that is, learnt and socially determined by rigid behavioural patterns: 'We played at courtly love', admits the narrator. The final stanza of the poem poignantly reveals the illusionary game of love by presenting men as the true dominant forces of the encounters. The poetic persona, who up to this point had been blind to the trap of

¹² Dorothy Molloy, *Hare Soup* (Faber and Faber, 2004), 14.

¹³ *Hare Soup* 37.

romance, painfully experiences her existential reality through marriage: 'But after I was wedded, bedded, I became / (yes, overnight) a toy, a plaything, little woman, / wife, a bit of fluff'.

One of the main consequences of the new gender order imposed by marriage in 'Le Grands Seigneurs' is the assumed domesticity in the identity of the poetic persona. The radical separation of spaces—inside (the home) and outside (public life: war, work, leisure)—has traditionally corresponded to a gender divide that is also observed in 'Waiting for Julio'; when the Civil War breaks out Julio goes to the Front while Maria is left behind to look after the house and child. In Ireland, the centenary of the 1913 lockout and of the 1916 Easter Rising have triggered new research on the active role women played in the process of nation formation. Similarly, the participation of women in the Spanish Civil War has been unearthed by historians who have redressed the imbalances in the official historical records. However, the link between women and domesticity does correspond to a generalized gendered politics of space that, in its turn, manifests itself by means of a gendered hierarchy of socio-economic power. For Wendy Langford romantic love is a microcosm that perpetuates the gender imbalances of any given society. 'Love', she argues, 'does not create a private domain in which humanity thrives apart from a competitive and alienating public world; on the contrary, life "within the refuge" is itself determined by the exercise of power, and love in itself helps to underpin an inhumane and unequal society'.¹⁴ Similarly, Erich Fromm has conceptualized romantic love as a mercantilist transaction where we feel attracted to the 'best object available on the market ... [i]n a culture in which marketing orientation prevails'.¹⁵ Such analyses of love deconstruct romanticism by disclosing its culturally-constructed nature and exposing its limitations in terms of, for example, gender and social class.

Although the aforementioned theorists mainly deal with the recent past, their conclusions could be equally applicable to the mythological past, where the same structures of power between the sexes can be found. Just as Maria is left behind by her soldier-husband, Penelope must stay in Ithaca while Odysseus starts his adventurous journey. Anne Le Marquand Hartigan's long poem 'Penelope'¹⁶ revisits Homer to problematize the literary construction of the eponymous heroine. Even though the text emphasizes Penelope's condition as a queen—and hence as the bearer of territorial power of some sort—'I am Queen. / And they know it'¹⁷—Hartigan specifies that her power is principally mental, and, accordingly, cannot really translate into concrete political action: 'I am Queen: / And I am more free than they, / My mind can wander / In most places'.¹⁸ This Penelope exercises some degree of control by refusing to marry the suitors that stay in Ithaca, but her already limited agentive power is further thwarted when she falls prey to the mythology of romantic love. After reflecting for a long time on the purpose of her domestic seclusion, she concludes that 'I am a Queen. / And I am

¹⁴ Wendy Langford, *Revolutions of the Heart: Gender, Power and the Delusion of Love* (London: Routledge, 1999), xii.

¹⁵ Erich Fromm, *The Art of Loving* (London: Thorsons, 1995), 3.

¹⁶ Anne Le Marquand Hartigan, *Immortal Sins* (Dublin: Salmon Poetry, 1993), 22-28.

¹⁷ Hartigan 24.

¹⁸ Hartigan 26.

a fool. // Do only fools love?’¹⁹ Hartigan’s anachronistic references to the mass media in her poem—‘My eyes are not glued / To television every night. I do not watch // It tells of death. / Paper deaths’,²⁰ explains Penelope—contribute to linking the mythical past with modern times in order to reflect the perpetuation of patriarchal structures across cultures and historical periods, making it very difficult for women to step out of their assigned roles.

In the opening lines of ‘Waiting for Julio’ the relationship between the sexes is presented as one of unequal force. Against Julio’s masculinist agentive power, there grows in the reader a strong awareness of Maria’s silence. Hartigan’s poem, in a similar vein, highlights, in its formal structure, the lack of articulation suffered by Penelope: the text is presented as a dialogue, with two voices that converse about the heroine’s waiting and weaving. However, the dialogic nature of the exchanges proves artificial: Penelope’s musings are addressed to some kind of chorus voice—maybe her own subconscious—whose aim is to question her stubborn waiting and to inspire her awakening. Hartigan’s Penelope is not really talking to anyone except, maybe, to herself.

