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“I Do Like Stretching Reality”: An Interview with Alan McMonagle*

Abstract: Galway writer Alan McMonagle participated in the Conference “II St. Patrick’s Day International Seminar: Irish Itinerary 2019 (EFACIS) and Women in Irish Culture” at the Centre of Irish Studies Banna / Bond, University of La Rioja (EFACIS Centre – European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies). The following interview took place there on 12 March 2019, covering issues of creative writing, formal innovation, poetry, short story, radio drama, film noir, comic fiction, dark laughter, gender, Beckett, Greek and Russian literature, and social inclusion and exclusion in Irish culture. McMonagle offers a number of insightful responses and shares his views on writing, relationships and his motivations to write. McMonagle has contributed stories to many journals in Ireland and North America over more than a decade and is the author of two collections, *Liar, Liar* (2008) and *Psychotic Episodes* (2013), both nominated for the Frank O’Connor Short Story Award. He has received awards for his work from the Professional Artists’ Retreat in Yaddo (New York), the Fundación Valparaíso (Spain), the Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (Canada) and the Arts Council of Ireland. Early in 2014, his radio play *Oscar Night* was produced and broadcast as part of RTE’s “Drama on One” season. Three years later, in 2017, McMonagle produced and broadcast another play, *People Walking on Water*. He is a contributor to the anthology *Young Irelanders* (edited by Dave Lordan, 2015). In November 2015, he signed a two-book deal with Picador and his first novel, *Ithaca*, was published in March 2017. He was immediately nominated for the Desmond Elliott Prize for first novels. At the moment, he is writing his second novel for Picador.

Keywords: Alan McMonagle, Irish culture, gender, dark laughter, “the Other”.

Résumé: En 2019, Alan McMonagle, écrivain originaire de Galway, a participé au colloque « II St. Patrick’s Day International Seminar: Irish Itinerary 2019 (EFACIS) and Women in Irish Culture » au Centre of Irish Studies Banna / Bond de l’université de La Rioja (centre EFACIS – European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies). C’est dans ce cadre que l’entretien qui suit, daté du 12 mars 2019, a été réalisé. Il aborde l’écriture créative, l’innovation formelle, la poésie, les nouvelles, le théâtre radiophonique, le film noir, la fiction comique, l’humour noir, le genre, Beckett, la littérature grecque et russe, ainsi que l’inclusion et l’exclusion sociales dans la culture irlandaise. McMonagle apporte à ces thèmes de nombreux éclairages avisés et partage son point de vue sur l’écriture et les relations interpersonnelles ainsi que sur ses sources d’inspiration. McMonagle a publié de nombreux récits dans différentes revues en Irlande et en Amérique du Nord depuis plus d’une décennie. Il est l’auteur de deux

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recueils, *Liar, Liar* (2008) et *Psychotic Episodes* (2013), tous deux sélectionnés pour le prix Frank O'Connor Short Story Award. Son œuvre a été récompensée par la Professional Artists' Retreat de Yaddo (New York), la Fundación Valparaíso (Espagne), le Banff Centre for Arts and Creativity (Canada) et l'Arts Council of Ireland. Début 2014, sa pièce radiophonique, *Oscar Night*, est diffusée dans l'émission «Drama on One» de RTÉ. Trois ans plus tard, en 2017, McMonagle écrit une autre pièce, *People Walking on Water*. L'auteur irlandais a également contribué à l'anthologie *Young Irelanders* (dirigée par Dave Lordan, 2015). En novembre 2015, il signe un contrat pour deux romans chez Picador, dont le premier, *Ithaca*, est sorti en mars 2017. Celui-ci a immédiatement été sélectionné pour le prix Desmond Elliot dédié aux premiers romans. Son second roman chez Picador est actuellement en cours d'écriture.

Mots clés: Alan McMonagle, culture irlandaise, genre, humour noir, «l'Autre».

Melania Terrazas: Alan, thank you very much for accepting the invitation to be a keynote speaker at Irish Itinerary 2019 [an initiative of the European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies (EFACIS)] and agreeing to this interview. I would like to start with a few general questions before I focus on some specific works in more detail. You speak and write very good Spanish. Do you have a connection with Spain? If so, could you tell us about it?

Alan McMonagle: In 2012, I spent a month at the Fundación Valparaíso, an artists' retreat near Mojácar, an old Moorish town in the province of Almería. It was my first visit to Spain and a very memorable time. So memorable that I come back whenever I can.

MT: I was very much looking forward to having you as a keynote speaker for Irish Itinerary 2019 at our Centre of Irish Studies Banna/Bond. EFACIS recently asked fifty Irish fiction writers about the ways in which they negotiated the boundaries between inner and outer worlds. To this and many other questions the website *Kaleidoscope* gives us answers from the island of Ireland and the diaspora. I love the piece "The Misadventures of a Dithering Writer in Thirteen and a Half Fragments", which you contributed to the project¹. How would you define your experience with *Kaleidoscope*? Will you contribute to the publication that will come out of it?

