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Rereading Peig Sayers:

Women's Autobiography, Social History and Narrative Art

Patricia Coughlan

Peig Sayers (1873-1958) was born to a family of subsistence farmers in the remote village of Dunquin, in West Kerry.[1] She reluctantly left school at thirteen, a common fate for all but a small section of the population at the time, and worked as a domestic and farm servant in the nearest town, Dingle, and in the surrounding country. She hoped to be sent the passage money to emigrate to America by her inseparable, beloved childhood friend Cáit Jim Ní Bheoláin, but this never happened. Cáit Jim left but never wrote back, and disappeared from view. She may have had an industrial accident in one of the Massachusetts mills where many West Kerry migrants were employed, or suffered some other illness; perhaps she forgot Peig once she herself had arrived, perhaps she simply failed to make good in the United States (Feirtéar 1998). Engaged in hard physical labour on a farm, Peig suffered a breakdown in health and was invalided home. After some bitter time spent penniless back in her parents' house, a match was made for her with Pádraig Ó Gaoithín from the Great Blasket Island and she went to live there.

The Great Blasket, the last inhabited island of a small chain lying three miles off the coast opposite Dunquin, was an isolated place where a small community

lived a life of physical hardship. They often barely wrested a living, mainly by fishing, from exposed and treeless land; in winter the seas would sometimes send spray over the entire span of the island. Islandmen found it hard to get wives, the island community was growing increasingly in-turned genetically, and they were probably willing as a result to forgo the customary dowry, which the Sayers family could not afford to give with Peig.[2] The couple had ten children, four of whom died of now-minor and ordinary childhood diseases such as chicken-pox and measles; five emigrated once old enough. One son was lost in his late teens when he fell from the island cliffs while gathering furze branches for firewood. Eventually moving to the mainland after this life full of hardship and personal loss, Peig became blind and died in 1958 after spending many years of her old age in Dingle hospital.

Peig was best known in her lifetime as an exceptionally gifted performer of oral tales in the Irish traditions. She knew examples of all the European folktales, and besides had in her repertoire the long Irish hero-tales which were more usually the property of male storytellers. She became celebrated among the scholars of the Irish language and tradition as the finest storyteller of the age. A tall imposing woman with a fine voice, she had an unparalleled command of the language and exceptionally clear and beautiful diction. Though she could not read or write Irish, skills not considered useful acquisitions in Irish National (primary) schools in the period, she was functionally literate in English. As is

well known, Peig's autobiographical texts are part of an extraordinary proliferation of literary production associated with the island: Blasket life generated several other works of autobiography, as well as some minor classics in English by visitors deeply impressed by the island community's sheer endurance, dignity and imaginative wealth.

My discussion here focuses on the two volumes of autobiography which Peig dictated to her son, Micheál Ó Gaoithín, and on account of which her name is most familiar to several generations of Irish people and perhaps abroad. These are: *Peig. A Scéal Féin* [literally *Peig. Her Own Story*] (1936), and *Machtnamh Sheana-Mhná* [*The Thoughts of an Old Woman*] (1939). Ó Gaoithín's own much later volume *Beatha Pheig Sayers* [*The Life of Peig Sayers*] (1970) is also relevant, though of lesser interest.[3] Bryan MacMahon translated the first volume (1974) and Séamus Ennis the second (1962); Ó Gaoithín's book has not been translated to date. These are the books concerning Peig's life history, though of course the folklore records also contain a large body of oral stories collected from her.

The received wisdom in the Irish folklore establishment has until very recently been that the autobiographical works are greatly inferior in interest and aesthetic quality to the tales. Indeed, it has been argued that the former are scarcely worthy of notice, being allegedly mere dilutions of a perceived immemorial purity which is preserved in the inherited tales. This question of mediation and

of notional interference - the Irish word *truailliú*, pollution of a pure source, perhaps catches the meaning best - is an important and ideologically laden one, in a culture so obsessed with seeking origins and with their moral primacy. Among historians, with few exceptions, there has been a startling lack of attention to these writings, a circumstance arising from the masculinist and mandarin assumptions of Irish historiography, where both social history in general and women's history in particular have been marginal or occluded intellectual concerns. In recent scholarship, then, more or less technical analyses by folklorists of Peig's oral tales dominate the field. Margaret MacCurtain and Angela Bourke have both referred feelingly though relatively briefly to the Peig autobiographies from perspectives similar to my own, and the recent scholarly edition of the first volume has an informative, though brief, foreword (MacCurtain, Bourke 1991, 1993, 1997, Ó Murchú and Ní Mhainnín 1998). Breandán Feirtéar's drama-documentary for television, *Slán an Scéalaí* (1998), with English subtitles, retraces Peig's life events with vivacity and feeling. The American historian Kerby Miller's distinguished study *Emigrants and Exiles* (1985) also draws briefly on Peig's life-story for his discussion of the sociology of emigration in the late nineteenth century. [4]

My argument in this essay is that a re-reading of the Peig Sayers texts is long overdue. They have suffered from unwarranted neglect among scholars of various disciplines and also from ideological distortion, and their importance to

our understanding both of women's writing and of women's history has not been sufficiently acknowledged. My discussion has three main sections. In the first I consider what we know about the important question of Peig's authorship of her own story. Central to feminist approaches to women's writing in general, this issue is of especial interest in this case because of the unusual circumstances of composition, not least among them the author's inability to write Irish, the language of the texts. As we shall see, it has been the object of some contention in Peig studies. In my view this contention arises from unacknowledged but fundamentally patriarchal assumptions about the very possibility of women's authorship. I also explore the image of Peig Sayers in the Irish national consciousness, its deployment as a prominent gender-role model in Ireland from the 1940s to the early 1990s, and the changes which that image has undergone. Then I briefly consider the ideological context of the period in which the autobiographies were written and published.

