
“Stretching the Imagination into another World”: An Interview with Eibhear Walshe

Pilar Villar-Argáiz
University of Granada, Spain

Copyright (c) 2020 by Pilar Villar-Argáiz. This text may be archived and redistributed both in electronic form and in hard copy, provided that the author and journal are properly cited and no fee is charged for access.

Abstract. Eibhear Walshe is one of the most significant scholars in Ireland in the fields of literary criticism, biography and cultural history. As a senior lecturer in the School of English at University College Cork and director of Creative Writing at the same institution, he has been involved for more than three decades in the teaching and promotion of subjects of Irish literature. Walshe’s research interests reflect his fascination for the interconnections between politics, literature and sexuality. Since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ireland in 1993, lesbian and gay studies has consolidated itself as an exciting and innovative field in contemporary Irish Studies and he has been representative of this new trend, both in his academic research and in his fictional work. Walshe is also a novelist himself and it is on this facet of his life that the following interview concentrates upon.

Key Words. Irish Literature, Creative Writing, Oscar Wilde, Georg Fiedrich Handel.

Resumen. Eibhear Walshe es uno de los académicos irlandeses más aclamados en el terreno de la crítica literaria, así como en los de la biografía y la historia cultural. Como profesor universitario en la Universidad de Cork (en la School of English) y director del centro de Escritura Creativa de dicha universidad, lleva trabajando durante más de tres décadas en la enseñanza y en la promoción de temas relacionados con la literatura irlandesa. Sus intereses como investigador son también una muestra de su fascinación por las conexiones entre política, literatura y sexualidad. Desde la descriminalización de la homosexualidad en Irlanda en 1993, los estudios sobre literatura gay y lesbiana se han consolidado como un terreno altamente innovador en este área de conocimiento en el contexto irlandés y Walshe es uno de los representantes de esta tendencia, tanto en su faceta de investigador como también en su faceta de escritor. Walshe es también un novelista y sobre este aspecto de su carrera se centrará la presente entrevista.

Palabras clave. Literatura irlandesa, escritura creativa, Oscar Wilde, Georg Fiedrich Handel.

Eibhear Walshe is one of the most significant scholars in Ireland in the fields of literary criticism, biography and cultural history. As a senior lecturer in the School of English at University College Cork and director of Creative Writing at the same institution, he has been involved for more than three decades in the teaching and promotion of subjects of Irish literature. Walshe's biography *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* was published by Irish Academic Press in 2006, and it is an essential source nowadays in the study of this iconic woman writer. He has also written critically acclaimed books on other voices such as Elizabeth Bowen, engaging powerfully in the important task of recuperating from oblivion (or neglect) silent female figures in Irish history and literature. His many publications include *Elizabeth Bowen: Visions and Revisions* (Irish Academic Press, 2008), *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork University Press, 1993), *Sex, Nation and Dissent* (Cork University Press, 1997), *Elizabeth Bowen Remembered* (Four Courts Press: 1999), *The Plays of Teresa Deevy* (Mellen Press, 2003), and *Elizabeth Bowen's Selected Irish Writings* (Cork University Press, 2011). Walshe has also published on writers such as Colm Toibín and Oscar Wilde. In 2002, he was commissioned as section editor for *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing: Volume 4* (Cork University Press). His study *Oscar's Shadow* was published in 2011 by Cork University Press.

Walshe's research interests reflect his fascination for the interconnections between politics, literature and sexuality. Since the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Ireland in 1993, lesbian and gay studies has consolidated itself as an exciting and innovative field in contemporary Irish Studies and he has been representative of this new trend, both in his academic research and in his fictional work. Apart from editing volumes, publishing critical monographs, peer-reviewed essays and book chapters on Irish writers, Walshe is also a novelist himself and it is on this facet of his life that the following interview concentrates upon. His memoir, *Cissie's Abattoir* was published by Collins Press in 2009, and was read on RTÉ Radio 1 on the Book On One. Walshe's first novel, *The Diary of Mary Travers*, was published in 2014 by Somerville Press, was shortlisted for the Kerry Fiction Prize 2015 and longlisted for the Dublin International Literary Award 2016. Focusing on the largely unknown historical figure of Sir William Wilde's lover, Mary Travers, Walshe engages in the courageous feminist act of unearthing silent female figures from the Irish past. His latest novel to date is *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (Somerville Press, 2019). This novel, which is receiving high critical acclaim in Ireland, focuses on the private sexual life of celebrated composer Georg Handel.