AM: I was delighted to have been asked to contribute a piece to *Kaleidoscope*. I was given a broad canvas, asked to offer some thoughts on my life as a writer. By and large, I am by turns a reluctant, spontaneous, plodding, instinctive writer and so I presented my contribution as a series of fragments. Hedwig Schwall is creating something wonderful, I think. She was so enthusiastic and encouraging about my contribution, and as far as I know, this will form my contribution to the ensuing publication.

1. Alan McMonagle, "The Misadventures of a Dithering Writer in Thirteen and a Half Fragments", *Kaleidoscope*, EFACIS, 2019, <https://kaleidoscope.efacis.eu/alan-mcmonagle/misadventures-dithering-writer-thirteen-and-half-fragments>.

MT: When and how did your writing adventure start? Did any particular Irish writer play a part in it?

AM: I think it began when I was very small – in several ways. The house I grew up in was full of books. My mother was a big reader. She used to recite Edward Lear's "The Owl and the Pussycat" to me when I was little: "The owl and the pussycat went to sea in a beautiful pea-green boat, they took some honey and plenty of money, wrapped up in a five-pound note". In so many of my stories, in my novel, in my radio plays, I think what I am essentially doing is putting an owl and a pussycat together and casting them adrift in the world, to see what they make of it, see how they fare. In primary school my teacher in third class was the author Patrick McCabe. He didn't spend too much time on mathematics or geography. I remember he used to write very strange-sounding words on the blackboard. He also used to give early chapters of what would go on to become his first published book, *The Adventures of Shay Mouse: The Mouse from Longford*². He had us on the edge of our seats with this story. I think in the long and troubled history of Irish boys' schooling we must have been the only class who did not want to go home when the bell rang at half past three. Movies, too, played a part from an early age. Gangster movies from the 1930s. Film noir. Tough-talking men and women. I loved these characters. I would try out my own versions. It was fun.

MT: I have read some of your poems. They are brilliant examples of new creative risks and possibilities. While the formal strategies may change, the doubts and questions motivating them seem not to. What is it that interests you in poetry and, more particularly, narrative poetry?

AM: I suppose I use the form to have fun. To play with form when I want/ need to take a break from sentences. Prose is all about the sentence. Poetry is all about the line. And so it presents another kind of challenge. Language. Rhythm. Sound. Your observation regarding motivation is correct. I have a poem about a hitchhiker who has been stranded on the road for a long time. Then a car pulls up and the hitchhiker is certain salvation is at hand. Next thing he seems to have entered a David Lynch movie. It arrived as a fully formed narrative poem, beginning with this image of a hitchhiker all by himself by the side of a quiet country road. A crow cawing. Wild grass – "witch grass" – in the surrounding fields. That was a three-line verse to start with, and then the narrative kicks in. It felt natural to continue in this vein – three-line stanzas. And it seemed to work. Loneliness. Dark humour. Saviours who are anything but.

MT: Which is the best genre for you to paint portraits? Short story, poetry, novels, radio plays?

2. Patrick McCabe, *The Adventures of Shay Mouse: The Mouse from Longford*, Dublin, New Island, 1994.

AM: Everything. I use the novel to pack in as many characters, however briefly, as I can. I like radio plays for the challenge of revealing character through dialogue. Short stories are great because of the form's narrow tolerances, their less-is-more sensibility.

MT: Could you tell us something about your radio play experience?

AM: I love radio – in my opinion, it is an unsung hero of a form – because much of my writing is for the ear, because I am an aural learner. I have written three radio plays. Two have been produced. And the third I have just heard has been given the go-ahead. So much of writing is solitary. But with radio drama an element of collaboration kicks in. A director. A sound mixer. And, of course, the actors. Each time to date, I have worked with the same director. She is able to tell me better than I can say it myself what appeals to her about the writing. I am especially looking forward to this third play. It involves a pair of sister assassins-for-hire. They have just turned up at the location for their very last kill – a ramshackle bar that has most definitely seen better days. Into the quiet bar they strut, along with plenty of ammo, two guns, one switchblade knife and enough attitude to ensure that no one is going to give them the runaround. One knows the identity of their target, the other does not. One is gung-ho for blood, the other is prepared to tease out the situation. For now, there is no sign of their intended victim. Instead, they must make do with an overly inquisitive barkeeper, several rounds of their favourite cocktails, some ghosts from the past and a long-awaited date with destiny...

MT: Alan, radio plays are a perfect training ground for writers who want to embark on writing drama because the words form a part of the finished product. Was or is this one of your aims when you produced and broadcast *Oscar Night* (2014) and *People Walking on Water* (2017)³?

