Troubled Departures: Migration and the Afterlife of the Northern Irish Conflict in Nick Laird's Fiction

Marie Gemrichová (marie.gemrichova@ff.cuni.cz)
0000-0002-4494-9862
Charles University, Prague

Abstract: The paper examines the portrayal of migration in Nick Laird's novels *Utterly Monkey* (2005) and *Modern Gods* (2014) within the context of recent Northern Irish fiction and its repeated themes. While contemporary fiction authors continue to address the Northern Irish conflict and its aftermaths, Laird's texts extend this discourse by focusing on an often-overlooked theme of (e)migration connected to the conflict. Providing a brief history of emigration from the province and the themes connected with migration literature, the paper provides a comparative analysis of the two novels. It demonstrates how Laird depicts characters who navigate identity negotiations and grapple with tensions between cultural and identity continuity and reinvention as they move from Northern Ireland, both within the United Kingdom and beyond. Drawing on theories of migration literature and identity formation, the paper argues that while not unique, Laird's nuanced portrayal of migration captures its deep psychological and emotional impact, revealing how Northern Ireland's turbulent history continues to shape the identities and experiences of those who leave its borders.

Keywords: Northern Irish literature, migration and identity, post-conflict society, Nick Laird, cultural memory.

Salidas conflictivas: la migración y las consecuencias del conflicto de Irlanda del Norte en la ficción de Nick Laird

Resumen: El artículo examina la representación de la migración en las novelas de Nick Laird *Utterly Monkey* (2005) y *Modern Gods* (2014) en el contexto de la ficción reciente de Irlanda del Norte y sus temas recurrentes. Si bien los autores de ficción contemporáneos continúan abordando el conflicto de Irlanda del Norte y sus consecuencias, los textos de Laird amplían este discurso al centrarse en un tema a menudo pasado por alto: la (e) migración (in)directamente resultante del conflicto. Después de ofrecer una breve historia de la emigración de la provincia y los temas relacionados con la literatura sobre migración, el artículo hace un análisis comparativo de las dos novelas. Demuestra cómo Laird describe personajes que navegan por negociaciones de identidad y lidian con tensiones entre la continuidad y reinvención cultural y de identidad a medida que se mudan desde Irlanda del Norte, tanto dentro como fuera del Reino Unido. Basándose en teorías sobre la literatura sobre migración y la formación de identidad, el artículo sostiene que, si bien no es único, el retrato matizado de la migración que hace Laird captura su profundo impacto psicológico y emocional, revelando cómo la turbulenta historia de Irlanda del Norte continúa moldeando las identidades y experiencias de quienes abandonan sus fronteras.

Palabras clave: literatura norirlandesa, migración e identidad, sociedad postconflicto, Nick Laird, memoria cultural.

1. Introduction

Despite the abundance and variety of recent fiction from Northern Ireland, there is a continuous discernible engagement with the Northern Irish conflict (The Troubles), the collective memory of it, engagement with its aftermath, and effects in contemporary society. While providing both historical and contemporary settings and focusing on diverse events and characters, even the most recently published works by prominent authors continue to address the legacy of this violent conflict. Fiction writers such as Anna Burns, Jan Carson, Glenn Patterson, or David Park continue to comment on the (recent) history of the province and on its current state. Concurrently, numerous scholars are examining these works and their discourse regarding themes connected to the Troubles, most notably Caroline Magennis and Birte Heidemann, among many others. Both fictional and critical engagements with the conflict underscore its continuing influence on the everyday life in the province and, more generally, the afterlife of such a period or event in any post-conflict society.

Northern Irish author Nick Laird, like his contemporaries, envisions characters and spaces grappling with the legacy of the Troubles. He addresses questions of identity regarding the Republican and Unionist communities and the transformation of the province since the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. Regrettably, Laird has been recognized primarily for his poetry, while his fiction has received limited and often dismissive attention. His debut novel, *Utterly Monkey* (2005), has been described as mere "lad lit," "lukewarm," or "overcrowded" (Block, n.p.). Although Laird's novels, *Utterly Monkey* (2005) and *Modern Gods* (2014), are often characterised as simple, straightforward thrillers or absurd social comedies, they warrant examination, particularly in connection with the themes established in contemporary Northern Irish literature. While the two texts differ in terms of characters, settings, and plots, Laird follows in the vein of other fiction writers by posing questions about Northern Ireland's recent past and its post-conflict prospects.