The following interview was conducted on February 15, 2019, in the context of the IV International Seminar on Irish Studies organized at the University of Granada. Eibhear Walshe was an invited keynote speaker in this seminar. The MA students attending this event had previously read his novel *The Diary of Mary Travers*, and thus, this interview is part of the public *Question and Answer* session that was held with the writer himself, in which we discussed some relevant issues in the novel.

The novel develops two parallel story lines: as a backdrop, we have Oscar Wilde's London trial in 1895; at the forefront, we have the story of the narrator, Mary Travers, who follows this trial closely by reading the reports of newspapers, as she remembers the libel trial she once initiated against Wilde's mother, Jane Wilde, the famous nationalist poet known as Speranza. Reading *The Diary of Mary Travers* inevitably takes the reader into an exercise of contrast/comparison of the profound changes that separate our world today from Mary's world. Walshe's focus on the Victorian scandals surrounding the Oscar Wilde family is a reminder of the changes in the nature of gender equality that have happened in Ireland since the beginning of the 20th century. The novel also reminds us of the contingent nature of secrets; what remained hidden from disclosure at the time can now be spoken of freely in Ireland.

Pilar Villar-Argáiz: Eibhear, you are not only a prolific writer of fiction but also a consolidated author of acclaimed memoirs and scholarly works. How do you manage to combine your life as an academic with your life as a writer of fiction? In which way do these two facets of your life interact?

Eibhear Walshe: I suppose because I write historical fiction and also biography, research is the starting point for each genre and so I can work on archives for both fiction and also for my scholarly writing. Also as an academic, I learned the rigour of regular schedules of writing and editing and so the work habits of an academic life suit the creative life. They compliment each other and now that I direct Creative Writing here in UCC, that brings each part into my working life.

PVA: How did you first come across Mary Travers, and why were you drawn to this historical character?

EW: I liked her because nobody had a good word to say about her. I came across her in my researching on the Wilde family and Oscar Wilde's reputation in Ireland for my book, *Oscar's Shadow*. She was the subject of much historical attack and dismissal, and she was the villain of the famous libel case she took against Jane Wilde and for that reason, I wanted to give a voice to a person who had been demonised and who then disappeared from public view.

PVA: You have chosen to narrate this story from the perspective of Mary Travers, and not, let's say, other fascinating characters in her life such as her sister Emily, or more interestingly, Jane Wilde (alias Speranza). Why have you decided to adopt the point of view of Mary Travers, and not of other characters?

EW: Partly because I saw her as voiceless, and the form of a diary would force me to adopt her voice and her point of view and I didn't always agree with her point of view. I took the risk of making the central voice that of a nineteenth-century woman, and I am not a woman nor have I lived in the nineteenth century. A diary form forced me to stretch my imagination, to put myself into another world, another body, another set of values and emotions. In saying that, Jane Wilde was easily my favourite character.

PVA: Indeed, the epistolary genre, and particularly diaries, are common in neo-historical fiction focusing on the Victorian period. I would like to ask you now about the research process behind the composition of this novel. Was it difficult to get historical documentation on Mary Travers? Where did you do all the research?

EW: Little survives of her life and there is no image of her. The cover picture is that of an unknown woman walking into the reading room of the National Library in Dublin sometime around the time she was living there. I did trace Mary Travers' steps, visited her grave, saw her house in Mitchelstown, went to Marsh's Library to see her father's portrait, read her will, and collected all the newspaper accounts of her libel trial and all of the relevant biographies. All of this helped but in the end it was an act of imagining and not a biography.

PVA. So, when rewriting about Mary Travers's life, were you attempting to appear objective and scholarly or would you rather locate your narrative on more fictional terms?

EW: I was not at all objective but I wanted to understand the deranged and obsessive behaviour of a young woman who had been scorned by the Wildes husband and wife, and who stalked them, to use our modern phrase, and who persecuted them. I could not be objective about her, because she was an extreme person.

PVA: For Sheridan (2014) in her review of this novel for the *Irish Examiner*, Mary as a historical character is “not a very likeable person”, partly because of her “dishonesty” and her tendency to live “on false pretences”. Do you agree? Do you think the reader can sympathize with the character of Mary?