AM: I regard radio drama every bit as highly as I regard other forms of storytelling. At times more so. Some of my favourite dramatic productions are pieces I have listened to on the radio. The RTÉ (Ireland's national radio) *Drama on One* season is a place I return to time and time again. I think they produce some brilliant work. At its best, for me, it is at the very least as powerful a medium as the best television, as the best stage theatre and so forth.

MT: Did you wish to pay tribute to radio drama because, after the advent of television, it never recovered its popularity?

AM: Of course, the form appeals to my hankering for the underdog. Television always claims the lion's share of the limelight. But I am a listener first. I learn better this way. I hear before I see. Sometimes I mishear – and this can be fun, too. And so often, too often in my opinion, the overcooked and rapid-pace visuals

3. Alan McMonagle, *Oscar Night*, in *Drama on One*, RTÉ Radio One, 2017; *People Walking on Water*, in *Drama on One*, RTÉ Radio One, 2014.

of television and cinema (special effects, explosions, quick-cut editing and so forth) sabotage the experience. Radio has its own way of storytelling, and when harnessed to the fullest of its potential, it is as effective and rewarding as its more lauded brethren.

MT: In your short stories and debut novel there are many references to jazz music, rock, etc. For example, *Ithaca* begins with Tom Waits' song *Time*⁴. What role does music play in your work? Tom Waits' verses seem to show you that there are others suffering along with you, but the refrain will convince you that company is always better than misery. Is this the effect you were seeking by using this song in the opening of your novel?

AM: I chose this song, and this particular stanza, because in its way – at least in the way I hear this stanza – it sums up the story of *Ithaca*. I suppose it's a combination of several things that crop up. Something about not knowing when to quit. That reference to the sailors, their prayers and their dreams. And yes, of course, something about the way that making a connection with another human being, no matter the circumstances, can somehow offer relief, comfort, a measure of safety. Music – be it a song lyric, a jazz piece, piano sonata – often helps to frame a particular mood I am trying to capture.

MT: You have written two collections of short stories, *Liar, Liar*⁵ and *Psychotic Episodes*⁶, yet also many other short stories, which are scattered in various publications, such as the collaborative novella *Let Him Lie*, written with nine other members of the Longford Writers Group, which was a project you mentored and edited last November 2018, and another short story in the anthology *Young Irishmen*⁷. What is it about short story writing as a genre that allows you to achieve your creative goals?

AM: What I like about an effective short story is that the story has begun before the writing. And the story continues on after the writing stops. The novel doesn't give you that. You can take more risks with the short story, you can get away with more (or at least attempt to). At their very best, it's as though there is a second story travelling underneath or alongside the narrative of the main story. And the wonderful thing about this "second" story is that it remains hidden, unseen, unnoticed. Even the writer may not be aware of it. And so, the act of generating a short story involves mystery, discovery, revelation. And that is what I adore about the form.

MT: Regarding your first collection, *Liar, Liar*, and your liking for the unreliable narrator figure, is there any relationship between the collection's title and what seems to be one of your favourite narrative techniques?

4. Alan McMonagle, *Ithaca*, London, Picador, 2017.

5. Alan McMonagle, *Liar, Liar*, Galway, Wordsonthestreet, 2008.

6. Alan McMonagle, *Psychotic Episodes*, Dublin, Arlen House, 2013.

7. *Young Irishmen*, Dave Lordan (ed.), Stillorgan, New Island, 2015.

AM: I think you could be right. I like the suggestion at work in the title here, that thing that a double negative may in fact be a positive. I love John Ciardi's assertion that a poem must lie its way into the truth. I am applying his assertion to fiction. And though my narrators are often unreliable there is a primary truth, an essential truth at the heart of what is making them tick – or not tick, as is often the case. This essential truth represents the X on the treasure map. And this “essential” truth, as Beckett has claimed, does not change, that is to say, it is very much reliable.

MT: Many of your short stories in this first collection feature female characters that are not always portrayed positively. In “My Good Lady”⁸, for example, there is a particularly negative portrait of the female protagonist. What were you seeking with this?

AM: This is actually one of my very first published stories. I like its tone. And I like that I knew something was working with it, something that I would eventually develop, improve upon, write further into. It is a playful story and possibly the narrator's ultimate views towards the female protagonist are withheld, or at very least masked. This is very much a “baby step” story. It contains the DNA of what is to come.

MT: Let's now talk about your second collection, *Psychotic Episodes*. There are five short stories that caught my attention, because of their formal experimentation and treatment of quirky topics. I will start with a question regarding “Looking after Little Patrick”⁹, where the narrator starts using humour, and then turns to sarcasm, paradox, dark laughter, the macabre and, finally, absurdity. The main characters seem to be creators of their own imaginary world (they even seem to believe that they have a child). They also seem to be inspired by the dark comic stories of Roald Dahl and / or their film adaptations by Alfred Hitchcock in his TV series *Alfred Hitchcock Presents*. Am I right?

