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DEFIANCE OF "MAGDALENES." FEMALE CHALLENGES IN RECENT IRISH FICTION

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After having published four book-length studies on Irish literature and culture: *Irish-Romanian Cultural Connections. Travellers, Writers and Ambassadors* (2019), *Mapping Ireland (Essays on Space and Place in Contemporary Irish Poetry)* (2014), *The Harp and the Pen (Tradition and Novelty in Modern Irish Writing)* (2013), *Duality of Vision in Seamus Heaney's Writings* (2009), Nicoleta Stanca has just published with Editura Universitară, București, her fifth volume, "*Defiance of Magdalenes.*" *Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction*, 2023.

The list of contemporary Irish writers analyzed in this volume, made up of five chapters, a Foreword, an Introduction, an Afterword and a Postscript, includes William Trevor (*The Story of Lucy Gault*, 2002); John Banville (*Mrs. Osmond*, 2017), Anne Enright (*The Gathering*, 2007; *The Green Road*, 2015; *Actress*, 2020); Sebastian Barry (*The Secret Scripture*, 2008; *On Canaan's Side*, 2011); Colm Tóibín (*The South*, 1990; *Brooklyn*, 2009; *Nora Webster*, 2014), some of whom having already been translated into Romanian in recent years.

The idea of the title of this book, *Defiance of "Magdalenes."* *Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction*, occurred to the author, as she confesses in the Introduction, after coming across, in 2022, in a library in Dublin, a volume dedicated to the Magdalene Laundries, *Ireland and the Magdalene Laundries. A Campaign for Justice* (2021). An overview of institutions of the Magdalene laundries, the Magdalene Oral History Project, the Magdalene Memorial Committee, Magdalene Names Project, Magdalene Survivors Project and Magdalene Restorative Justice represent some of the topics dealt with by the authors of the study on the Madgalenes, each of them being involved in a personal or professional manner in these stories and activities. The accounts that Nicoleta Stanca read are absolutely impressive and the efforts of those involved in the process of restoring justice to the Magdalenes should be made known and supported, hence Stanca's desire to be intertextual with this study. At the beginning of the 20th century, after the establishment of the Irish Free State, the authorities embraced the Victorian legacy of the ideal woman and funded ten Magdalene Laundries run by Catholic orders with the role of "rescuing"

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women in danger of becoming disrespectable: abused women, single mothers, vulnerable girls and women in general. Gradually, after decades of silence, confessions revealed the horrors of the carceral regimes of these institutions. The state authorities were thus disturbed by the personal confessions of the survivors, the legal actions, the cultural projects and the publications dedicated to restorative actions for these women.

The female characters in the novels under scrutiny in *Defiance of "Magdalenes." Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction* are in a subtle way part of a similar same cultural project. They have been treated as symbolical "Magdalenes." Hence, the title of the volume. Apart from the obvious detail of the historical period when the fiction was published, 2002-2020, coinciding with further Magdalene Laundries restorative actions, an aspect worth mentioning is the forging within a common consciousness of Irish contemporary writers of the "Magdalene" figures of Lucy Gault, Isabel Osmond, Veronica Hegarty, Rosaleen Madigan, Katherine O'Dell, Roseanne Clare, Lilly Bere, Katherine Proctor, Eilis Lacey and Nora Webster, the protagonists of the novels discussed in the chapters of the book. Each of them challenges a stereotypical feminine role. Yet, they defy the system in a gentle, subtle manner, meant to restore harmony, possibly as followers of another famous Magdalene, St. Mary Magdalene, who chose to remain faithful to Christ.

Nicoleta Stanca's volume is opened by a Foreword by HE Paul McGarry, Ambassador of Ireland to Romania, who draws attention to at least two important aspects to be considered: the relationship with history of recent Irish fiction and the important role of Irish novelists in the contemporary society. "This year the Irish State marks 100 years of independence. Independence was hard won – a struggle over many, many years culminated in a War of Independence fought against the British Empire, followed by a Civil War, when the Treaty negotiated to end the War of Independence split the country in two. As a consequence, the early years of the Irish State were marked by poverty and deprivation. As the State struggled to establish itself, among the values it prized most were conformity and submission. For people who did not conform, it meant exclusion and deprivation. Many writers who tried to explore this reality found their work banned and their livelihoods taken away. They endured, frustrated. Still others emigrated, some forging successful careers abroad.

The social consequences of what happened during that time and the legacy of hurt, remain to this day. Industrial schools where children suffered appallingly; the reign of terror perpetrated on unmarried mothers; the over-weaning power of the church in social affairs; these all had consequences that Irish society is still coming to terms with today.

With this perspective in mind, Nicoleta Stanca's latest work, *Defiance of "Magdalenes." Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction* explores the female

characters in a range of novels by more contemporary Irish writers. Of course, the Ireland of today is very different from the State in its infancy. We like to think of ourselves as modern, liberal, outward looking, welcoming difference. We value our writers and artists because of the insights they bring to our lives – not just to reflect society. The novels that are considered here, by William Trevor, John Banville, Anne Enright, Sebastian Barry and Colm Tóibín while coming from a particularly Irish place, have universal appeal and contribute hugely to our understanding of ourselves. As a reflection of the high esteem that Irish writers are held in today, the Arts Council created the role of Laureate for Irish Fiction. This was to acknowledge the contribution of fiction writers to Irish artistic and cultural life by honouring an established Irish writer of fiction; encouraging a new generation of writers; promoting Irish literature nationally and internationally; and encouraging the public to engage with high quality Irish fiction. Each Laureate continues their work as a creative artist. In addition, over the course of their term, they spend a semester at University College Dublin and one at New York University and while in residence, they teach creative writing. They also deliver an annual lecture and engage in major public events. The Laureateship is designed so that the Laureate can shape the role allowing the individual artist to be at the heart of the project. Anne Enright, Sebastian Barry and Colm Tóibín are recent Laureates and each has occupied the role with distinction and each has made their own, unique contribution.” (Paul McGarry, 9-10).