Secondly, I discuss the representation in these texts of women's lives and women's mental world within Irish traditional culture; an important part of this is the representation of the feelings and thoughts of the central character, Peig herself, as subject of the autobiography. The third and final part of what I have to say focuses on the considerable narrative art and aesthetic effectiveness of the texts, using two specific examples of motifs and scenes.

On the question of authorship, the production of the first two of the volumes was instigated by Blasket visitors, in the same way as the other most famous Blasket autobiography, though in this case by a man (Ó Criomhthain, Nic Craith). That is, interested Irish-language scholars, some Irish, some from abroad, in Peig's case two women from Dublin - Máire Ní Chinnéide and Léan Ní Chonalláin - encouraged the islanders to write about their lives. As was typical in the period, these people were teachers and enthusiastic advocates of the revival of the Irish language outside the Gaeltacht (the Irish-speaking area) and in the towns. They saw the people of Corca Dhuibhne (the Dingle Peninsula, including the Blaskets) as vital exemplars in this project. Cultural tourists from about 1910 on had included distinguished scholars from Scandinavia, France and Britain, notably Robin Flower from Oxford and George Thomson, the distinguished English classicist and Marxist who in a de-romanticized way greatly admired the simplicity, endurance and co-operation which characterized the islanders' lives. [5]

Returning to the Blasket autobiographers themselves, Ó Criomhthain was literate, but as we have seen Peig dictated her story, the opening couple of chapters to Máire Ní Chinnéide, then the remainder of the first volume and all of the second to her son Micheál. Micheál first emigrated to the U.S.A., then returned in 1930 and was also a writer (later known as "Maidhc File" [Mike the Poet]). Perhaps, then, these works represent an act of joint composition. Hence the first crux of Peig studies: was she the author of her own text? There is a

tendency among scholars to assign the autobiographies to Maidhc. I emphatically disagree and I think this is an example of the principle outlined by Joanna Russ (1983) - a principle familiar from Maria Edgeworth and Mary Shelley criticism - namely "she didn't write it: her father/husband/brother wrote it"; or, in this case, her son. In one saving instance, study of the texts of both mother and son produces a salutary complication of such assumptions. This is the case of Pádraig Ó Fiannachta (1989), who after a confident opening assertion of Maidhc's authorship, wavers and eventually concludes, I feel sure correctly, that Peig was very much the prime mover. On the other hand, Muiris Mac Conghail, author of an excellent account of the Blaskets in English (1987, reprinted 1994), subsequently reiterated a negative position as regards Peig's capacities for authorship ("she was not the author of her own text" (*Pat Kenny Show*, 1998)). The folklore scholar Joan Newlon Radner has, however, shown fairly definitively what sharp disparities there are between Peig and Maidhc both in literary quality and in viewpoint concerning questions of gender. Radner makes a comparative analysis of their two versions of the same tale, "The Woman Who Went to Hell" (1989). This shows that Peig's narrative gifts outclassed her son's. It also demonstrates that Peig had a developed and positive position about women and the value of their contribution to the traditional society in which she lived. By contrast Maidhc uses the shared inheritance of the tale to represent the female characters censoriously, seek to underline their moral inferiority and stage their punishment. The markedly favorable representation

of women in the two autobiographical volumes, itself very much under-remarked, is therefore far closer to Peig's viewpoint than to her son's.

Other compelling evidence – by default - of Peig's primary authorship is to be found in the falling off in interest and quality of the third volume published long after Peig's death and the unequivocal product of Maidhc's own imagination. The information conveyed is still interesting, but its effect is diminished by greater religiosity (a marked characteristic of Maidhc's own writings) and less able narrative organization. "Bhínn ag iascach uirthi i ngan fhios di" ["I used to be fishing from her without her knowledge"], remarked Maidhc about his culling of the material for this volume. The implication of surreptitiously exploiting an unknowing Peig is unsavory and recalls Synge's notorious eavesdropping on the conversations in the Aran Islands through the floorboards of his loft bedroom. An intriguing aspect of Maidhc's volume is the variant and floridly romanticized narrative it offers of the alleged courtship of Peig by her prospective husband; the earlier version written from Peig's own dictation is a much less emotional and more pragmatic story of the made match with a stranger. Finally, as regards Maidhc's literary competence, the view of scholars currently working on an unpublished diary which he kept for a year in 1923 is that it is overblown, meandering and lacking in linguistic and scholarly integrity.[6] The much finer journal kept from May to November of the same year by the twenty-three-year-old Eibhlín Ní Shúilleabháin (2000) - a document of great freshness and charm,

only recently published - will afford a further opportunity to explore women's perspectives on Blasket life, side by side with those of Peig herself. Like Peig's friend Cáit Jim, Eibhlín emigrated to America, only to die in her forties, broken in health and spirit in Springfield, Massachusetts.