AM: The story is essentially a psychodrama – with the comedy thrown in. At the time, I was rereading *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and sitting up late watching Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton go at it in the film version. Also, at the time, my neighbours' little baby seemed intent on establishing a new world record for crying. Also, at the time, my girlfriend and myself were given our little nephew for the day, and we somehow contrived to put him through quite the adventure. Somehow the disparate yet timely elements coalesced. Instinctively, I placed this story as the opening story for the tone it quickly sets, for the early flavour it provides of the skewed sensibilities in the stories. For the way it attempts to stretch reality. It was also the first story I finished after my first collection.

MT: Do you think that dark comedy can facilitate new truths in this story, and in other works of yours, by going against the status quo?

8. Alan McMonagle, “My Good Lady”, in *Liar, Liar*, p. 134-140.

9. Alan McMonagle, “Looking after Little Patrick”, in *Psychotic Episodes*, p. 11-19.

AM: Dark comedy can make for heightened versions of truth, but truths nevertheless. In ancient Greece tragedians were very plentiful. It was the comedians who were put up on a pedestal. It is where that phrase derives from. A student recently pointed out an interesting line to me from the collection *Liar Liar*: "Laughter isn't taken seriously enough". And I think this points towards one of these new truths you speak of.

MT: Regarding your short story "Psychotic Episodes"¹⁰, you tend to fictionalise the lives of alienated subjects and / or unstable people who nevertheless have many insightful ideas. Your unreliable narrators seem to enjoy presenting the lives of those in the margins, placing them centre stage. What effect are you seeking in doing this in this short story?

AM: The players in many of these stories essentially are misfits. They operate on the margins, they come at life from an angle, whether by choice or by nature is not always apparent. They are at odds with the world they are growing into, or have already become part of. This marginalisation has bequeathed them fractured relationships and distorted attitudes, affected their ability to engage in any meaningful way with people with whom they come in contact. The knock-on effect of this is that, like it or not, they must live with an inability to communicate with themselves. And as a writer I am interested in this inability to communicate, and how such people engage (or not) with the everyday.

MT: Let's talk about gender and "The Good Crank"¹¹. The story presents the life of Kitty Clog, whose man vanished from her life some time in the past. She is desired by Jack, yet she hates the idea of his touch. She wonders how it would feel to turn herself into a man. In this short story, you show Kitty's and other women's lives in the past, when they were treated either as mad women in the attic or as objects of male lust. They were dependent on men to get by. The story hints at the fact that Kitty has to behave in a caring manner towards certain men she dislikes, yet whose socio-economic position is secure, in order to cope and survive. Alan, are you paying tribute to Irish women of the past through this short story?

AM: This is the first story I wrote in a female voice. And, yes, I wanted to be playful and ironic, at times a little cutting and flippant towards my own gender, and its often casually careless and blatant ways. I can't honestly recall what might have constituted my essential motivation for presenting the story in this manner. I do like stretching reality, which certainly feeds into the surreal quality of the story. And I suspect that, once again, you are correct and that lurking somewhere in the recesses of my mind was a desire to acknowledge and pay tribute to women of a certain circumstance and moment in time, a wish that things had been different for them.

10. Alan McMonagle, "Psychotic Episodes", in *Psychotic Episodes*, p. 29-36.

11. Alan McMonagle, "The Good Crank", in *Psychotic Episodes*, p. 67-73.

MT: Your story “Walking among the Ruins of Babylon” in the same collection, *Psychotic Episodes*¹², talks about mental illness among old people and daily life in nursing homes, yet also the disturbing side effects on their caring children’s lives and their marital relationships. Marian’s husband suffers from his wife’s relatives’ and boss’s constant phone calls. The story is narrated in a very tragicomic voice. Marian’s husband experiences some inner change regarding his sense of empathy for other people’s problems and illness as the story goes on. Do you think that society is becoming dehumanised and/or lacks empathy? Was this one of your concerns when you wrote this story, or did you use those phone calls as a way of shaking Paul’s conscience in order to help his wife?

AM: All of what you say is pertinent to this story. It was inspired by a short story by Raymond Carver, “Whoever Was Using this Bed”¹³, and the structure borrows from a mysterious and unsettling phone call a couple receives in the middle of the night [in Carver’s story]. I thought it might be a way to explore a relationship between two people who, though together through “thick and thin”, are also very different. And so we have the constantly in-demand wife, Marian – a woman who seems prepared to drop everything, no matter how inconvenienced she is, in order to assist those around her. And her increasingly bemused husband, who can clearly see that she is being taken advantage of and yet nevertheless feels powerless when it comes to doing something about the worsening situation. But one thing he is learning or acquiring is a decent dose of empathy. This will sustain the relationship, or at least give it a fighting chance of survival. And, who knows, it may even extend into the husband’s interaction with the bigger world beyond the confines of the home he shares with his wife. It’s a curious story, I probably still don’t fully know what to make of it myself, and so I’m grateful to you for asking about it.