The *Defiance of "Magdalenes."* *Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction* first makes general comments, in the Introduction, on the Irish recent novel, the so-called post-national novel in terms of trauma, memory, history, diaspora, femininity, motherhood, immigration, urbanization, globalization, consumerism, and it also introduces the major writers to be focused on in each chapter.

For William Trevor’s novel, *The Story of Lucy Gault*, the lens through which the heroine is scrutinized is the Big House novel and feminine trauma. Lucy Gault is a symbol of a trauma that petrified the lives of a family and their Big House. A sense of slow erosion pervades the entire narrative. In between the silences, the characters, Lucy, her parents, the Catholic boy, do not do anything to fill the gaps and verbalize the pain. In her wisdom, acquired with great suffering, Lucy concludes that this must be the fate of all generations. This is how the protagonist ultimately challenges both the Protestant Big House and the Catholic blood sacrifice myths.

Chapter two is devoted to *Mrs. Osmond* (2017), John Banville’s imaginary sequel to Henry James’ novel *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881). Stanca considers that Banville’s novel is a faithful sequel to that of Henry James from many points of view: the theme of the innocent New World spirit in dangerous adventure in the corrupt Europe; psychological novels, with a touch of melodrama; theatrical confrontations that come out of introspection and indirect discourse, as shown in the examples depicting Isabel at length and shifts in the reflecting mind. Stanca shows how half of Henry James’ novel consists of the marriage plot (courtships, proposals and refusals) and the other

half of revelations that darken Isabel's existence. Banville's novel is equally made up of two parts: the certitude of the mistake of Isabel's marriage; her meetings and confessions related to the somber secrets and the second part focuses on the action of gaining independence.

The Gathering, *The Green Road* and *Actress* by Anne Enright portray Ireland positioned in a global world caught between the religious and the secular, tradition and modernity, the past and the present, with its generational traumas and virtual communities, old practices and increased mobility, public scandals and the confessional mode as psychotherapy. Veronica Hegarty, her mother and her daughters in *The Gathering*, Rosaleen Madigan and her daughters in *The Green Road* and the mother actress and daughter writer in *Actress* expose fractured family bondings but also challenge the idea of doomed mother-child connection in contemporary Irish society through instances of genuine affection and affiliation.

Critics consider that Sebastian Barry belongs to a second generation of Irish trauma novelists, together with Anne Enright and Colm Tóibín. In *The Secret Scripture* and *On Canaan's Side* Barry recuperates voices of two women considered outsiders, misfits, marginal, ghost-like, disempowered figures, true "Magdalenes," Roseanne and Lilly, both extremely old when recounting their life stories on one and the other shores of the Atlantic, in Ireland and in America. Roseanne McNulty and Lilly Bere match the old age afflicted mind pattern and in solving the puzzle of their grief through story writing, the reader gains knowledge of broader traumatic events affecting the Irish nation.

Colm Tóibín's first novel, *The South*, was granted the Irish Times Literature Award in 1991. Colm Tóibín's popularity has been since proved by his writings translated into more than thirty languages. The most recent translation into Romanian is that of *The Magician* (2021, trans. 2022). Immigration, motherhood and trauma have been considered by Nicoleta Stanca in discussing three novels by Tóibín in the fifth chapter of her book. According to Stanca, *Brooklyn* tells the story of the Irish migrant girl to America in the 1950s with the 2000 Ireland and immigration in the background. *Nora Webster* challenges open and covert forms of patriarchal domination and gender stereotyping in an Irish context of the 1960s by exploring the narrative of a widow, Nora Webster, her four children, her relatives, her acquaintances, colleagues and friends. In *The South* Stanca investigates how Tóibín combines motherhood and exile with violence against a parallel Irish-Spanish background from a painter's viewpoint, which in the end redeems the protagonist.

The volume is equally framed by a Postscript by Anne Fogarty, Professor at University College Dublin, a remarkable personality in the field of Literary Studies in Ireland, who appreciates Stanca's contribution as follows. "The *Defiance of "Magdalenes"*. *Female Challenges in Recent Irish Fiction* fulfils just such a task and provides an invaluable overview of a group of foundational novelists, William

Trevor, John Banville, Anne Enright, Sebastian Barry, and Colm Toibín. Her concentration on the figure of the heroine, moreover, allows her to cross-connect these writers and to examine how they mould and remould the female protagonist. The malleability and Otherness of the female vantage point permits, as she argues, a renegotiation of many aspects of personal, affective, familial, and national identity. As Stanca shows, the challenge of living in a globalized world and the disturbing upheavals of the modern are prominent facets of the novels examined, including *The Story of Lucy Gault*, *Mrs Osmond*, *The Green Road*, *On Canaan's Side*, and *Nora Webster*. For all that, as the sinuous interpretations in this study reveal, Irish novels also continue to delve into the past and seek to countermand the silences and occlusions created by injustice against women, children, and outsiders in Irish society in former eras. They also show that Irishness may be defined as much by cross-national openness and porousness as by watertight, geographically bound traits (Anne Fogarty, 245-246).

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