Both *Utterly Monkey* (2005) and *Modern Gods* (2014) engage not only with themes of memory and identity in connection to the Troubles but also, perhaps more intriguingly, with a key issue only recently addressed by scholars in relation to the province: (e)migration directly or indirectly caused by the Troubles. Laird himself moved from

Northern Ireland, first to London and then further to the USA. While he remarked in an interview that he did not feel a need to speak about specific topics or on behalf of others, he also added that "when you sit down to write, whatever is going on in your subconscious tends to rise to the surface" (Wroe, n.p.), making perhaps a reference to the similarity between his own life and those of his characters. His personal journey is indeed mirrored in his fiction, but more crucially, his texts discuss a specific consequence of the conflict that has largely been overlooked. This article considers Laird's portrayal of the process of migration or movement from the province caused by the Troubles. First, it explores the intricacies of identity formation in connection with migration from Northern Ireland, particularly when the movement occurs within the borders of the United Kingdom. Subsequently, it examines some established themes of migrant literature before analysing Laird's two novels.

2. (E)migration from Northern Ireland in the Twentieth Century

Roulston et al. note that despite the "scale and impact of 20th-century emigration from the North, there is no body of research on this aspect of Northern Irish history comparable to the extensive analyses of emigration from the rest of the island" (162). Indeed, engagements with this topic are mostly scattered, often focusing on oral history and personal memories of emigration from the province. Scholars like Johanne Devlin Trew and projects such as Conflict, Memory and Migration: Northern Irish Migrants and the Troubles in Great Britain under the University of Manchester have been recently at the forefront of this engagement. While the historical facts regarding the movement and migration that occurred during the onset of the Troubles, as well as the histories of so-called burnt-out individuals and communities, are well known, Roulston et al. (2024) point out that in the following decades, between 10,000 and 15,000 individuals left Northern Ireland each year, many of whom 'emigrated' to different parts of Britain (163). Just as the Troubles are often depicted in Northern Irish fiction, this major outcome of the late-century conflict can also be detected here. Although recent migration statistics show that Northern Ireland now experiences net immigration (Campbell, n.p.)—and immigration

appears, albeit briefly, in Laird's work—the scale of earlier emigration and the general neglect of this issue should not be overlooked.

The recent examination of migration from Northern Ireland within Britain and beyond recognizes importantly the identity politics that have played a major role in this movement, as well as in the problematic of discussing it. Tonge and Gomez rightly point out the complexity of any resettlement of Northern Irish individuals within the UK (279-280). Particularly concerning the Unionist community, from which Laird hails and which he portrays in his novels, these migrants predominantly identify "as a subset of the wider British population, whose identity and aspirations they share" (279). The simultaneous presence and absence of a border (the Irish Sea, but a single recognized country) and, since the Good Friday Agreement, the possibility of holding both a British and an Irish passport do not clearly categorise such individuals as emigrants in the simplest definition of the word. Moreover, the recent complex position of Northern Ireland during the post-Brexit negotiations demonstrates that movement from the province within Britain can be perceived as both moving within and outside the borders of a single country.

A particular issue crucial to Laird's texts is the interrogation of one's identity in connection with such a move. While Crangle et al. describe migration simply as an act of reinvention through departure, in the Unionist Northern Irish – British context, such reinvention is not straightforward. Binks and Ferguson point out that migration is often accompanied by a dilemma "between adaptation to a new society and, often, a new culture and the desired preservation of their original and established identity" (299). However, both Irish and Northern Irish migrants to Britain (or even to the USA) have historically been perceived and have perceived themselves as too similar for such a dilemma. They have not been seen as "sufficiently different to warrant affording them the status of 'foreign', although because of subtle differences in language and tradition, neither have they been allowed to be considered British subjects" (Binks and Ferguson 299). This paradox of being both strange and yet similar creates specific and often problematic encounters between individuals and cultures.

Importantly, migrants arriving from Northern Ireland during the Troubles would have also carried the weight of historical knowledge

and cultural memory regarding the province's position within Britain. Crangle et al. insist that migrants constitute themselves through memories of their home and those they have left behind (261). Not only migrants but all individuals construct their identity in communication with others, both those directly around them and those with whom they share a common image of the past (Assmann 127). This identity and shared memory of the past necessarily influence any migratory experience. As research on diasporic identities suggests, identities post-migration become dependent on both previous attachments and new connections (McDowell 880-881). It is then important to recognize that in the context of Northern Ireland, these were migrants escaping a violent conflict to a different region that is both involved and yet distant from it; they are both leaving and yet remaining within a single country, and they are both joining a new community while still staying within the same one. This image of Northern Irish emigration during the Troubles and the general intricacies of migrant experiences thus present unique circumstances when examining such a topic in local fiction.