My strong suggestion therefore is that we *should* credit Peig with her authorship, however collaboratively exercised in close conjunction with her son. Indeed, instead of trying to assign ownership to one or the other, we should perhaps try to attend more positively to the evident warmth of the collaboration between them. This is attested in the beautiful photograph taken about 1930 which shows them on either side of the fire, Maidhc with fountain-pen poised over a school copybook, his high, laced boots covered in ash, and Peig with one hand laid serenely over the other, about to speak. Less hidebound practitioners of the discipline of folklore and ethnography are beginning to observe that the Blasket autobiographies are perhaps the least mediated of all the narratives which came out of that traditional story-telling world. It is beginning to be perceived that the situation staged by the folklore collector, however much he might have felt himself to be paying homage at the undefiled shrine of immemorial tradition, was in fact a highly artificial one. Furthermore the product, in the form of the orally performed tales, was very strongly influenced by the intrusive presence of that collector himself (it pretty well always *was* a him), and sometimes of his cumbersome recording equipment. Furthermore, collectors valued some kinds of

material over others (e.g. hero tales, magic tales); they came with a list - "Do you know this one? That one?" – and they were attempting to recreate, cold and usually one-to-one, an originally communal occasion.[7]

I turn now to the question of Peig's image and the reactions to it of her readers, who as we shall see were, as older teenagers, often unwilling conscripts to the task. Two images of Peig Sayers are current in the Irish imagination; or perhaps it's better to say two aspects of, or responses to, the same image. The first is the quintessential Irish mother, who has suffered and is holy and resigned, who has had her children snatched away by death or emigration. She endures femininely and emulates the Virgin Mary; she can be imaginatively assimilated also to the Mother-Ireland figure as in Pádraig Pearse's work, and indeed the whole composite tradition of nationalist rhetoric, nineteenth-century ballad and Irish Revival drama. This, by and large, was the image offered to generations of sixteen- to eighteen-year-olds for whom the first volume was a set school Leaving Certificate text. Beginning in 1942-3, it was prescribed only once every third or fourth year. During the 1970s, however, it probably was a much stronger presence, since it figured among a list of six prose texts of which students had to be conversant with two; it was finally dropped in the late 1990s (Department of Education). Peig was, as one might put it, promoted as a role model to young girls, and her piety, purity and allegedly unquestioning acceptance of suffering agreed very well with the dominant ideology in the de

Valera years. We might note that between the two volumes of the autobiography there appeared that other famous national document the 1937 Constitution, with its well-known insistence on the essentially domestic function of women. [8]

I would, however, argue that this image is an entirely misleading one of the writings Peig actually produced: for school use the first volume was edited, removing, among other things, an episode of communal drunkenness (during a rare trip to Dingle) which is comically recounted without disapproval. Unfortunately we do not know what the manuscripts of either of the first two volumes might have originally contained to shock the Dublin commissars of nationalist ideology, who were at their most stern and regulatory in the 1930s. No part of a typescript or proof, still less a precious original manuscript, appears to survive.[9] *An Gúm*, as the Government National Publications Office, which published the second volume, was then known, was notorious in this period for its zeal in censorship. Finally, as I have been told by a younger personal friend of Peig's, also a native speaker of Irish, who frequently visited her in the Dingle hospital in her old age, in her latter years at least Peig showed a lively sense of bawdy and earthy humour. She was not unwilling to offer (partly within the framework of quasi-humorous vocabulary discussion, a familiar genre in Gaeltacht conversation) the words in Irish for officially taboo topics involving sexual and physiological functions.[10]

Nevertheless the version of Peig as a figure of lugubrious piety which prevailed in Irish public consciousness produced its own negative effects. When in the 1980s and 1990s there set in an explicit reaction to this idealization, practitioners of *kulturkritik*, mainly from Dublin, systematically (and not without considerable justification) rejected the representation of Peig as a saintly role-model. Her alleged passivity and her whole mental world were criticized as classic examples of the imposition of sentimental, backward-looking and ruralist ideology upon the nation and specifically upon adolescents to whom the Great Blasket was as remote and irrelevant as a life led on Mars. Dermot Bolger, himself a writer and publisher, of the school sometimes known as "New Dublin Realists", led the van.[11] It was a part of this continuing reaction that until very recently a spoof website could be accessed in which a Peig figure proffered agony-aunt advice on everything, and other such gestures of repudiation were much in evidence among young adults, particularly in Irish cities and towns.

My own argument is that we should move beyond both these views and seek to arrive at a fresh understanding of the material in ways it has not been approached before. The Peig texts are: social history, women's in particular; women's autobiography; and, not least, narratives, susceptible as such to literary interpretation and aesthetic consideration. I leave the last of these to the final part of my discussion. This revisionist move itself, however, produced a certain backlash in 1998, when a controversy ensued in the *Irish Times* after a perhaps

mischievous sub-editor headlined the report of my lecture (given at the annual Blasket commemoration) as follows: "A feminist Peig Sayers chafed at being a chattel".[12] Needless to say, I had not anachronistically attributed feminism to poor Peig, but had only suggested, as I do here, that a feminist *reading* might be made of her work. A priest based in Co. Kerry initiated a public correspondence in which he sought to defend and preserve the traditional image of Peig; my own reply explaining my views and expressing my admiration for Peig failed, over several exchanges, to allay his sense of profanation. This unlikely and sometimes hilarious controversy over who owned Peig, who might think and write about her, and in what ways, generated national radio coverage, even on the current-affairs program *Morning Ireland*, besides widespread discussion on local radio stations all over Ireland. All this makes clear that an important issue seemed to many people to be at stake. Peig Sayers evidently stood for something in the national psyche, or memory, or sense of self, and this contestation of her meaning is intimately concerned with the roles women might and might not be allowed to occupy in Ireland.

