

## All Over the Place

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### ***So what?***

When Claire asked me to speak at this event, she mentioned something I had told her. I remembered. I was talking about a woman's comment to me after her visit to Talbot Street in Dublin's so-called north inner-city. "Not one person speaking English," the woman had said, "not one." And in my retelling to Claire, I said what I had not said at the time: "So what?"

On the Monday morning after the Thursday night riots in Dublin last November, I had a lesson with a group of learners – around twelve people who had been together since mid-September, a fairly settled, comfortable enough group, who got on well. I arrived early and sat in our classroom – the Art Room of the F2 Building, a community centre in Fatima-Herberton run by Fatima Groups United (FGU), who, since their establishment in 1995, had campaigned for and worked to implement regeneration projects in the area around Rialto and Fatima Mansions, the large public housing development in Dolphins Barn. Self-portraits painted by people in the centre's men's group hung on the walls beside knitted commemorations for children who died in the 1916 Rising and sentences written by literacy learners expressing their hopes for their children. I read again the framed newspaper cuttings about the area and the decision to go ahead with its regeneration. Headlines told of poverty, addiction and fear – of people unable to find comfort or security in their own homes – and finally (but perhaps only because the story ended there) of relief and hope. I thought back to the COVID-19 shutdowns when my daily walk took me along the canal, past the flats at Fatima Mansions. People – teenage boys and young men in regulation tracksuit, runners and hooded rainwear – thronged the entrances to the blocks. I remembered vape and weedsmoke, shared phones and tinny music, and brief eruptions of mock MMA, evasive twistings, and flurries of fists nearly landed.



I thought of the night of the riot. I was at home in my apartment on the fifth floor of a private multi-unit development near Cork Street. The front entrance to the building is a big metal fence – a listed artwork – in which there is a gate secured with a maglock. Fob access only, in theory. Since I'd moved in in 2017, we'd had sporadic incursions by local children – mostly very young, others well into their teens – but it hadn't happened for a good while. As I followed events on my phone – including a very few moments in the tit-for-tat screed on X – a jubilant outburst seemed to come from worryingly close to my windows. I twitched the blind to peek out just as the blur of a teenage boy ran up the flat roof that abuts my terrace with his arms raised shouting in near ecstasy as others cheered him on. He came to an abrupt halt. One more step and he was five-floors down crumpled on the concrete. I decided not to disturb them. Below, on one of the main access routes into the city, small groups of people – hooded teenagers and young men – moved in haste towards the action. I watched videos of a torched Garda car, a bus in flames, windows being smashed, shutters breached and shops looted. In one video, three young men in trained fighting stance rounded on an isolated Garda. The boys on my roof were jubilant. Roars of laughter and exhortation suggested triumphant release.

When the people in the class arrived that Monday morning, I asked how they were feeling – did they want to talk about the riots? A Vietnamese woman in her thirties who had been living in Kimmage for more than two years asked if it was true that Irish people don't like people from other countries. I said, it appears to be true that some Irish people don't, or they think they don't. I doubt anyone understood my distinction. Everyone was unsettled. A Brazilian man was already thinking of moving with his wife to Spain. A Ukrainian woman had been at an event on Abbey Street when the riots kicked off and they had to evacuate the building. Gardai escorted them from the area. A Turkish woman told us how fearful she had been bringing her daughter to school on the Friday morning. But, she said, her daughter had been fine, happy among her friends. Everyone had avoided the city centre.

Though it seemed a victory for advocates of exclusion, I thought this wise. I'd been away in Galway for the weekend, but on the Friday afternoon, I had walked from my home in the Liberties to a city centre swarming with uniformed Gardaí. Later I went to Heuston Station to print my train ticket. Among skittish rush-hour commuters, I spoke on the phone to my brother. His friend had been at a LinkedIn staff do the night before and had spent hours ensuring colleagues – who'd come from all over the world to work in Dublin – got home safely. I told him about all the Guards out. I said if I were far-right or hell-bent on a riot, I could have the run of any other place in Ireland. He said he hoped they didn't think like me. As it got dark, I walked along the Liffey quays to O'Connell Street, feeling a ramping tension. On Westmoreland Street I heard a young man declaim – neck clenched to court challenge – his phrasing borrowed from a once-alien discourse: "I have no love for a minority." The two young

women with him laughed. I headed home, past shuttered shops and restaurants usually alive at that time of the week. Property sealed in defensive armour.