The silence of Penelope in the *Odyssey* has been interpreted as cunning and intelligence on the part of the Homeric character, that is, as her own particular strategy to navigate through the male-oriented economy imposed upon her,²¹ rather than simply a mere lack of agency and disempowerment. A comparison of the specificities of place and time in the construction of the ancient Penelope and the more contemporary Maria would fall outside the scope of this essay. However—and regardless of the degree of accuracy of such an interpretation for Homer’s historical background—it is the disempowering kind of silence that has come down in history as Penelope’s attribute. The same silence that most contemporary writers aim at denouncing in their revisions and the same kind of silence Maria is doomed to at this point of her story.

Movement 2: Waiting and The Textile

The second, and longest, part of ‘Waiting for Julio’ describes what happened during the waiting that gives the poem its title. While the Civil War is taking place somewhere else, Maria engages in her domestic chores: looking after the baby and keeping Julio’s memory alive by making sure his side of the bed is intact, plumping up his pillows and embroidering ‘his name // in the linen’.²² Julio’s presence *en absentia* is thus preserved symbolically through objects of the domestic sphere (bed, pillows, bed linen), the only sphere that Maria has access to. In *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With*, Sherry Turkle reminds us of the strong importance of the material in our emotional, affective and even sexual development. ‘We live our lives in the middle of things. Material culture carries emotions and ideas of startling intensity. Yet only recently have objects begun to receive the attention they deserve’,²³ she contends. In our relationship to objects much is revealed about our own thoughts and emotions, as well as about the social structures that regulate them. In Molloy’s poem, the bed, the pillow and the sheets are all

¹⁹ Hartigan 28.

²⁰ Hartigan 27.

²¹ This is the argument of Patricia Marquardt in her essay ‘Penelope “Polutropos”’.

²² Long-distance Swimmer 26.

²³ Sherry Turkle, *Evocative Objects: Things We Think With* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 6.

evocative of sexual and sensual intimacy. Maria's dedicated inscription of Julio's name in the linen reinforces his central role within the family structure and, most importantly, functions as a strong signifier of Maria's chaste waiting for the soldier who may, or may not, return home.

This aspect of the waiting (Penelope's, the soldier's wife's, the political prisoner's partner's) has been exploited in popular culture and literature across time, where the faithfulness of the woman left behind by the mythical hero/warrior/soldier connotes an existence of repressed sexual desire, or even the absence of desire altogether on her part. In 'Waiting for Julio' the time of absence is occupied with routine activities that are described mechanically. This confers upon the waiting a performative dimension, in other words, the chastity of the protagonist and her textual as well as sexual inscription of Julio's presence *en absentia* in the household are presented as learnt actions. As a result, Maria's waiting as an act of unconditional love is problematized in the text. This interpretation does not rule out the possibility of Maria's missing Julio and/or experiencing a deep sense of mourning during the war period (as we will see below). But it does also highlight that such a feeling of loss is not presented exclusively as an unquestionable emotional and sexual dependence. It is also inscribed as part of Maria's process of socialization in the dynamics of marriage and romantic love. This interpretation would be in keeping with a tradition of feminist revisions of the Penelope trope by contemporary women poets and artists who have strongly objected to the heroine's asexual waiting.

For example, in Anne Hartigan's 'Penelope', the dialogic structure used ensures that the heroine's awareness of her sexual needs is awoken. The chorus-like voice interpellates Penelope with questions and blunt statements: 'You are growing old: / Are you waiting for / A rotting corpse / To lap to your shore?' The spectral voice challenges her to '[b]ecome dry / Stay bleached / Stiff as starched linen',²⁴ the reference to linen here strengthening the link to sexuality and intimacy referred to above. Penelope's statements about her sewing—'I never liked it. Only / the joy of outwitting [the suitors]'—and about her domestic chores—'Housecraft doesn't interest me. / Servants and housekeepers / Are for that'—interpret the Homeric heroine along the same lines of the victim narrative that has been pervasive in readings of the classical text. Even though she shows a degree of freedom in her decision not to marry the suitors, she nonetheless cries at night and sees herself as an implement in a patriarchal establishment: 'I have wept. Tears / Have been an instrumental tool, / Have been and will be / For countless years / I reckon'.²⁵ The unhappiness of the waiting is also read in Eva Bourke's 'Penelope'.²⁶ On this occasion, the Homeric heroine is portrayed in her workshop, 'picking up threads where she left them / the day before',²⁷ and separated from the male world of the suitors, who are entertained by their wine-drinking and night parties. The poem echoes John Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' in the parallelism established between the bucolic scenes in Penelope's woven text and those represented in the romantic poet's urn: lovers, trees, musicians from Arcady. However, the

²⁴ Hartigan 22-23.