3. Tropes of Migrant Literature (in Northern Irish Fiction)

Recent Northern Irish fiction is marked not only by its focus on the legacy of the Troubles (of which migration is only one feature) or on the relationship between the past and the present, but overall, by its attention to the themes of transition and *in-betweenness*, as well as to the uneasiness connected to them. Both Caroline Magennis and Birte Heidemann in their monographs comment on the many ambiguities and uncertainties that local authors illustrate. While Magennis in *Northern Irish Writing After the Troubles* (2021) draws on affect and feminist theories to discuss the contrast of intimate and public spaces and lives, Heidemann in *Post-Agreement Northern Irish Literature* (2016) even more closely focuses on the theme of liminality in Northern Irish fiction. Describing Northern Ireland as in the state of negative liminality, she asserts that it is to be "understood as precarious state of being trapped in a geography of fear, one that is performatively configured by a profuse sense of claustrophobic intensity" (39). Focusing on two of Nick Laird's poems, she comments on how he portrays the interaction between the past and the present and between two circumstances (Heidemann 148-

151). While she does not focus on migration as such, Heidemann's assertations on liminality, on the state of in-between can be connected also to the present theme, as the process itself creates a transition or an intermediate space and time filled with uncertainty.

Before examining Laird's novels and their engagement with migration in detail, however, it is necessary to consider the types of tropes that may appear in his work in connection with migration. Migration literature is often marked by themes of identity, belonging, and cultural conflict; the process of migration is not only a physical movement but also a psychological and emotional journey that challenges one's sense of identity and kinship. Fictional texts engaging with these topics create a tension between home and away, negotiating between the old and the new. The resulting hybridity, or a state of in-betweenness, as described by Bhabha (85-92), is one of the defining concepts in migrant literature. This state of in-betweenness or hybridity proves crucial in connection with migration from Northern Ireland within Britain or within the (post)colonial landscape. As Nyman comments, "the concept of identity plays a key role in migration literature" (35). As examined above, however, within the space of Northern Ireland such identity is complicated by the province's history in the colonial context.

Shuttleworth et al. caution against viewing the province as unique due to its "troubled political history, social divisions, and legacy of religion-based residential segregation" (2), noting that many migratory patterns are similar to those in other European countries in the second half of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, all the factors they describe must be considered when discussing the province. While migration functions as a vehicle for exploring the complexities of identity, in the landscape of Unionist – Republican identities, one's identity is already complex pre-migration. Individuals are caught up in conflicting definitions of what a community means; new places, limitations, and borders may appear merely as outsiders enter different parts of a singular city. Within the space of a single country then, individuals can already experience migration or exile, where what they previously learned within family and close community relations becomes "strange, complex, and fraught with contradictions," as Corinna Assmann describes the impact of migration on familial relationships (2). Additionally, the cultural

trauma of the Troubles necessarily creates a close, albeit frustrating, connection to one's home.

It is therefore understandable that the portrayal of (e)migration in Northern Irish literature must be also complex and multifaceted. Themes of belonging, displacement, and rootlessness take on heterogeneous forms, led by the uncertainty of integrating into a new society or completely disconnecting from the old one. As contemporary novels continue to portray the nuances of life during and after the Troubles, its violence, religious and political divides, and the history of colonialism, similar nuance should be observed in their portrayal of migration. Nonetheless, these narratives may still be approached within the thematic scope of migrant literature. Commenting on previous scholars such as Bhabha and Hall, Nyman points out that cultural identities are always changing and developing through new encounters and interactions with previously unfamiliar cultures (35-36). While fictional accounts, Laird's own included, are not necessarily realistic representations of migrant experiences and rather narrativizations of the processes of transnationalism, multiculturalism, and transculturalism in a particular context (Nyman 43), they do provide insight into the complexity of the migration processes. In the case of Northern Ireland, the complexity stems from encounters between cultures and cultural identities that are different yet similar enough, where the precise moment of crossing a border and encountering a new culture does not necessarily occur, and subsequently, an establishment, redefinition, or transformation of one's identity may or may not transpire.