MT: Let’s now focus on “The Remarks”, included in Dave Lordan’s collection *Young Irelanders* published by New Island in 2015¹⁴. This anthology features contributions from a number of Irish writers who have gone on to publish novels and short story collections. Following Lordan’s words in his introduction to the collection, are you using fantasy and multiple experiences and points of view on traditional Irish literary topics, such as famine, the harshness of rural Irish men and poverty, as a way of “re-marking” or “re-making” the melancholy naturalist mode so recurrent in Ireland in the 20th century by using alternative literary techniques?

AM: One of my favourite short story writers, Flannery O’Connor, once said there may be only a certain number of stories to tell but there is always a new way to tell them. And so I think you are correct here. There are well-worn motifs at large in the story (references to poverty and famine; to idleness and uncertainty and questionable ambition). But I also wanted to make a record of youth in all its

12. Alan McMonagle, “Walking among the Ruins of Babylon”, in *Psychotic Episodes*, p. 91-110.

13. Raymond Carver, “Whoever Was Using this Bed”, *The New Yorker*, 28 April 1986, p. 33-37.

14. Alan McMonagle, “The Remarks”, in *Young Irelanders*, p. 111-128.

carefree abandon, and particular preoccupations; and ultimately, I wanted to tap into the well of insecurity and confusion that so often attends youth. And so, my poteen-soaked bread rituals, the novel the American is supposed to be slaving away at in his room, and of course the arc of the fantasy rock band that gives the story its name, combine, I hope, to offer a new take on familiar themes.

MT: Let's talk about your debut novel, *Ithaca*. It presents the story of a vulnerable child, Jason, who meets another of society's scapegoats, an unnamed "girl at the swamp", and in each other's company both escape the misery of life in the boghole they call home. *Ithaca* is located in Ireland, summer 2009: a country in recession, just after the bailout. Why is this place "a ghetto" for Jason's mother and a "bog-hole"¹⁵ for Jason?

AM: The story is set in the Irish Midlands, in the town that I grew up in, a town that is surrounded by a vast area of bogland. The story plays out in the summer months after the economic collapse. There is a lot of confusion and uncertainty: shops are closing, jobs are not as plentiful as they once were. I remember at the time, I was travelling regularly across the country, to give a series of writing classes, and one thing that I noticed, was all these housing states that had been built during these so-called good times. Many of them were empty, abandoned, or there were only handfuls of people living in them. They had this sort of ghostly feel and atmosphere to them and the expression had come into common usage, "ghost estates". It made a big impression. This new experience combined with my own early memories of the town I grew up in (a row of terraced houses, a jungle of a back garden, a back lane, a ditch, a wasteland of a field, the railway tracks). This provided the hinterland for the novel, Jason's and his mother's stomping ground.

MT: *Ithaca*, whose title references Homer's *Odyssey*¹⁶, is divided into fifty-eight chapters whose titles are very telling and funny. Two in particular, "Death"¹⁷ and "Happy Hour"¹⁸, are much longer than the rest. Do their length and title have any relevance to the book's main concerns and implications? Or to your view of tragedy and comedy in literature and life?

AM: Yes, it is interesting, the contrast between their titles, "Death" and "Happy Hour". At the most surface level, the response is to break up the rhythm of many short chapters in the book. I wanted to present maybe two or three longer whole chapters that would feel like set pieces. Both allow for this combination of tragedy and humour that you have mentioned. The one called "Death" was useful in that, when Jason decides to go on this quest to find his father, the first candidate that he

15. Alan McMonagle, *Ithaca*, p. 31.

16. Homer, *Odyssey*, Robert Fagles (trans.), Salt River, Deckle Edge, 1997.

17. Alan McMonagle, "Death", in *Ithaca*, p. 41-55.

18. Alan McMonagle, "Happy Hour", in *Ithaca*, p. 96-108.

comes up with is already dead. So, Jason is suddenly in this adult world at a funeral. And this allows me to bring all the town's people together, and in one swoop, if you like. So Jason gets to see these people, how they behave, using this backdrop of this economic collapse. I just bring them on, have them behave in surprising, unpredictable, absurd ways. Jason is listening to them and he is quite intrigued by it all. And so, what should be a sad situation for him, because the first man that he has convinced himself is actually his dad has died, becomes something more. For me, the tragedy and humour thing is interesting. I think these two characters, they run together, they coexist, at home. I think we cry and laugh at the same time for the same things, but also the humour is throwing light on the parts that are not funny, and again, the serious parts, hopefully, allow us to remember the humorous parts. There is a line in *Don Quixote* by Cervantes: "*Detrás de la cruz está el diablo*"¹⁹. Behind the cross stands the devil. For me, that is doing the same thing. This contrast, this mix of light and dark, it's very much together all the time. You cannot have one without the other.