How do the Peig texts in fact represent women's lives and experiences in the Blasket and West Kerry communities? A full exploration of this needs to be done and would require much more scope than I have here; so I can merely indicate some directions it might take. I can only name below some of the topics which

are strongly evident in the Peig texts and which strongly merit further attention and analysis.

Most striking is the importance of mutual support and emotional closeness between girls and women. Important examples are the relationships between Peig and Cáit Jim, and between Peig and both her own mother and later her kind and supportive mother-in-law. Also marked is the fellowship among the women on the island, with whom, the narrative relates, Peig gains a crucial intimacy after an initial period of shyness and homesickness for the mainland. This fellowship of women is a dominant theme, which is pursued throughout the texts: I see this as part of a consistent validation of women's social roles and their life-experience as agents, which has not hitherto been thematized or much attended to.[13]

Also of great interest is the repertoire of feminine roles shown in the narratives. This emphasizes women's especial association with birth and death. The former is seen in the deftly comic scene showing the chorus of old women round the new baby, Peig's first son, when he is brought home into the island: "his nose is too long", "his chin sticks out" – it might be from Perrault (Sayers (1936) Chs. 19-21). The second volume also gives a lively narrative of old women's authoritative conducting of a wake, an episode I shall return to in my discussion of Peig's narrative art.

Furthermore, Peig's texts are full of concrete social information. Among other items, they provide a sharp insight, from within, about the "surplus woman" problem among subsistence smallholders and tenants in Ireland in the late nineteenth century.[14] The wife of Peig's eldest brother "marries in" to the Sayers household, and she strongly resents the continuing presence of Peig as a useless extra mouth to feed. This painful experience is powerfully rendered in the early chapters of *Peig: A Scéal Féin*, and indeed is the impetus for Peig's removal, at thirteen, from her father's household and her being sent into service. It is intriguing – and characteristic of the imaginative technique of these texts – that the problem is treated a second time, in a displaced way, in the *seanchas* or story material deployed within the main, autobiographical narrative but clearly marked off from it. In this instance the second volume unfolds a narrative about a clever tailor who reconciles the old and the young in-laws to one another in a situation of domestic conflict (Sayers (1939) Ch. 4). During the anecdote the man of the house is reproached for not establishing order and ending the constant disputes, perhaps a discreetly distanced reflection on Peig's sense of her own father's rather passive approach to the struggle in his own household.

An insistently recurring theme of both main texts is the evidence of Peig's resentment at the lack of personal autonomy in her young life before her marriage. This resentment focuses especially on her lack of income: the pay for

the work she is contracted to do is handed over to her brother or father at year's or season's end. In a society predicated, as Irish society was, upon communal existence, and in which the individual had little freedom or space, this was the norm. It applied not only to women, of course: boys too were hired out and their wages, till they became adults, paid over to their families.[15] But the narrative emphatically and repeatedly rehearses Peig's remembered bitterness at this, as also her chafing at her disempowered situation when ill-health forces her to return home, already a young woman, and live penniless again in her father's house (Sayers (1936) Ch. 11).

The very deliberate recall of this chagrin gives the lie, of course, to the saintly image of an all-enduring Peig promulgated, as we have seen, by some and derided by others.[16] The narrative has its dark colorings, and these are not merely, though they are most obviously, to do with the endurance of material deprivation and emotional loss. Among instances of such loss, that of Cáit Jim is central: the narrator in both volumes repeatedly revisits it, with a poignant sadness. There are also the two episodes of theft by this central figure, frankly enough recounted and painfully explored. First is the little girl's stealing the freshly baked half-griddle cake on her way to school. Later this is thematically echoed in the double theft of the salt fish and the weaver's duck by the young adult woman desperate to acquire goods so she can join in the other girls' party in the village (Sayers (1936) Ch. 11). Both are markedly associated with the

defiant desire for pleasure and gratification. The second, more bitter, instance deliberately echoes the first innocent one, and both combine to signify to the reader a personality capable not only of appetite but also of a resentment strong enough to induce rule-breaking. The immediate motivation of this second theft is made perfectly clear: it is the frustrated sense of a near-complete lack of individual agency in a disabling economic situation.