²⁵ Hartigan 26.

²⁶ Eva Bourke, *Spring in Henry Street* (Dublin: The Dedalus Press, 1996), 20-21.

²⁷ Bourke 20.

parallelism does not go beyond the merely superficial. In Keats such scenes of still life had become a metaphor for the immortality of art as opposed to the transient and frail nature of human existence: lovers will always be about to consummate their kiss, forever suspended in that climatic moment preceding the union of their lips; her beauty will never fade, and he will always be in love; Spring will never cease and trees will never shed their leaves. In short, the art of the urn will outlive the human observing it and nowhere is this spirit better summarized than in the poem's oft-quoted oxymoron '[h]eard melodies are sweet, but those unheard / Are sweeter'. However, in Eva Bourke's poem, the scenes woven during the day are un-woven at night in what becomes a never-ending circle that ensures the immanence of her art and the disappearance of lovers, music, and nature: 'Lovers rise from the grass, go their separate ways, / baskets empty themselves of fruit, / trees leave the orchards, // sunlight lifts from the hills as orchards and hills, too, vanish, / a melody plays back to its keynote'. The sense of futility in Penelope's prolonged waiting becomes anxiety: 'she fears / She, too, might undo if she's not careful'.²⁸ Although the end of the poem may point at ambiguity in Penelope's power to destroy and un-do her own reality through her art, the last lines problematize her faithful waiting once more: she has 'grown old and sad at her loom' and is doomed to 'begin [her weaving] from scratch'.²⁹

Irish artist Kathy Prendergast has also explored the theme of waiting in her installation of the same title [*Waiting*, 1980], a life-size piece representing three seated female figures. They all wear yellowish long dresses reminiscent of a distant past, suggesting that the waiting has now lasted for a considerable length of time. The seated position of the women connotes passivity and boredom—their hands rest on their laps in total calm. In none of the cases have the hands been caught in the midst of movement, the artist has instead chosen to represent them in this almost inert fashion. The heads of all three women are missing from the representation, as are their breasts (both breasts in the case of the middle figure, just one in that of the left- and right-hand-side figures). The background of the installation is formed by dressmaking patterns. Textile images abound in Prendergast's work and have been read as the artist's 'metaphor for social conventions, for how lives are tailored to society's allotted roles'.³⁰ Once more, then, the seated position, the textiles and the missing parts of the female bodies connect these figures with the Homeric heroine and question the non-act of waiting and the passive existence that history has reserved for women of all times. Prendergast's installation does not leave the audience indifferent, partly because the three figures represent the uncanny, in the Freudian sense of the word—that eerie feeling that comes from objects and images that are familiar to us but presented before our eyes in unfamiliar ways. The strangeness of the physical and emotional consequences of the waiting embodied in the unsettling decapitated women is precisely what deconstructs the sanctioned version of Penelope's waiting as a positive role model.

We had left Maria waiting in the company of pillows and bed linen. But Molloy's references to the textile in 'Waiting for Julio' do not end here, and what follows in the poem steers our interpretation in another interesting direction. After listing Maria's

²⁸ Bourke 20.

²⁹ Bourke 21.

³⁰ 'Kathy Prendergast: Map of the Human Heart'.

domestic chores, the text describes, in quite a lot of detail, the different steps she takes in the process of washing those same sheets:

She soaked them in troughs
 of dark water behind the house. She scrubbed them
 on washboards of stone.
 She dragged them up steps to the kitchen, in buckets
 and basins and tubs.
 She strung them out neat on a line that stretched taut
 from her window to peaks
 that poked holes in the sky. She pegged them on tight.
 Clouds of carbolic
 hung over the house and got under her skin.³¹