MT: In *Ithaca*, you seem to show sympathy for children and figures relegated to the category of "the Other" and their desperate desire to belong. Is that right?

AM: I think that that is spot on, yes. There are a couple of things here again. The novel starts over the summer months of 2009, summer because I did not want Jason to have to interact with other children. So, summer: no school, and the couple of half-friends he has have gone away. What's more, there is an absent father, his mother is distracted, and so, Jason is, to all extent and purposes, very much alone by himself, and must find ways to get through these summer days. Hence, this mysterious relationship with this girl character who is just sitting on his rock one day. Next thing, she is in the water and he gets her out, and there, something starts between them. And, possibly, there is this suggestion there that this person also might be a useful influence on his life and, again, because she is the risk-taker, she likes dangerous situations, she is only too happy to encourage Jason into these dangerous situations with her. Again, she is presented as though she might not be the best possible person for Jason to be with, certainly not in the places that she is going to take him.

MT: Homer's *Odyssey* is probably, after the Bible, the best-known story worldwide. *Ithaca* is Jason's personal search for his father, yet also a search for his own self, a search to understand why Ireland, back in 2009 and post-Celtic Tiger, had to tighten its belt again, and go back to "the shite-and-all mess it's always been"²⁰, as Jason says in *Ithaca*. Do you think that today, a decade later, Ireland is still looking for a way to solve its bigger societal issues?

19. Miguel de Cervantes, *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quijote de la Mancha* [1605], Madrid, Espasa Calpe, 2014, Part II, Chapter XXXIII, p. 563.

20. Alan McMonagle, *Ithaca*, p. 69.

AM: I would say so. There is a crisis now, homelessness, rents are going up in all the bigger cities. It is so expensive to find a place, to be able to stay in it. There are vague suggestions in the novel that this is coming down the road. The Slug Doyle character, for example, has received a letter. He has to get out of his house by a certain date, and he is not going to go willingly. This became more prevalent when this Celtic Tiger came to an abrupt end. And perhaps there is a suggestion in the book that a little bit more could have been done to ensure that the ramifications would not reach the worst possible situation.

MT: Alan, you touch on the notion of "the bigger picture" among other themes in your novel. Do these ramifications have to do with this idea? If not, to what effect do you tackle this issue?

AM: I probably had a couple of things in mind when I was using this phrase. The female characters were interesting to me and how they turned up and declared themselves. Jacinta seems to have an awareness she is not shy about sharing, even if she may not be able to do anything about it. At some level, she knows that there are circumstances responsible for her situation that were beyond her control. A "bigger picture". Similarly with the girl. She takes the lead in her relationship with Jason. She has ideas, notions, a "bigger picture" in mind when it comes the various aspects (emotional, physical, spiritual) of her relationship with Jason. Ithaca itself plays a part too in this idea of a "bigger picture". I remember I liked the sound of the word as a title of the novel for a start, and I also like this reference to this early Greek story that I used to love and read so much when I was young. Odysseus on his way home, victorious from the Trojan War. The Greeks so arrogant in their victory that the Gods were going to make it difficult for them to get home. So they bring on stormy seas and so forth. To me, Ithaca became this symbolic place in the Mediterranean, a place of blue seas, white sand, leafy trees, and so, it became very symbolic because of the setting for the novel in this boghole town, which it is very claustrophobic. It certainly became a place for Jason to aspire to and, of course, it is the girl who makes him aware of the existence of Ithaca. In my own reading, I came across a line by French painter [Georges] Braque. For him, "art is a wound turned into light", and I distorted that line slightly. For me, art is a wound turned towards the light. I think the first part of this line (the wound) encapsulates where Jason and indeed the other characters – Jacinta, the girl, and so on – find themselves, when the novel begins. Jason and his very self-destructive nature which manifests itself in various ways. But gradually the second part of the line (turned towards light as well as what this symbolic place, Ithaca, comes to mean for him) becomes a way for Jason to see beyond the claustrophobic terms of his existence, to see a "bigger picture". You can apply this to the other characters of the story as well, I think.

MT: Alan, a friend of mine was intrigued by the character Jacinta. Her name is very unusual. What sort of heroines are you interested in?