4. Nick Laird's Fiction

Laird's earlier novel *Utterly Monkey* (2005) takes place in post-conflict London and focuses on the character of Danny, who has previously moved from a small town in Northern Ireland to work in London as a lawyer, and thus closely mirrors Laird's own experience before becoming a writer. At the beginning of the narrative, he is joined by a childhood acquaintance, Geordie, and later by Geordie's girlfriend, Janice. The plot revolves around the 'shenanigans' of Danny and Geordie as they attempt to stop another Northern Irish character, Ian, who arrives in London as a member of a unionist paramilitary organisation to plant a bomb. The plot of *Utterly Monkey* is indeed quite

absurd and convoluted; however, it offers a clear focus on the topic of migration within Britain and, importantly, the complicated identity formulation of the Northern Irish characters regarding their move. Despite numerous minor characters, it is these four Northern Irish ones who function as focalisers. Their points of view are provided as they navigate life in England and experience clashes between their own culture and the metropolitan city. We observe their concerns about the process of leaving, the stage of settling into a new community, and the complex relationships these individuals have with their space. Through the minor characters both in Northern Ireland and in London—and thus through the home and host cultures—we can then also examine the different and often dismissive responses to the principal characters' migratory processes.

Utterly Monkey proclaims its interest in migration on its very first page. In introductory chapter the narrator comments, "Moving is easy. Everyone does it. But actually leaving somewhere is difficult" (Laird 1). By means of this opening, the text establishes the novel's interest in the many moves portrayed: Danny's previous economically motivated one, Geordie's escape from a violent gang, Janice's journey to follow her boyfriend, and Ian's arrival as a paramilitary. Their experiences may differ, but the complexities of being a Northern Irish individual in England are apparent. They all endure a tension between maintaining a connection to their community and its past and assimilating into their new home. The portrayal of Geordie's and Janice's departures, in particular, exemplifies the province's position in the UK. When Geordie describes his passage on the ferry, his journey seems easy, yet it is to "another country" (Laird 19). Geordie equates the travel to England with a possible further trip to Australia (Laird 43). Similarly, when Janice prepares to move from Northern Ireland to London later in the narrative, her concerns keep shifting; she reminisces about previous holiday trips while simultaneously having a difficult conversation with her mother and younger sister, as if she is never to return. She urges her sister to keep whatever she wishes from the possessions Janice is leaving behind. Janice's mother urges her to leave and "make a go of it," as if speaking to her daughter for the last time (Laird 217). The narrative also injects a comedic moment when Janice is unsure whether she needs a passport for her flight from Belfast to London. While the book portrays Danny and Geordie as having already left, through

Janice we are offered a glimpse into migrants' thoughts and anxieties concerning their upcoming move, and considerations of what they're leaving behind.

The process of settling that Geordie and Janice experience upon arriving in London is thwarted by misunderstandings, characterising both as clear outsiders and emigrants. Although the novel often focuses on a quick plot development, as the pair experience their first moments in the new environment the pace of the narrative often pauses to describe moments of first encounters. When Janice lands at Heathrow, she wonders about people from multiple cultures that she observes, not used to such an environment. She "suddenly [feels] that *she* [is] the exception" (Laird 271). Similarly, Geordie "[feels] himself in a new position: the outsider" (Laird 52), and experiences a *faux pas* when he asks for bacon at a kosher butcher's shop. Early in the novel, we learn that Geordie escaped Northern Ireland with money that Janice stole from her brother. Adding to the convoluted nature of the plot, that money actually belongs to Ian and his organisation. While this may serve as a critique of the novel and its many intricate sub-plots, through the migration lens, it additionally portrays Northern Ireland as a small place far away from busy London where everyone knows each other. It is seemingly a place where everyone has a close connection, which is questioned post-migration. This is mirrored later when Danny visits Belfast during a work trip and surprisingly meets an acquaintance of an acquaintance in the local company offices. The novel appears to affirm that these are indeed migrant experiences from a remote, small place to a metropolitan city abroad.