Penelope's waiting here turns into frantic physical activity. The repetition of the subject-verb-object syntactic structure ('She soaked them'; 'She scrubbed them'; 'She dragged them'; 'She strung them out'; 'She pegged them on') guarantees the representation of Maria as the agent of this intense hustle and bustle and thus presents an interesting transgression of traditional representations of Penelope's waiting as being a passive non-action. This new interpretative frame also connotes the embroidering of Julio's name in the linen with creativity. The linen becomes the canvas/paper upon which to inscribe meaning, its whiteness hiding the potential to become all the other colours of the spectrum. It is not infrequent to find references to knitting, weaving and sewing as creative outlets for women in literature and art, particularly in the contemporary retellings of classical myths. In 'Silenced',³² for instance, Eavan Boland writes about Philomel, a somehow minor character in Greek mythology but whose story has often been recovered in the work of (particularly women) artists and writers. After being raped by her sister's husband, Tereus, Philomel is mutilated (her tongue cut out) to guarantee her silence. In Boland's poem, as in the original myth, Philomel is determined to tell her story no matter what, and devises an alternative way of doing so: 'She began a tapestry. / She gathered skeins, colours. / She started weaving'. Boland does not romanticize Philomel's story with a false sense of empowerment. In fact, she uses the verb 'whisper'—as opposed to the more assertive 'say' or 'tell'—to describe the limited articulatory possibilities of the protagonist and emphasize her isolation: 'She was weaving alone', says the poetic voice, and 'never saw me enter'. The confrontation of the mythical time with the contemporary *now* of the poetic persona—when an old radio is telling 'its own / unregarded story of violation'—produce the effect of denouncing Philomel's rape and its continuation throughout history. Although unable to change the root of the violence, the heroine's weaving and knitting do make a difference in her imposed silence and she is able to find solace and a way to get her story out in her own work. Similarly, in Celia de Fréine's 'Grafting'³³ the poetic voice compares the writing of

³¹ *Long-distance Swimmer* 26.

³² Eavan Boland, *Domestic Violence* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007), 16.

³³ Celia de Fréine, *Scarecrows at Newtownards* (Dublin: Scotus Press, 2005), 11.

poems with knitting socks—‘round and round / on four needlless’—in a clear allusion to the creative potential of this traditional female activity. Over time, though as the toes are incorporated into the sock, the knitting becomes increasingly more difficult. Although she follows a pattern to produce ‘that perfect seam / with no beginning and no end’—the socks turn out to be too ‘beautiful’ and ‘delicate to be / distorted by corns and bunions’. For this reason, the poetic voice makes the decision to write poems—‘round and round with words / in much the same rhythm’. As in Boland’s text, here poetry is perceived as witness to what is not easy or comfortable to tell: the metaphors of corns and bunions in ‘Grafting’, or the more direct statement about violence against women in ‘Silenced’.

Maria’s washing of clothes takes place within the domestic sphere, here understood not just to mean the confines of the house, but also of its immediate surroundings. While it is true that this domestic dimension confers upon the protagonist’s activity the character of a gendered, and hence learnt role, it is impossible not to notice the emotional content that such repetitive actions have for her, summed up in the poignant ‘[c]louds of carbolic / hung over the house and got under her skin’. This situates Maria in an affective map that did not look so obvious at the start of the poem. Her huge efforts to keep the sheets white translate into her desire to keep alive the possibility of Julio’s return, as well as its sexual and sensual potential. As contended above, the sheet is an object of intimacy and sexual desire and at this moment in the text it becomes quite clear that for Maria the sheet is also the embodiment of Julio. Turkle reminds us that in the psychoanalytic tradition both things and people are ‘tellingly called “objects”’, which suggests that ‘we deal with their loss in a similar way’.³⁴ Thus, in ‘Waiting for Julio’ Maria’s iterations of washing and scrubbing become a ritual to overcome her grieving for her former life with Julio. Washing the fabric is not just a non-activity associated with a woman’s waiting but emerges as an almost therapeutic tool in the midst of her specific trauma, namely the uncertainty of Julio’s return.

Reading this part of the poem it is easy to imagine Maria permanently washing and scrubbing in what Irish performance artist Amanda Coogan has described—talking about her own practice—as an ‘insistent’ and ‘infinite loop’.³⁵ In the documentary film *Amanda Coogan: Long Now*, the artist talks about her durational performances as activity that is ‘insistently continuous’ and of necessity affected by the passing of time. Interestingly enough, in *Yellow* (2010), one of her signature pieces, a woman wearing a very long dress sits on top of a bucket filled with water and soap bubbles. For hours the performer sinks her yellow skirt between her legs into the bucket and washes and scrubs the fabric energetically. These frantic moments intersect with long pauses during which the artist holds the skirt out to the audience and looks them in the eye. Elsewhere I have contended that there is a historical subtext in *Yellow*: the Magdalene Laundries where the so-called ‘fallen women’ were forced to wash clothes incessantly, in a clear metaphorical reference to the washing of their ‘flawed’ souls.³⁶ But the parallelism

³⁴ Turkle 9.