AM: The name was carefully chosen. Jacinta. There is something very Irish sounding about it. At least I think so. It is also very close to Jason. The first two syllables are essentially Jason's name (and so I break one of the very first rules of writing I was told: accord very different sounding names to characters). I like her because she is a mixed bag of qualities. Some are useful. Some are unpredictable. Some are not exactly commendable in any way. That is to say, she is human. And this is how I like my heroes/heroines to be.

MT: In *Ithaca*, you focus on the lives of Jacinta and the girl at the swamp, but not exclusively. There are some notable male characters, and they are not always portrayed very positively. Alan, did you think about gender issues when you created Jacinta?

AM: There are two female characters that play a big part in the novel: Jacinta, the mother, and the girl, who I deliberately kept unnamed, to retain an element of mystery. Very early on, when these characters turned up in the landscape of the novel, I did know straightaway that I wanted them to have a strong presence. With Jacinta, for example, I was always going to try to present a mother who was not so quick to adhere to conventional representations of "the Irish mother". I wanted Jacinta to come bolting out of the traps. She is active, she is strong, she is fearless, she is well able to speak her mind, and will do everything it takes in order to get through the days of her life. In addition to all these strengths, of course, she comes with a sack full of flaws: she neglects Jason, she has questionable methods of getting through life, she is unpredictable and erratic. And of course she is still quite young, young enough to still have her own dreams and hopes and expectations, and by extension, her own disappointments, sadnesses and frustrations. And all of this, I think, makes for an interesting character. A very human character. There is a line from Beckett: "the essential does not change"²¹. Thus, one thing that I did not want to do was to somehow present Jacinta initially as an unsympathetic, awful person, and then, by the end, present a kind of reformed character. She is on her own journey which involves dreams, expectations, frustrations, unfulfillment and disappointment. Maybe there is a suggestion towards the end that makes her realise that she has to keep an eye on things a little more, but I do not think that she essentially changes. She is a bundle of qualities, some good and some bad, which always coexist. That is what I was aiming for. Jacinta wasn't set out to change, she is a natural born survivor, she is going to find ways to go on, some of these would be appropriate, some would be inappropriate, most definitely inappropriate, but that is how she earns her keep.

MT: And when you created the girl at the swamp?

AM: The girl at the swamp is there to take the lead in the relationship. What I remember from my adolescence is that boys of eleven or twelve are not quite as

21. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, in *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London, Faber and Faber, 2006, p. 22.

developed emotionally, whereas the girls of the same age are a little further down the track – certainly, emotionally. I kind of felt that. And so the girl is a little more mature than Jason, a little more knowing. She is a little wiser, she is more streetwise. No matter what Jason says, she is going to have a better line; no matter what Jason is doing, what he wants to do, she is going to have something more interesting or something more adventurous, something more dangerous. She very quickly establishes herself as the risk-taker of the pair, and, indeed, happily dares Jason into dangerous situations. I thought it was interesting that she is tempting or daring Jason to go a little further all the time and making him realise, whether he wants to or not, that it's very likely he is going to have to grow up a little bit more quickly than one would necessarily wish upon one so young.

MT: Tell us about the "stereotype blasting" that you carry out in *Ithaca*, when you exaggerate your characters' traits of behaviour and relationships for satirical purposes. How does this relate to the mediating role of the writer in society?

AM: In the chapter "Happy Hour", Jacinta, and all her friends, the women, go drinking, pub crawling, and they are making all the jokes, making fun of how they look, how they dress, how they speak. There is an episode of *The Sopranos* playing on TV in the bar, and they all take turns to say what they would like to do to Tony Soprano, to this tough representation of masculinity. This was fun and interesting to do as well. They are having this contest to come up with the worst possible punishment of this odious TV character. Obviously, they are using this to vent some of their own frustrations, disappointments, in their day-to-day lives. And again, this is very valid, I think.

MT: Jason seems to have an ambiguous opinion about his mother. Would he prefer to have another mother? He feels very much rejected by Jacinta, but does he love and admire her because she is different? How could their relationship be understood at the end of the story?

AM: There is a great moment at the end of the Bertolt Brecht play *Life of Galileo*. Galileo's friend says, "unlucky the man that has no heroes". And Galileo says, "lucky the man that needs no heroes"²². Like it or not, Jason needs a hero. And what I think the novel is ultimately trying to do is allow Jason to realise that this hero may be a lot closer to home than he is at first prepared to accept. And when he does come to recognise that, as far as heroes go, it is to his mother he should be looking (as opposed to some spurious father figure), the version of a hero he will have to content himself with comes with as many flaws as virtues. Probably more flaws. And I think he is OK with this – after all, she is a born survivor. She is a single mother who has had to bring up Jason on her own, in these times of uncertainty. She is trying to find her way (and remember she is quite a young mother as well). She is not afraid to express her opinions about her circumstances and about the people she needs to engage with,

22. Bertolt Brecht, *Life of Galileo*, Mark Ravenhill (trans.), London, Methuen, 2013, p. 92.

to the extent that she perhaps takes her eye off of her little boy Jason, who has his own feelings about his present circumstances. He cannot be fully aware of the wider socio-economic context of the story. As far as he is concerned, his mother is not doing what she should be doing, but whether he is aware of it or not, she is already influencing the way he is, his sensibility and, of course, a big part of what the book is doing is sending Jason off on this journey, at times a literal journey, but also on this metaphorical, symbolic journey that culminates when he perhaps realises that what he is actually looking for is not as far away as he initially thinks it is.