Regarding Danny himself, having previously migrated to London, it is interesting to observe how he has both acclimatised to his new community and surroundings while still being defined by his past and culture. When Geordie travels to London, Danny is the first person he visits, holding onto the connection to his home and resisting the new space. Danny's initial response is fear of someone from the province reaching out to him. Only when he realises that it is his friend does Danny compose himself, realising that Geordie "was not going to draw a gun and shoot him" (Laird 5). Danny soon begins to feel "relaxed now, forthright, made in Ulster" (Laird 14), as Geordie's arrival re-establishes his sense of connection to home. While they both left Northern Ireland

for a better life, the connection to it remains strong. The complicated relationship a migrant has with their previous home is also portrayed in the novel through Danny's work trip to Belfast. While Danny is cautious about returning in the middle of July during the marching season, and recognises the possible danger of encountering a march or a bonfire, he is also frustrated that he has forgotten certain facts, such as how the Northern Irish car registration system works. Having spent several years abroad, he isn't necessarily part of his original community anymore. Indeed, Wimbush asserts that the return of a migrant in literature is a form of exile (86). Peters similarly comments that a homeland becomes unapproachable (31); the character in the book experiences this development even during a momentary return. Furthermore, Danny arrives as a representative of his employer, a law firm, and has the task of shutting down the offices in Belfast. He is now a representative of the imperialist London employer.

The relationship to one's place of origin, in this case Northern Ireland, is crucial as the characters oscillate between intimacy and distance from the province. Danny and Geordie's encounter at the beginning produces both fear and kinship. It mirrors Crangle et al.'s interviews with Northern Irish emigrants who "evoked the solidarities and connections of life in Northern Ireland while bemoaning the repression these intimacies allowed for" (260). While Geordie migrates to distance himself from a violent gang, he happily sits down with Ian in a pub in London, bonding over stories from home and personal and familial connections to the Troubles. The characters desire a fresh start from the past but are unable to leave it behind completely. During these scenes of reminiscence between Danny and Geordie or Ian and Geordie, in particular, the main narrative again pauses and readers are offered short vignettes of the characters' past, indicating its importance. The responses that the Northern Irish characters receive from people in London similarly point to the double-edged reality of emigration, the individuals as well as the province's position in Britain. These minor characters are themselves unable to decide whether Danny, Geordie, Janice, and Ian are truly emigrants; they often seem to have no knowledge of the conflict at all, while having a sense that these individuals are different. The experiences of the migrants and the members of their host culture do not necessarily produce new understandings of established boundaries, but their encounters provide

a space for examining the identity of Northern Ireland and its people within Britain. Consequently, they further mirror the interest of migrant literature as well as Bhabha's assertion on sites that challenge fixed identities promoted by colonialism and nationalism (85-92).

Laird's text provides numerous quaint and amusing moments of misunderstandings. Several times, Danny is mistaken by his co-workers as being from Scotland rather than Northern Ireland, as if they are one and the same. More importantly, the novel also features two scenes where a map of the British Isles is examined, first by Danny's love interest Ellen and later by Geordie, both of which reveal the precarious coexistence of the differing cultures within a single space. In the first scene, Ellen asks Danny to show her on the map where he is really from. In the later scene, Geordie looks at an old car map and comments that the cover picture "made it look as if Britain was trying to hug Ireland. Or eat it" (Laird 310). The novel is filled with these misunderstandings and perceived distances between characters from Northern Ireland and those from London. Besides being mistaken for Scottish, Danny is also repeatedly called a stranger by Ellen. In reference to the novel's title, Geordie feels the need to explain the *completely monkey* phrase to Danny's London acquaintances. Here again, the complex relationship with home is revealed for both characters. Danny becomes angry at Geordie for revealing snippets from their shared—and abandoned—past to the people he knows now. Geordie accuses Danny of forgetting that he's Northern Irish. To demonstrate their entangled friendship, the narrative pauses and describes a formative event in their childhood when, as boys, they discovered a dead body while breaking into someone's house. It hints at their indirect fault and reflects the violent realities of the Troubles that continue to function as a frustrating bond. Ultimately, the novel portrays the delicate balance between the two places, the position of Northern Ireland within a larger entity, both the appreciation and misunderstandings that develop from encounters between individuals and communities that are very similar yet different, and importantly the need to both retain and sever one's connection to the province.

As discussed, Laird portrays Northern Irish characters from the Unionist community, who do not necessarily become completely separated from their primary culture and background through their

move. The primary reason for Ian to plant a bomb in London is his grievance and anger at the government in Westminster for having forgotten about the province's needs; Ian' goal is to remind those in London that Northern Ireland is indeed part of the Union. While Ian is characterised as simple and single-minded—his speeches are revealed to be copied from a superior—he embodies actual communal and political concerns of the Unionist parties and groups in the province, as well as the continuing question of Northern Ireland's status in relation to Britain and Ireland. Subsequently, although Laird's characters cannot be described as crossing actual country borders, their concerns regarding their move do fall under migrant literature themes. Indeed, the novel discusses the challenges concerning national unity, describes moments of potential border crossings, and utilises tropes such as language and translation or scenes of misunderstanding over food and cooking, which Nyman finds crucial for migrant literature (34-35). Although the novel is set in 2004 (Laird provides specific dates for chapter titles), through the migration lens, the text highlights how leaving Northern Ireland—both during the conflict and today—does not mean leaving the Troubles and the province's issues behind or in the past. As Roulston et al. comment on emigration from the province, this is due to "the transnational effects of war and the emotional afterlives and echoes of Troubles' memories" (166), which Laird brilliantly portrays in both novels.