³⁵ Paddy Cahill, *Amanda Coogan: Long Now* (Dublin: Paddy Cahill Productions, 2017).

³⁶ Luz Mar González-Arias, ‘Much More than a Colour: *YELLOW*, or the Signifying Potential of the Non-Verbal’, *Amanda Coogan: I’ll sing you a song from around the town* (Dublin: Royal Hibernian Academy, 2015), 76.

between *Yellow* and the washing of sheets in 'Waiting for Julio' can be stretched beyond the historical reference to also suggest the therapeutic power of repetition and ritual in the face of trauma. Maria's actions, the same as Coogan's iterations, submerge her in an 'insistent' flow of time to battle against the '[c]louds of carbolic' that painfully remind her of Julio's absence. Until the end of the war can resolve the enigma of whether her husband will or will not return, Maria can transcend her immediate sadness by means of her own activity.

Movement 3: The 'Return' of the Hero

The last part of 'Waiting for Julio' focuses on the return home of the eponymous character after the experience of war in what becomes the poem's emotional climax. The narrating voice tells us that all the other men were killed on the battlefield or went back to their hometown. However, Julio 'hovered betwixt'.³⁷ The poignancy of this line situates Maria's husband in a disabling liminal space from which it will be, we can easily guess, impossible to return. Liminality has always provided writers with powerful metaphors to convey either the benefits of being in two worlds simultaneously or the painful consequences of inhabiting the neither-here-nor-there kind of space. It is the latter that can be applied to Julio's experience of war, making him unable to pick life up where he left it before combat trauma affected him. The psychological effect of war on soldiers is well-documented and is usually referred to as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). In his two monographs on the topic—*Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*³⁸—psychiatrist Jonathan Shay traces back the psychological injuries of war in Vietnam veterans to Homer's accounts of the behavioural patterns of Achilles and Odysseus. For Shay, these two paradigmatic heroes of the classical world react to war as soldiers, rather than as supernatural creatures, and are affected by the same injurious experiences that touch participants in any war at any given time in history: horror, terror, grief, wrath. Quite frequently a sense of anger dominates after the experience of the battlefield and prevents many soldiers from returning to civilian life in a functional way. They instead stay tuned into some sort of 'combat mode'.³⁹ And so, Achilles moves on to a killing spree and reacts extremely violently after Patroclus' death. In his turn, Odysseus continues to sack cities after the Trojan War and on returning to Ithaca he does not hesitate to slaughter all the suitors that have tried to marry Penelope.

After his twenty years of absence, Odysseus returns home dressed as a beggar and his wife cannot/will not at first recognize him: 'Now because I am so dirty and wear foul clothes on my body, she dishonours me still and will not yet say that I am he'.⁴⁰ However, and after a few tests, Penelope realizes the stranger is in fact her husband and they end up lying in bed together and enjoying each other's narrative of what had happened during their long separation. Although Ulysses continues in the 'combat mode' referred to above, the return of the hero to his home is also surrounded by the

³⁷ Long-distance Swimmer 27.

³⁸ See, Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat and the Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (New York: Scribner, 2002).

³⁹ Sontag.

⁴⁰ Homer 385.

aura of a 'happy ending': 'Those two, when of delectable love they had taken their pleasure, pleased themselves with the stories that they now told each other'.⁴¹ It is precisely this aspect of the happy ending that has inspired most contemporary revisions of the story of Penelope, as already pointed out. Penelope's dutiful acceptance of the waiting and her asexual loyalty towards her husband after twenty long years of silence have been questioned by women writers and artists who, often, have deprived Odysseus-Ulysses of his sexual prowess. In Anne Hartigan's 'Penelope', just to show one example of this trend, the protagonist foresees a rather disastrous ending for her relationship with Ulysses and clearly emasculates him in order to problematize his heroic glory:

Crafty Odysseus
You'll out-wit any
Scheming God.

I see you
Riding your mistress
And when she's bored

With you
(Your tiny oars
Tickling her shoulders

Irritably)
Will toss you back
To my wide shore.