Furthermore, the clarity with which this state of dependency is observed, and resisted, in the story makes inappropriate the attack upon Peig from another, rather different, angle. Cathal Ó hÁinle critiques the texts for an alleged lack of existential protest and subjective presence. He unfavorably and somewhat oddly compares Peig's autobiography with some of the great autobiographical texts of Western tradition (all by men). This criticism is inappropriate on several grounds: first, far from invariably evincing the kind of holy docility of which Ó hÁinle accuses her from the vantage point of the 1980s, Peig *does* express her protest, and trenchantly, about this and the many other sorrows of her life. Ó hÁinle makes a revealingly patronizing remark (adapting Marx) about the passages of religious feeling in the later parts of the story: "*Ba é an creideamh* valium *na linne*, "faith was the valium of the era". To me this seems to show a lack of historical imagination. He also inexplicably fails to notice some of the most painful and moving moments of the story, when he wonders whether Peig did really suffer "*sceon agus sceimhle*", terror and fear of a psychic or metaphysical

kind. It should go without saying that no-one in Peig Sayers' community had the kind of Augustinian, Montaignian or Sartrean freedom which permitted these great autobiographers of the past to elaborate the specifically philosophical discourses of subjectivity for which their writing is valued. Questions both of gender and of social structure and system are not irrelevant here: for a woman in the subsistence economy of the Blasket in the 1920s and '30s, tormented individuality would probably have been about as much use as sun lotion in a rainstorm. Adequate interpretation is also adaptation and response to the nature of the performance offered. In the case of women's works, and indeed of works emerging from a social milieu in which community takes primacy over individuality, the role of connectedness or inter-relatedness in forming and expressing identity and experience is likely to take precedence over an *angst*-ridden subjectivity. The expression of subjectivity in the Peig material is certainly remote from the masculine and predominant Western model in which heroism is shown precisely by the construction of an atomized selfhood, which then engages itself in competitive Oedipal striving against others and against a patriarchal God.[17]

The texts do, however, offer a fascinating patchwork of attitudes towards the prevailing patriarchal ideology in Irish traditional rural society. Their equable and humorous narration of traditional anti-feminine sayings and attitudes co-exists with a strong strand of feminine intelligence, wit and capacity to stand up

for oneself. The lively mutual chaffing between men and women in the boats rowing out of the island for the pilgrimage excursion to the holy well called *Tobar na Molt* is a good example. Another is the comical train episode where an agreeably, even brazenly, assertive Peig obliges the corpulent and self-important *bourgeois* from the town of Tralee to move his coat from the carriage seats so she and her female companions can sit down (Sayers (1939) Ch. 10). There *are* instances of traditional anti-feminine motifs, for instance the representing of women as quarrelsome and envious in the "*caismirt na gcearc*" story (a dispute over the ownership of a hen), where, however, the skills of verbal wit and verse-making by the participants are simultaneously savoured (Sayers (1939) Ch. 14). More striking is the chapter rehearsing two stories about the sea mounting the land to threaten or annihilate young women who break religious taboos from pure high spirits and the desire for pleasure, in one instance by going to the strand to collect barnacles on Easter Monday. They are swept away by a great wave, but are seen by a kinswoman in an uncanny vision dancing a four-hand reel on the cliff-top, with the brilliantly surreal touch of "*an cúigmhadh duine ag seimint dóibh*", the fifth girl playing the music (Sayers (1939) Ch. 24).[18] But the deployment of such regulatory warnings is countered both by the storyteller's evident delight in the tale itself, by the subject's emphasis on her own good sense and perfectly peaceful friendship and co-operation with other women, and by her own insistent enjoyment of small pleasures. This is also shown in the comic and quasi-picaresque recounting towards the end of *Machtnamh Sheana-Mhná* of

an adventurous expedition to Ballyferriter, on the mainland, to claim the old-age pension for the first time (Sayers (1939) Ch. 17).

We also need to explore the Peig material as an example of women's autobiography, a genre of which we are quite short in Ireland, and extremely so in the case of those other than the middle or upper-middle classes. In this connection, it is important to get beyond the mere-transcription theory, which has so far dominated what few commentaries there are.[19] We need to acknowledge the reflexivity and fictionality of Peig's narrations, to whatever extent they may be refracted through the pens or minds of the "certain editors" said by scholar Máirín Nic Eoin to have "come between us" and Peig (Feirtéar 1998). The late-twentieth-century theoretical scholarship on autobiography as a genre emphasizes that all autobiography *is always already narrative*, and that as such it is both a work of creation and one of reflective understanding (Bruner and Weisser, Marcus). There is no scope here to develop the potential for fruitful investigation of Peig's subjective life as these texts construct it. But I would argue that the texts do evince such a life, and that they could and should be discussed in the context of reflexivity, constructions of femininity, and psychological self-development as well as world-view.[20] To do this will require historical and social imagination and a degree of psychological tact, a quality largely absent to date in the reception of Peig in most quarters of the Irish mainland.

I turn finally to discuss these texts as narratives and to argue that they do indeed offer the satisfactions *of* narrative. I shall focus briefly on two specific narrative moments, by way of exploring what I as reader experience as the art of Peig as narrator. These also touch on the thematic points I have made earlier about representations of women's lives, in that they are intimately concerned with the experience of women in this specific social milieu.

The first moment is a famous one: the story of the death in 1920 of Peig's son Tomás (Sayers (1936), Ch. 23). The chapter opens with Peig's looking across the breakfast table at her late-adolescent son and mentioning the imminent departure of his older brother Pádraig for America. When she brings this up, wishing Pádraig might stay one more year, Tomás reaches his right hand to take hers and says, with shining eyes, that as long as his hand is strong he will never leave her to fend for herself. Then he races out over the threshold, the description laying especial emphasis on his strength and high spirits. That day he falls over the island cliffs while reaching for a branch of heather and is killed. There is a direct link between his loss and the family's - indeed the whole community's - state of deprivation: there is no turf on the island in that season, hence this dangerous obligation to gather firewood even on the cliff's edge. In what is perceived as a miracle, the young man's body is tossed up on a flat rock and can be recovered: itself an eventuality much marveled at and a source of

some consolation, when the bodies of drowned fishermen were often recovered months later or not at all. Finding the body is a social and psychological blessing, which we can understand as enabling the bereaved ultimately to complete what Freud called the work of mourning.