EW: The reader must sympathise or else I have failed in my task as a writer. When I finished the book and was editing the manuscript for the publisher, I sat down one Saturday and read it from beginning to end, I felt a great deal of sadness for her, a rejected, lonely, talented and abandoned young person. Ultimately that was my purpose, but I only realised it right at the very end.

PVA: Mary Travers is a skilful manipulator; she conceals and discloses secrets as she wishes. Furthermore, she is a questionable character from the moral point of view (for instance, she confesses her jealousy in her diaries and she behaves immorally at times, as when she steals from her sister in hospital the rosary beads). Are we then to believe her? Are we to take at face value all that she says? Or is she an unreliable narrator?

EW: She is unreliable and fails to understand what is happening around her; she is unscrupulous and jealous, and she is obsessive in her behaviour and so I hoped the reader would look beyond her own first person narrative to see the hurt and the loss beneath. People who behave badly rarely do so deliberately; they are reacting to fear, loss, pain and jealousy and believe they have been undermined or treated unjustly. William Wilde's behaviour is far worse than Mary's, yet readers seem to like him more.

PVA: At the end, Mary goes to visit Jane in London, in an attempt – it seems – to come to terms with her past. Would you say this character is positively transformed in the end? Does she achieve some form of redemption?

EW: I hope so. Mary wants Jane's forgiveness and simply she wanted her back as the glittering, charming friend she once had. Mary is as much infatuated with Jane as she was with William and don't forget, Mary channels much of her revenge in the public attacks on Jane. The Wildes took her up, made much of her and then dropped her. I hope that the London scene makes both Jane and Mary realise the injustice that had been done to her.

PVA: When reading this novel, I inevitably established a connection with Oscar Wilde's *De Profundis*, perhaps because of the intimate confessional note present in your narrative. Was this a (conscious) influence, or not?

EW: I hadn't noticed, but I teach *De Profundis* and so you must be right. The tone is very similar, the sense of self-justification, the revealing version of the past, the narrator showing us their unconscious desires and angers.

PVA: Travers's strong voice also bears important resemblances to the narrative voice found in Molly Keane's *Good Behaviour*, a text which I know you deeply admire. Would you like to comment on this literary influence?

EW: Yes, Aroon is a great voice, a naïve first person narrator who has been betrayed. Keane allows her reader to see what Aroon cannot see, the lives of those around her.

PVA: Which other literary influences can we find in your fictional writing?

EW: *The Master* by Colm Toibín had been a great influence, and also Emma Donoghue's *The Letter*, as well as my own favourite Victorian writer, Anthony Trollope.

PVA: Having written about Mary Travers, which other marginalized character/aspect of Irish history would you like to write about?

EW: Nothing at the moment; I've written about Kate O'Brien and so that was my other marginalised figure.

PVA: Let's talk about your latest novel *A Trumpet Shall Sound*. How did the original idea of this novel come about?

EW: The idea of Handel in Dublin, broke, no longer famous, out of fashion in London and creating at a low moment in his career, the most beautiful piece of music in the entire canon of church music, *Messiah*.

PVA: Secrecy is an important aspect of your work. In *The Diary of Mary Travers*, the ability to keep secrets is paramount in Victorian Dublin, in order to maintain an image of social respectability and decorum. Similarly, in *A Trumpet Shall Sound* you "attempt to imagine" what Handel "may have kept secret from his public and his patrons" (I am here quoting from your words; Ní Dhuibhne 2019). The intersection of secrecy and sexuality is powerful in both novels, and it directly mirrors the strict gender politics which governs the Romantic and Victorian societies at the time, as you depict an underworld of occult relationships (i.e. illicit extramarital affairs, homosexuality) which remain outside the social system. In which way does your fiction speak about contemporary Ireland, a country which has also gradually unearthed many secrets from the past? I am asking this in light of the recent disclosure in media and international news of previously silent traumas and religious and political scandals...

EW: My novels are really twenty-first century novels, despite being historical fiction. I am old enough to remember the repressions round being gay, for example and I don't think I would have published the Handel novel twenty years ago. I would have felt at risk professionally. Now I feel open to write lost stories, to wonder why a man as famous as Handel seemed to have no private life, no partner, no lover. These books could not have been written when I began my career as an academic and university teacher.

PVA: Most characters in the novel are historical, with the exception of some of them (namely the fictive characters of Handel's lovers Luca and Lorenzo). Which historical sources did you use when writing this novel and where did you conduct the necessary research for accuracy?