Then my love, only then
Will our troubles begin⁴²

However, in 'Waiting for Julio' Dorothy Molloy writes into Julio's return the disabling difficulties that characterize the life-after-combat existence of many soldiers. Maria's husband reappears at his home wearing 'a rug round his shoulders, / his eyes out on sticks'. This leads to an interesting reversal of the *Odyssey* plotline since now it is the soldier—not the waiting wife—who does not recognize his family nor his house in the same terms as he did when he left: 'He pushed past "My Jewel", the baby, the bed, / and curled up in the cot'.⁴³ These lines illustrate one of the points raised by Jonathan Shay when talking about combat trauma, namely a very distressing form of emotional 'shutting down' that will challenge the sufferer to renegotiate his relationship with his surroundings. In Shay's own words:

If that switch that has turned off the tender, softer, sweeter, more nuanced capacities for emotion remains jammed in the "off" position—if someone is just emotionally numb to all those emotions—then negotiating a life with a family with a sweetheart or a wife or with children becomes extraordinarily difficult.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Homer 389.

⁴² Hartigan 25.

⁴³ *Long-distance Swimmer* 27.

⁴⁴ Shay.

In Molloy's poem Julio suffers from a deep sense of alienation when he finally returns home, to the point that coming back to the familiar becomes, in reality, an impossibility. Julio is presented here as victim of the endless mistake that is war, not by engaging in savage acts of revenge, as in the classical texts, but rather by his deeply troubled psychological state. This poignant depiction of combat trauma connects 'Waiting for Julio' with the work of Canadian writer Margaret Atwood. In her short story 'Poppies: Three Variations',⁴⁵ the author rewrites, even at grammatical and syntactic levels, the first stanza of John McCrae's oft-cited poem 'In Flanders Fields', written during the First World War. McCrae's text became an example of political poetry, where dead soldiers pray that their deaths have not been in vain and pass on their legacy to the next generation of men. Atwood's narrative is divided in three parts (or 'poppies', to link with McCrae's imagery), the first of which addresses the traumas of war veterans by denouncing the inability of contemporary society to understand their emotional complexities. The narrator criticizes how national histories are devalued when the harsh realities of war are hidden—'That goes to show about war—in retrospect it becomes glamour, or else a game we think we could have played better'—and when memory is commodified in the form of souvenirs—'[w]e always bought those felt *poppies*, which aren't even felt any more, but plastic: small red explosions pinned to our chest, like a *blow* to the heart'.⁴⁶ For Atwood's narrator, whose uncle was one of the veterans in the annual parades, combat trauma is the unseen reality behind so much political propaganda. Their acknowledgement of the horrors of the war situate both Molloy's Julio and Atwood's vet as victims who will never be able to fully return to normal life, who will always be haunted by fear. As Atwood's narrator says: 'sometimes you *heard* things anyway: the man beside him whispered, "Look", and when he looked there was no more torso: just a red hole, a wet splotch in *mid-air*'.⁴⁷

The closing lines of 'Waiting for Julio' emphasize all the more the trauma experienced by the male protagonist during his time away: 'plugging his ears with his whimpering hands, / he made soft sucking sounds // with his lips'.⁴⁸ In this way, the end of the poem presents us with a soldier who has lost some of his articulatory possibilities. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry wrote that 'there is no language for pain, ... it (more than any other phenomenon) resists verbal objectification'.⁴⁹ Her theories apply to physical pain, as distinct from emotional or psychological suffering since, she argues, the latter has referential content and is 'susceptible to verbal objectification'.⁵⁰ However, it is my contention that physical pain and psychological pain, especially in the case of warriors and soldiers, are not separate categories but rather go hand-in-hand. Julio is portrayed as a soldier whose trauma is inscribed both physically—in his 'whimpering hands'—and psychologically—'plugging his ears' to stop, we assume, hearing voices. Scarry's statement about physical pain resisting linguistic articulation, 'bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human

⁴⁵ Margaret Atwood, *Good Bones* (London: Virago, 1993), 113-120.

⁴⁶ Atwood 114. The italicized words in the story correspond to their equivalents in McCrae's poem, here utterly transformed by being inserted in Atwood's sentences.

⁴⁷ Atwood 115.

⁴⁸ *Long-distance Swimmer* 27.

⁴⁹ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 12.