When Tomás's body is sighted, one of his hands is in a pocket. We should pause here to observe how skilfully this accurate detail of the *actual* event has been woven into the narrative. The motif of the hand has connotations both of his filial love and of his sense of physical prowess and promise. This motif is, as we have seen, used in the first scene of the chapter so that it can have all its effect of poignancy in the description of the dead body. This deliberate management of motifs for aesthetic and emotional effect is what narratologists call *discourse*, and is evidence of a highly developed narrative art beneath the apparent artlessness of the *story (*see the exploration of these concepts in Bal and Chatman).

Another important element of this narrated event is the heartbroken mother's reaction when her son's battered body is brought into her house. Alone (according to the narration) except for her now-invalid and bedridden husband, she must somehow find the strength to wash and lay out the corpse, whose skull is shattered. This she finally achieves after several reprises by bringing the statue of the Virgin Mary and setting it beside her while she works. It seems that in reality Peig was in fact aided in this dreadful task by the presence of her

neighbor Méiní, a *mulier fortis* who acted as unofficial island midwife and nurse, as described in Leslie Matson's luminous memoir. [21] However this was, most people who have ever read the passage remember, even if they did first encounter it as rebellious urban teenagers, that the sense of sheer raw loss and religious feeling in the narrated scene has an agonized intensity very far removed from the notional effects of valium.

The isolation and dignity of the central figure in this scene makes it a kind of Blasket Pietà, which draws upon a fundamental understanding of human attachment and grief. But the text has not yet done with these themes: after an intervening chapter Peig recounts a story from the Famine era in West Kerry which resumes and emotionally transacts the motif of mothers with lost children (Sayers (1936) Ch. 25). This is the story of Bríde Liath. Bríde is the sole survivor of her whole household: her husband and all her children have died of Famine fever or starvation, and when the story opens she must herself carry to the grave the body of her adult daughter, the last to die. Bríde is offered help with the burial itself by four male neighbors, and food by a woman whose house she passes by as she drags the corpse. Finally, she stands alone by the common grave of all her loved ones and recites a prayer, a stylized and incantatory invocation of eternity and of an ultimate consolation. Both this passage and the earlier drowning episode draw upon diction and imagery from the love-poetry and the whole repertoire of *amhráin na ndaoine*, the inherited body of songs and

poems performed and handed on among the people. Here is Bríde Liath's prayer, spoken by the female figure face to face with death, the last one left standing:

> "*Codlaíg go suaimhneasach i suaimhneas síoraí, a chlann ó agus a chéile chneasta. Ní baol go músclófar sibh go dtiocfaidh an mhuir aduaidh is go n-iompóidh an fiach dubh gléigeal. Ná bíodh eagla oraibh, a chlann ó, gur baol díbh ocras ná tart. Tá bhur sáith do Shruthán na Glóire chun bhur dtart a mhúchadh inniu. Fágaim sibh in úr suan i ngrásta Dé nó go seimfidh an tAingeal an trumpa an lá déanach!*"
>
> "Sleep peacefully in an eternal peace, o my children and my gentle husband. There's no danger you will be awakened until the sea turns back on itself and the black raven turns white. Don't be afraid, o my children, that you will suffer hunger or thirst. You have your fill of the Stream of Glory to quench your thirst today. I leave you sleeping in the grace of God until the Angel will sound the trumpet on the last day!" [My translation]

This incantation acts as a crowning moment of aesthetic stasis which draws together the Bríde Liath material and the other, just earlier, narrative of maternal grief and necessary fortitude. The text arranges these two narrative elements, which have an evident thematic relation, in a delicate and intensely moving collocation. The effect is to set up a kind of typology which celebrates the self's powers of endurance and regeneration by means of spiritual insight and hope.

The notion of catharsis might be adapted here: pity at the loss of those so young and terror at the power of death in nature. But in this time and place there is also the potent moment of solace, achieved by calling upon the idea of a saving and benign eternity which can transcend both pity and terror. This is imaginatively realized in the natural and vernacular figures of the ever-moving ocean and the black raven, rhetorically a trope the Greeks called *adynaton*, meaning "something which cannot happen".[22]

Both the death of Tomás and the Bríde Liath story are concerned, among other things, with the association between women and death. This association in Irish traditional society is well attested by folklore and anthropology, as Patricia Lysaght, Angela Bourke and others have shown: on a symbolic level it clearly matches the equally strong but more physically evident association of women with birth. A Blasket custom offers an intriguing example of this felt closeness of women to death. When someone died on the island and the *naomhóga* went out to the mainland to bring back the wake materials (whisky, tobacco, the coffin) there always had to be a woman in one of the boats.[23] The observance of this custom is recorded in a more minor but also under-valued Blasket classic, Eibhlís Ní Shúilleabháin's delightful *Letters from the Great Blasket* (1978), which is in English.