EW: I used as many biographies of Handel as I could and so all of my facts are as correct as I could have made them but what I found to be most helpful was listening to his music and also visiting the museums dedicated to his life and to his work, which meant wonderful times in London, Rome and Halle in Germany.

PVA: While the novel is set in different places which were important in Handel's life (such as the ones you mention; Rome, Venice, Halle and London), the opening and the closing scenes take place in Dublin, which is visualized as the place of composition of *Messiah* and also as the setting of its première performance. Is this structure deliberate?

EW: Yes, but it was not the original structure of the novel. My editor persuaded me to make it more linear and more chronological. It is a short novel but covers a vast period of time and so we made it as direct a timeline as possible. I wrote the closing scene first, the first performance of *Messiah*, as I wanted to imagine what it was like for him to hear it himself. All of the rest of the novel then led up to that point.

PVA: How did you choose the title of the novel?

EW: I called it *The Trumpet Shall Sound* because it is one of my favourite arias in *Messiah*. I also wanted readers who love Handel to recognise it and, hopefully, to want to read it.

PVA: Which is your next project? Would you like to talk about this?

EW: I am working on a biography of Jane Wilde and also a collection of her essays with those of her husband. I am obsessed with the Wildes and with the 200 anniversary of her birth approaching in 2021. I want to reclaim her and her husband as key figures within Irish intellectual life. I am also publishing my next novel, on the life and the writings of the Irish novelist Elizabeth Bowen. This will be called *The Last Day at Bowen's Court* and looks at her relationship with the Canadian Diplomat, Charles Ritchie and the writing of her most celebrated novel, *The Heat of the Day*. Like Handel, this new novel is about creativity, the struggle to express in art what cannot be expressed in life.

Works Cited

- Haverty, Anne. Review. "The Other Woman in the Other Wilde Case: *The Diary of Mary Travers – A Novel*". *The Irish Times*. 20 September 2014. 16 July 2018.
<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-other-woman-in-the-other-wilde-case-the-diary-of-mary-travers-a-novel-1.1931889>.
- Ní Dhuibhne, Eilís. "*The Trumpet Shall Sound* review: Imagining a Gay Handel". *The Irish Times*. 2 February 2019. 16 July 2019. <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-trumpet-shall-sound-review-imagining-a-gay-handel-1.3769412>
- Sheridan, Colette. Review. *The Irish Examiner*. 27 July 2014. 16 July 2018.
<https://www.irishexaminer.com/viewpoints/books/the-diary-of-mary-travers-276586.html>.
- Shine Thompson, Mary. Review. "Oscar Wilde's Father Was also a Scandal". *The Independent*. 27 July 2014. 16 July 2018.
<https://www.independent.ie/entertainment/books/book-reviews/books-oscar-wildes-father-was-also-a-scandal-30460310.html>.
- Walshe, Eibhear. *The Diary of Mary Travers: A Novel*. Bantry: Somerville Press, 2014.

———. *The Trumpet Shall Sound, A Novel*. Bantry: Somerville Press, 2019.

Received: 19 July 2019 Revised version accepted: 17 December 2019

Pilar Villar-Argáiz is a Senior Lecturer of British and Irish Literatures in the Department of English at the University of Granada and the General Editor of the major series “Studies in Irish Literature, Cinema and Culture” in Edward Everett Root Publishers. She is the author of the books *Eavan Boland’s Evolution as an Irish Woman Poet: An Outsider within an Outsider’s Culture* (Edwin Mellen Press, 2007) and *The Poetry of Eavan Boland: A Postcolonial Reading* (Academica Press, 2008). She has published extensively on contemporary Irish poetry and fiction, in relation to questions of gender, race, migration and interculturality. Her edited collections include *Literary Visions of Multicultural Ireland: The Immigrant in Contemporary Irish Literature* (Manchester University Press, 2014), *Irishness on the Margins: Minority and Dissident Identities* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), the special issue of *Irish Studies Review* (entitled “Irish Multiculturalism in Crisis”, co-edited with Jason King, 2015), and the special issue of *Nordic Irish Studies* (entitled “Discourses of Inclusion and Exclusion: Artistic Renderings of Marginal Identities in Ireland”, 2016). Villar-Argáiz is currently a member of the board of AEDEI (Spanish Association of Irish Studies) and EFACIS (European Federation of Associations and Centres of Irish Studies).

pwillar@ugr.es