⁵⁰ Scarry 11.

being makes before language is learned',⁵¹ is thus perfectly illustrated in Julio, who curls up 'in the cot' and makes sucking sounds, returning to those cries that predate language. In psychoanalytical terms, Julio would be returning to the Imaginary Order, that is, the pre-linguistic, pre-social stage. He would be leaving the Symbolic behind and, with it, all possibilities for a healthy reinsertion in society. The image of the cot and the sucking sounds are ultimately the moving representation of the loss of self the protagonist is undergoing.

Equally interesting for the purposes of our analysis is the choice of words to describe the 'whimpering hands' that block out the maddening voices Julio is hearing. To 'hear voices' and to 'see things' are two forms of hallucinations triggered by the intake of drugs, dementia, mental instability and various kinds of trauma. For the person experiencing these sounds and images there is no difference between what is being perceived through their senses and a reality supported by referential content. For Julio, such voices are real—hence his need to block them out—and he is with all probability aware of the fact that he is the only one hearing them, this being the main reason for their distressing nature. The choice of 'whimpering' to describe Julio's hands is a rigorous one. As a poet, Dorothy Molloy was a master of language and her creative process was based on a strong process of rewriting and revision. In her papers, it is not unusual to find marginalia expressing her taste for or disapproval of one noun or adjective over another to make sure her final choice conveyed what she wanted to say with great accuracy. In the case of 'whimpering' she could not have done better. The verb 'to whimper' is often associated with children and animals, which would connote that loss of self and return to the pre-linguistic—or Imaginary Order—pointed to. But 'to whimper' is also indicative of fear and akin to crying.⁵² With the one term, Molloy manages to inscribe the two most important meanings for Julio's state of mind: his fear and also his desire or impulse to cry. In her study of Achilles, Marta González explains that '[o]n Homer's Trojan stage, tears are common to men and women, to heroes and slaves'.⁵³ Later on in history, the control of emotions acquired a gendered dimension by means of which women were connected to emotional outbreaks and tears, while men remained emotionally contained, rational and pragmatic. As González argues, Achilles breaks down in tears several times and 'unleashes his grief over the death of Patroclus'. Odysseus is also known to weep several times, she reminds us, particularly when he pines for Ithaca and wishes to return home. By using the adjective 'whimpering' at the end of her poem, Molloy recovers the capacity that common men, soldiers and heroes had to show their affections and distress in the classical texts, while at the same time imbuing such capacity with the emotional shutting down resulting from the experience of war. At no time does this whimpering and crying suggest an emasculation of the returned soldier. Rather, the accuracy of Molloy's vocabulary transgresses time and gender boundaries to leave us readers pondering on the futility of conflict.

Conclusions

⁵¹ Scarry 4.

⁵² John Sinclair et al., eds., *Collins Cobuild English Language Dictionary* (London: Collins, 1987), 1663.

⁵³ Marta González González, *Achilles*. Series Gods and Heroes of the Ancient World (London: Routledge, forthcoming 2018), galley proofs, no page numbers provided by Routledge yet.

The methodology of assessing the men and women of Ancient Greece through the lens of contemporary gender theories may be problematic if attention is not paid to the contingency of their specific historical backgrounds. In the assessment of the echoes of Penelope and Ulysses in the work of contemporary women poets and artists there is often a tendency to consider the categories of sex and gender as static sets of characteristics that have not changed over the centuries. This may lead to an undesired de-contextualization. In my reading of Dorothy Molloy's 'Waiting for Julio' in the light of the *Odyssey*, attention has been paid to the differences, as well as the similarities, in the constructions of femininity and masculinity for Homer's audience and for contemporary readers. For this reason, my analysis of Molloy's text does not simply rely upon the modern interpretation of the classics, but confronts Maria and Julio with the gender assumptions operating at the time the *Odyssey* was composed to highlight the different layers of meaning functioning at textual and subtextual levels. Maria's waiting is not necessarily interpreted as a social compulsion to remain loyal to her husband, but can also be imbued with the drama of war and the grieving for the absent lover. Similarly, Julio's psychological damage on returning home moves him closer to Achilles and Ulysses than to the contemporary revisions of the myth, where the hero appears emasculated and ridiculed as a strategy to deflate his power in the patriarchal structured that presided over the original text. Ultimately, the different layers of interpretation in my reading of 'Waiting for Julio' point toward a harsh critique of war by exposing the traumatic consequences of political and armed conflict for both men and women. There as much as here; Then as much as now.

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