The final passage I shall discuss, then, from *Machtnamh Sheana-Mhná*, concerns this closeness (Sayers (1939) Ch. 7). The episode unfolds as follows: back in Dunquin during Peig's childhood, a miser, Tomáisín Ó Gríofa, dies. He has always stinted his wife, Neil Mhór [Big Nell], in everything, and ultimately there is therefore a degree of relief for her in his demise. The mood of this scene is altogether different: it has much in common with the comic and semi-grotesque atmosphere sometimes generated in Boccaccio and Chaucer. The little girl Peig and her great friend Cáit Jim, the former bold and the latter fearful, hang around at the threshold of the death room. Cáit Jim is expressing terror of seeing the dead person's face, while Peig wants to move up nearer and even announces she will touch him. "*Bhí an tsaighdiúireacht ionam féin*" says Peig: "I had a streak of bravery" (or perhaps "bravado"). Cáit wants to leave, but Peig threatens her with an alleged *piseog* [taboo]: that one may never leave the wake house alone, on pain of being haunted ever after by the dead person. Throughout the exchange the young Peig is presented as the leader, the daring one, the tease. Eventually the old women who are in charge of things call the two girls up to the fire and they are given white bread and jam, which though a great luxury barely relieves Cáit Jim of her terror at having to go nearer to the corpse. The remainder of the scene is concerned with the *fuadar* of the old women (i.e. their busy-ness about the appropriate conduct of the wake), and a noting of their strong desire and appetite for tea and tobacco. This is clearly analogous to the girls' enjoyment of the bread and jam. There is an unspoken but evident imaginative connection

between the strength shown by the child Peig, that of the efficient old women who are managing the occasion, and the specifically narrative authority possessed by Old Peig as narrator. We might diagrammatize the situation as a *mise en abyme*, or effect of embedding, like this:

(1) the reader, looking in upon the whole scene

(2) the narrator, whom we know as old Peig,

telling the story

(3) the two little girls, looking on in their turn

(4) the old women, bustling about the conduct of the

wake

(and finally, at the very inner heart of this *abyme*, or abyss):

(5) the dead body of Tomáisín who of course can

neither look nor speak nor lift a finger.

There may be here an implicit suggestion of the silencing of men in the presence of death. Whether or not this is so, part of the meaning of the scene, which we may discern at this meta-level of fictional signification, is that Peig's *saighdiúireacht*, her agency, is what has brought her to this controlling, storyteller's, place.

Furthermore, the scene has ended in feasting: a feast set up and offered in the presence of the dead man and therefore of death itself, and against death. We see in this and in many other ways that for all their constant awareness of

hardship, danger and death these texts are turned towards life. Thus they are really not recognizable in the rebellious caricature of the 1980s, with its miasmatic gloom. Neither does the well-regulated docile conformity enjoined upon Irishwomen in our mothers' and grandmothers' generations - and even into our own - appear as their dominant message or meaning. We noted earlier that Peig teases her friend. But she does also console her, with a speech which is touching and funny in equal measure:

> "*Níl ag cur orainn-ne ach an óige. Tiocfaidh lá orainn-ne fós, má mhairimid leis, ná beidh aon eagla orainn.*"
>
> "Our only problem is that we're children. A day will come, if we live to see it, when we won't have any fear." [My translation]

There is a delicate narrative poise and poignancy in the recall of this hopeful moment by the narrator. This little speech is, after all, imagined by the biographical Peig in her mid-sixties, in view - and in spite - of the life of loss and suffering, of chagrin and indeed of terror, which she now knows lay ahead to be lived through. The moment is a triumph of the narrative imagination over the constriction of actual circumstance, and should be recognized as such. Nabokov wrote that imagination is a form of memory, but it is also, as Proust showed, a transformative force. Not only, then, does Peig Sayers deserve to be re-read for the power of her texts as social history from a woman's perspective and for the psychological insight they afford into feminine subjectivity in Irish traditional society. In what is to be sure a small compass, her writings also reveal the

working of this transforming aesthetic imagination on the material of ordinary lives, however poor, culturally subaltern and geographically marginal the community where those lives were lived. Finally, on the subject of women's agency, we may note that the chapter concludes with a delighted and ironic account of Big Nell's pleasure in spending the miser Tomáisín's accumulated wealth: she happily lavishes hospitality on all comers (Sayers (1939) Chapter 7).

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[1] See my longer essay in Irish (1999), based on the lecture the late Máire Ní Chéileachair of Radio na Gaeltachta, an inspiring and emphatic presence, asked me to write. More detailed references to Peig's writings and to related material will be found in that essay and its notes. The view of Peig here advanced is developed from a lecture I gave at the annual Blasket commemoration in 1998. It also reflects ensuing discussions of the topic in Irish national newspapers and on local and national radio during April and May 1998 and when the essay was published in 1999 (*Irish Times*, *Pat Kenny Show, Morning Ireland*). For biographical information, see Breatnach and Ní Mhurchú.

[2] The best single account in English of the history and culture of the Blaskets as a whole is that by Mac Conghail, who also gives information about the other classic autobiographies. Feirtéar's moving television documentaries (1997 and 1998) are an excellent introduction; the latter includes an interview in America with Peig's youngest child, her much-beloved Neilí. Thomson and Flower are classics of English-language writing about Blasket life and culture; Moreton gives a striking view of the island community's last days, in the 1940s and early '50s.

[3] For revealing discussion of Ó Gaoithín, his literary pretensions, and his readiness to perpetrate an authorial hoax, see Almqvist.