Laird's later text, *Modern Gods* (2014), mirrors some of the earlier novel's concerns; there are even scenes that directly reflect *Utterly Monkey* (2005). However, in its consideration of migration from Northern Ireland, the novel ventures in a different direction. As the main character moves beyond the borders of the United Kingdom while also staying within the colonial landscape, the novel contemplates different historical aspects of Northern Ireland's position within the UK and beyond. Set in the present, the novel's main character is Liz, who (similar to Danny in *Utterly Monkey*) has previously left the province to live in New York. She returns at the beginning of the narrative to attend her sister's wedding and then immediately leaves again, as she is hired by the BBC to film a documentary on an emerging cult in Papua New Guinea. Her experiences both back in Northern Ireland and in Oceania are formative. As the primary focaliser, Liz views herself to be both an insider and an outsider. This consideration interestingly occurs during disagreements with her family at home as

well as when Liz witnesses a looming conflict between cult members and an established colonial authority on an island called New Ulster in Papua New Guinea. Liz's story is further accompanied by the novel's secondary focus on Liz's sister Alison and her new husband, Stephen. Shortly after their wedding in the beginning of the narrative, Stephen is revealed to have been a member of a paramilitary group during the Troubles and to have served time for shooting several people in a bar in the nineties. Switching focus between these three characters, the novel's primary concern is, as in the earlier text, the self-assessed position of Northern Irish characters in connection with the world around them.

While in *Utterly Monkey* the nearness of the violent conflict is portrayed through Danny's reacquaintance with his childhood friend Geordie and through Ian's bombing attempt, in *Modern Gods*, its presence functions more as a haunting. Liz has previously left the province, but as she returns home for the wedding and later travels to New Ulster, she is metaphorically confronted by the past. Similarly, Stephen is confronted by his personal history and the part he played in the conflict when a local newspaper reveals his identity. Although set in the present day, the novel makes it clear that the Troubles are still very relevant in the characters' minds and actions. This is reflected even in the novel's structure. The narrative focus switches between Liz, Alison and Stephen, offering different perspectives. More importantly, the main narrative line in the present is interrupted several times by the description of the last living moments of Stephen's victims. Although these vignettes are set apart as short, individual chapters, the past is directly positioned in the present lives of the three main characters.

The presence of the conflict is subsequently mirrored in the portrayal of migration as well. As the previous, this novel often portrays the process through humour and situational comedy. When Liz explains to her family where she will be travelling to film the documentary, her father comments: "A lot of violence in these places, […] a lot of trouble" (Laird 70), as if unaware of where he himself has lived his entire life. Later, when Liz returns from her work trip in New Ulster and tells her family about the violence that ensued there, about the multiple people hurt and a person shot by local authorities, only then her father comments: "A home away from home" (Laird 302). Her sister Alison then simply asks: "What'd you buy?" (Laird 302), normalizing to herself

Liz's descriptions of the remote violence. Interestingly, this scene mirrors one from *Utterly Monkey* where Janice and her mother discuss Janice's departure to London. When Janice's mother sees Danny with a black eye (given to him by Geordie), she looks at her daughter "as if to say *I told you so. It's a dangerous place*" (Laird 255), referring to London. These humorous instances comment on the assumption that emigration is a journey into the potentially dangerous unknown.