MT: The girl at the swamp is an outsider, as are the beggars and other minor characters in *Ithaca*. What is the appeal of “the Other”, in terms of class and income, for you in *Ithaca*? Is it “the Other” in the Irish context specifically that interests you as an author?

AM: Jason takes to the streets and bumps into various characters that might be best avoided when you see them coming. Street drinkers. An angry protesting sort. A guy with a set of dogs he has named Rommel and Himmler. There is probably something in my own sensibility that draws the writer in me to these kinds of characters and, by extension, something within Jason is similarly drawn to them. Characters that maybe have slipped through the net, that occupy their own particular patch. These may not be obviously appealing patches, and indeed, not necessarily attractive patches to describe, but, nevertheless, they are very much there, they *do* exist, and I think they are always interesting. These drinkers who gather around a little fire they have going, swapping yarns: “I was in love once”, “Remember the good old days”²³, but then, you think: “What good old days?”, because this has been your life, for as long as you can remember. But here they are, somehow enduring, and there is, at times, a smile on their face. And of course there is the unusual way they speak. They use expressions that are really intriguing to Jason, and so he is drawn to them. He recognises, at some level, that this could be part of his future, and it is up to him what he is going to do about it. I think you could say they are skewed, they are distorted, they are physically not appealing. Characters I would have been drawn to in my early reading, for example, in the great American short story writer Flannery O’Connor, and that world of the grotesque that is there in pretty much every one of her short stories. A world that is really, really vivid and interesting, darkly comic. Her stories and the style in which she always presents her characters, this comic universe they seem to inhabit, at least initially, and then you slowly begin to realise that this universe is anything but comic. You have these contrasts: they have a smile on their face, but you begin to recognise that there is a lot of pain going on inside, the kind of pain that should not produce a smile. Yes, these are the sorts of things I am really attracted to.

MT: Jason and the girl at the swamp often behave as if they were a married couple. To some extent, they resemble Beckett’s pseudo-couples. What does Beckett’s

23. Alan McMonagle, *Ithaca*, p. 267.

work mean to you? And Paris? I ask this because going to Paris seems to be a big obsession for Jason Lowry. A good friend of mine also noticed Jason's obsession with the Russian steppe. Does Russian literature mean much to you?

AM: "Pseudo-couple" is a good phrase. I was reading a novel recommended to me called *The Invisible Mile* by New Zealand author David Coventry²⁴. It is a story of the 1928 Tour de France cycling race. It is also a story of endurance, memory, war, as well as physical and psychological torment. There is a great line towards the end. It pertains to this desperate need we have to be other people, and in becoming other people we become ourselves. I think there is some of this going on with my pseudo-couple, and perhaps with Beckett too. Beckett ended up spending a significant portion of his life in and around Paris, and wrote in French. I think there may be a subliminal nod to the great man in Jason's obsession with Paris. Beckett is the crown prince of serene melancholy and I adore his latter-day less-is-more style. As for the Russians, a resounding "Yes". Gogol. Dostoevsky. Chekhov. Sergei Dovlatov. I adore the ideas. The sensibility. The mordant humour. The moment-by-moment chaos. The quiet grace.

MT: Could you say something about your next project for Picador? How does it relate to the previous ones?

AM: It is always difficult to talk about the next project. You are always wondering, "Will it get started?", "Will I be able to continue if it gets started?", "Will I be able to finish?". A lot of my stories begin with a voice, and then the voice becomes a character, and the character would become a story, and then the story acquires something resembling a plot. Probably because the women characters were so strong in *Ithaca*, I said to myself, "I would like to write in the first person and in the voice of a young woman". I have not fully decided on her age, but somewhere in her mid-twenties, early thirties, I think. And I thought, "let her be a rascal", but somebody who wants something, something that remains out of reach for various reasons. Perhaps a dream that was planted by her father when she was young. It will involve another "journey", an inner and outer journey. Plenty of obstacles. Disappointment. However, at the moment, she is still a stranger to me. And maybe that is as it should be.

MT: Thank you so much for your reading and for this interview, Alan. I wish you all the best for your future work.

AM: *Muchas gracias*, Melania.

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24. David Coventry, *The Invisible Mile*, Wellington, Victoria University Press, 2015.