[4]Miller's account, however, seems to say that the cost of the passage to America was offered to Peig, but that she refused it because she preferred to stay by her mother, who was then an invalid (475). However, it is clear to the reader of all three volumes that in any case she and her family could not, from sheer poverty, raise the passage money, and furthermore her friend Cáit Jim did not – perhaps could not – fulfil her promise to send it. In her reference to the matter, McCurtain emphasizes the spiritual bond between Peig and her mother, an emphasis with which I agree (Murphy n. 21).

[4] Maureen Murphy shows a much more positive outlook on the institution of rural family life in Ireland, stressing the altruism of the remittance system, whereby emigrant sisters sent financial "help" home to their siblings; she sees this as a mark of specifically feminine strengths.

[5] These visitors notably included Carl Marstrander, Carl von Sydow, Kenneth Jackson and Marie-Louise Sjoestedt (both frequent island visitors in Peig's time), as well as Flower and Thomson. For some of von Sydow's striking photographs see Mac Conghail.

[6] See Ó Gaoithín (1923). I thank Professor Seán Ó Coileáin for his discussion of this.

[7] These and some related points are influenced by discussion with folklorist and ethnographer Diarmuid Ó Giolláin, though the responsibility for their formulation here is mine.

[8] See Valiulis on constructions of femininity in the newly independent state, and Scannell on the Constitution and women's rights. She also notes the opposition mounted by some women as the text was being drafted towards its exclusive emphasis on women's role in the home.

[9] As shown by investigation of the archives of Talbot Press (now Educational Company of Ireland) which published the first volume both in its full and school editions, and at the National Publications Office which brought out the second.

[10] I thank the late Aindrias Ó Gallchoir for this information and for discussing his own memories of Peig.

[11] This passage from the hero's speech in Bolger's play *In High Germany* makes clear the association of Peig with a nationalism perceived as atavistic and experienced as coercive:

> "I thought of my father's battered travel bag, of Molloy drilling us behind the 1798 pike, the wasters who came after him hammering *Peig* into us, the masked men blowing limbs off passers-by in my name. You know, all my life, it seems, somebody somewhere has always been trying to tell me which Ireland I belonged in…" (107).

As recently as 2002, the biographical note in Julian Gough's humorous novel *Juno and Juliet* (London: Flamingo**)** credits Gough, raised in Tipperary, with co-authorship of a presumably imaginary work called *Peig: The Musical*.

[12] The controversy followed a report on my Dunquin lecture by Dick Hogan (*Irish Times Southern Report*, 31 March 1998). Rev. Pat Moore, with an address in Gnieveguilla, Co. Kerry, conducted a prolonged dispute with me in "Letters to the Editor", vehemently expressing his disagreement with my position, especially in regard to women and their social roles (*Irish Times*).

[13]Máirín Ní Dhuinnshléibhe, however, gives a strong account of women's shared lore and habits of intercommunication on the island, especially of their daily conversations when they met at the well ("Saol na mBan", Ó Muircheartaigh).

[14] Sisters, as well as younger brothers, in such families were forced to leave households and earn their living elsewhere, often in Britain or America, by the prevailing social system, whereby the eldest son inherited the farm, and in circumstances where poverty precluded the financial support of other siblings. I have borrowed the term "surplus woman" from Davidoff and Hall's discussion specifically of middle-class "redundant" women in the mid- and later nineteenth century (453). Inglis develops a compelling argument about the long-lasting effects of the Irish rural inheritance system on late marriage rates and on emotional life, though his account of the

role of mothers is contestable (Chs. 7 "The Transformation of Irish Society" and 8 "The Irish Mother", 159-200).

[15] See Joanna Bourke on the conditions of employment of farm and domestic workers in the late nineteenth century ("Paid Workers" and "Subsistence Entrepreneurs", 25-198 and references therein).

[16]My own discussion of this issue proved particularly unwelcome to conservative critics, those hostile to feminism (*Irish Times*).

[17] Benjamin has an excellent discussion of intersubjectivity and mutual recognition *versus* the dominant Western tradition of an atomized selfhood predicated on separation and Freudian instinctual drives towards mastery.

[18] For an open and whole-hearted late 20th-century emphasis on the sense of women's mischievous delight in transgressive play, see Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill's poem "*Táimid damanta, a dheirféaracha*" ["We are damned, my sisters"]; Ní Dhomhnaill herself has a West Kerry background.

[19] The rather literal-minded transcription approach until recently also marked the reception of the slave-narratives of American literature, by both female and male authors. I thank my colleague Lee Jenkins for this observation and for the reference to McWilliams' essay.

[20] On women's autobiography, see Anderson.

[21] This passage has a kinship with the scene where the pet cat dies in Willa Cather's novella *Old Mrs Harris*. Mrs Harris is the only character with old experience of deathbeds and with a long memory: Cather clearly links these characteristics with Mrs Harris' wisdom, despite her social devaluation by her daughter and son-in-law.

[22] See Bourke 1988.

[23] Transport to and from the mainland, across the notoriously dangerous stretch of the Blasket Sound, was by *naomhóg*, the frail but buoyant boat locally constructed of tarred canvas over a light wooden frame and called a *currach* in Connemara (Mac Conghail, Thomson). The connection with both birth and death indicates the liminality of women and the feminine. The requirement that a woman travel in the *naomhóg* provides a striking instance of a rite of transition, in the two senses of a literal passage across the dividing water, and the dead person's passage beyond this life.