What *Modern Gods* portrays exceptionally well is the experience of an emigrant returning to their original community or country. Liz remains a member of her family but upon her return she is also a stranger. She has incorporated new experiences away from home, and is necessarily a different person. She is picked up at the airport by Stephen, and as they attempt to have an awkward conversation in the car, Liz makes several comments about her surroundings. She recognises the (re)adaptation she is experiencing as she returns to the North; the car functions "like a decompression chamber, adjusting the body to the new density surrounding it, to the element of Ireland" (Laird 45). Having spent years abroad, she has changed her perspective on what constitutes home. Indeed, Liz comments: "Home was like climbing into a suit that was made of your own body, and it looked like you, and it smelled like you, and it moved its hands when you told it to, but it wasn't you, not now" (Laird 46). She tries to remain detached in her relationship with her primary home and community, not reacting when Stephen begins to discuss upcoming elections. Yet throughout the car journey, the ghost of the province and its history lingers in her mind. She perceives this to be a place of diverse voices, which give her shivers. This scene clearly reflects Laird's interest in migration and its effects. As Nyman suggests, memory and return are prevailing topics in migrant literature (39-40).

Liz's departure to Papua New Guinea begins with her discovery of Stephen's past. Her response to it reflects her double-edged position as both an insider and an outsider. She explains everything to her English producer Margo, who comments that she would like someone to "explain Northern Ireland to [her]" (Laird 126). Liz only replies, "me too" (Laird 126), as if lacking knowledge of her home and its recent past. During her trip to New Ulster, Liz continually struggles between understanding and misinterpreting what is happening. Her active attempts to distance herself, such as those working in her car ride

with Stephen, do not prove successful. Even Liz's trip can be construed as both leaving and returning home. While there is no island of New Ulster in Papua New Guinea, there exists an island called New Ireland (there is also a province in New Zealand previously called New Ulster), which has a history of colonialism (Britannica). The conflict that Liz witnesses here between an emerging local cult and the joint venture of missionaries and a colonial government presents direct parallels to Ulster's own history. On the one hand, Liz is portrayed almost as a local, as if she has returned home. She quickly gains rapport with the cult leader and its members, comparing the cult's celebrations to "the Orangemen back home" (Laird 246). On the other hand, having previously emigrated, she no longer belongs, and just like the rest of the BBC crew, she is merely a colonial observer. Liz recognises that she "had entered a country that she did not belong in, and did not understand" (Laird 249).

Liz's trip to Papua New Guinea also opens the topic of engaging with foreign cultures and identities and the possibility of different cultures altering each other. The BBC crew, like the missionaries and the local government, only see the cult and its members as something to observe and control. Connecting Ulster with New Ulster, the novel reflects on the colonial assumption of Ireland being a place of barbarism and ignorance. At the same time, it rightfully questions the representation of the coloniser (Britain) as being tolerant and civilised. It subsequently recognises Northern Ireland's position as being somewhere in the middle. As Seamus Deane remarks, the language used to describe Northern Ireland in comparison to England and even Ireland has often been dominated by a division between vulgarity and refinement (128). Additionally, Liz's experience contributes to the important discussion on identity in relation to Northern Ireland and migration. On the one hand, when Liz returns to Ulster at the beginning of the narrative, she feels unwelcomed, both by her family and the province itself. She looks for ways to distance herself from her parents and sister. On the other hand, once in New Ulster, she comments that "the farther she travelled from home, the more unqualified and ridiculous she became" (Laird 126), as if reaching back for her connection to Northern Ireland.

Liz, like other Northern Irish characters in local fiction, continues to be defined not only by her individual past but by the province's history

and the collective memory of the conflict. The inability to fully distance oneself from their past is evident here, and Liz even admits that while the connections she has with her family and Northern Ireland may have loosened over the years, they retain "all the same angles and shapes, the same functions of shame and despair and joy" (Laird 30). As the BBC crew is leaving New Ulster, they witness the beginning of a conflict between the small cult and the local established authority. Commenting both on the real and the metaphorical Northern Ireland, Laird appears to speak to the issues of coexistence of different cultures and histories and the negative presence of the colonial power in previous centuries, as the small fictional island is thrown into complete chaos. At the same time, he speaks to the complex reality of incorporating different cultural experiences within an individual identity.

While Liz is the only character to fully migrate in the span of the novel, the commentary on identity and movement is also visible through the novel's exploration of Alison's and Stephen's relationship. Once Stephen's past is revealed, he suggests moving to Scotland, and Alison reacts as if that would mean moving to the other side of the world. She wishes to retain her connection to Northern Ireland. Even though she fears Stephen's past, she is even more scared of interacting with the outside world. Stephen's violent past is something familiar. Instead, in an attempt at normalcy, the two go on their honeymoon to a resort abroad, where they meet another Northern Irish couple. Throughout their conversation, Alison attempts to guess whether they are "Catholic or Protestant, Cathestant or Protholic" (Laird 187). The binary division between the two communities is still very much ingrained in her engagement with the world—it is again a type of knowledge she can draw on and feel safe with—and she uses it to classify even this experience abroad. Her inability to conclude which side the couple belongs to only provides frustration. While not a direct portrayal of emigration, this short scene similarly exemplifies Laird's narratives' interest in identity politics in and outside Northern Ireland. In the case of Alison's character, Laird portrays the fear that may precede and hinder the process of migration.

5. Conclusion

Nick Laird's novels are not necessarily exceptions when it comes to the engagement with themes of migration in recent Northern Irish fiction. While the topic is remarkably apparent in his texts, other authors similarly depict characters either on the move within their communities, contemplating a move outside that community, or migrating from the province completely. One of the most prominent contemporary fiction authors from Northern Ireland, Anna Burns, describes in her earliest novel *No Bones* (2001) a young female character, Amelia Lovett, who grows up during the Troubles and decides to leave for London in her early twenties. Just as in Laird's texts, Amelia experiences primarily a lack of understanding from her family, who only attempt to convince her to stay. Unlike Laird, however, Burns adopts a much grimmer and pessimistic description of the character's departure. After she leaves, Amelia suffers a mental breakdown and spends time in a mental facility. As the focaliser, she is described as continuously thinking of her life back home while experiencing "dual realities" of existing in both London and Belfast, during which "as long as she [doesn't] panic, ten times out of ten, Belfast always [goes] away" (Burns 284). The continuing presence of home, of the values imparted there, and the struggle to venture into the unknown after leaving are similarly present. The departure from Northern Ireland is initially perceived as an escape, but the weight of the past and the previous experiences and events in connection with the conflict ultimately catch up with the character.

Themes of migration and the impossibility to evade one's past likewise appear in David Park's notable novel *The Truth Commissioner* (2008). Focusing on an imaginary Truth and Reconciliation Commission taking place in the province, one of the novel's main characters, Danny, is portrayed as having previously left Northern Ireland because to his involvement with an unnamed paramilitary group during the Troubles. Described as having successfully settled in Florida, having found a job and a partner, Danny is forcibly brought back to Northern Ireland during the narrative to participate in the commission and discuss his actions during the conflict. Just as the characters in Laird's texts experience misunderstandings while settling in their new communities and use comparisons to their home to understand their surroundings, so does Danny in Park's novel. Upon his return, he similarly struggles to

reconcile his life after emigration to his forced appearance 'back home'. While not as prominent as Laird's focus on the topic of migration, Anna Burns and David Park, as well as others, showcase that this topic can indeed be observed recurrently in recent Northern Irish fiction.

The focus on migration and the topics connected to it are indeed most prominent in the two novels by Nick Laird. In both *Utterly Monkey* (2005) and *Modern Gods* (2014), the author portrays previous or ongoing movements that provide scenes of encounters with presumably new cultures and spaces. Readers are shown the developments, or changes, to one's identity through such encounters and the renegotiation of the relationship between an individual and their original community. Particularly in the context of Northern Ireland and its unique political and cultural history and present, Laird's texts provide a nuanced portrayal of identity in relation to migration. His characters' journeys highlight the complexity of leaving one's home—in Northern Ireland often strictly defined by community boundaries—and of venturing into the unknown while still addressing the continuing impact of the Troubles.

While Laird focuses on the Unionist community, he also interrogates the link between Unionism in Northern Ireland and Britain as a larger entity, and questions the simplistic connection between individuals from a Unionist background and the rest of the Union. Sara Ahmed recognises that home cannot always be associated with closeness and migration with unfamiliarity (340). By depicting the journeys and the complex connections that remain with his characters' space of origin, Laird's novels indeed problematise the simplification of home as safe and familiar and migration as a venture into unfamiliarity. Laird's characters experience both poles of home and away; their departure or exile is often more metaphorical than physical and frequently reveals feelings of exile in other ways as they navigate old and new connections and struggle to integrate their original community knowledge with the new experiences. By focusing on the topic of migration in the context of contemporary Northern Ireland, Laird ultimately adds nuance to the many depictions of the Troubles in recent fiction emerging from the province and provides crucial insight into an overlooked consequence of the conflict.

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Acknowledgement

This article was made possible with the financial support of the Charles University Grant Agency, project no. 99623, entitled "Memory in Post-Agreement Northern Irish Novel," implemented at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University.

Received / Recibido: 28/3/2025 *Accepted / Aceptado: 1/6/2025*