Weeks and months passed and my learners got on with their lessons, preparing portfolios for assessment. People from Somalia, Sudan, and Algeria; from Congo, Libya and Bangladesh; a Cape-Verdean with Portuguese nationality, Italian citizens from Brazil; Iraqis, Afghans, Romanians; people from Ukraine, Jordan, the Russian Federal republic of Sakha; from Turkey, Georgia, Moldova, and Albania; Chile, China, India, and Pakistan; Kurds, Nigerians, naturalized Irish citizens. Protests went on outside migrant accommodation centres. Some learners, told to stay in and avoid confrontation, regularly missed class. Illness and absenteeism were rife. A Nigerian woman – in class after five hours work as a cleaner – often brought bags of apples and bunches of bananas or some biscuits to share. During Ramadan she brought bags of food for her Muslim classmates. We celebrated International Mother Tongue Day with the F2 Centre's Global Café group, mostly retired women from the area. After a round of shy introductions, and a few well-meaning but cringey confessions of privilege were met with bafflement, prolonged awkwardness was eased only when the tea and cake arrived and everyone stood. People served one another, checked preferences for milk or sugar, which cake, what size slice. More and more words were exchanged and conversations – still awkward and effortful – broke out. Later, when I told someone about this they said pity I didn't take photos. I said it would've been worth it if I could have documented the whole process, to show the stress in coming together. They seemed unconvinced. Afterwards, in the lobby of the F2, as I arrived for work, I'd sometimes see people who had met that day chatting and laughing with no intermediary or prompt. There were more feasts, cake and tea and coffee. In March, a Kurdish nationalist in the class brought burek and baklava to celebrate Newroz. She was the same person who, each morning when I asked how everyone was doing, said, "Not good." Although much of her worry stemmed from the threat the Turkish government posed to her father and cousins, I had a feeling the answer might be the same until her life's purpose were realised – an independent Kurdistan, a Kurdistan for the Kurds. We celebrated Eid and the end of the academic year. Some people baked, made intricate confectionary – marzipan flavoured with fresh fruit and shaped into balls to resemble cherries, each with its own stalk; homemade pastries savoury and sweet. Others brought Ukrainian pancakes, spiced coffee, fresh Irish strawberries in season.

Meanwhile, young people continued to break into the building where I live, sometimes several times a day. One day, I had the disgusting thought that our lives, my life, would be so much easier if these young people did not exist. I did not like the thought. When confronted by residents the young people often refused to leave. They sometimes used racist abuse. Or made threats. We liaised with the community Garda. Things improved for a while. I thought,

maybe many people felt the same about the people who had rioted as I felt about the young people on my roof. This is not who we are, said Taoiseach Leo Varadkar. This is not who we are as a people, said Tanaiste Micheál Martin. Scumbags and thugs, said the Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee. And many of the so-called protestors seemed to feel the same way about migrants. This is not who we are was the message from some people in East Wall or Newtownmountkennedy. And it wasn't or isn't only protestors. As evidenced in books like Jeremy Harding's *Border Vigils*, with its subtitle: *Keeping Migrants out of the Rich World*, Daniel Trilling's *Lights in the Distance* and most recently and in horrific detail, Sally Hayden's *My Fourth Time, We Drowned*, the EU is committed to a doomed project of doomed exclusion. When, asks Harding in his book, had generosity become a vice? Groups large and small want to restrict access, to say who's in and who's out, who may enter what we consider our territory. My fellow residents and I are saying to the young people who don't live in our building, you don't belong here. We invoke laws of property, contract and trespass, we expect the Gardaí and our elected representatives to work on our behalf, to secure what we consider our right to enjoy our home in peace. People who protest against migrant accommodation are saying to migrants you don't belong here. The government that erects metal railings on streets around the International Protection and European Parliament offices on Mount Street are saying you and your tents don't belong here. Same for the railings on the Grand Canal. People who attach handwritten signs to the railings saying "Ireland is for the Irish" or who attack the tents or the people in them or who remove the tents from the banks of the Grand Canal or from City Quay send the same message. By one of the locked metal gates of a park in Georgian Dublin a sign reads: Private Community Garden. If you don't have a key, you don't belong. Residents Only read the signs on the walls and fences of Dublin City Council flat complexes.





Segregation, exclusion and worse are nothing new in Ireland or elsewhere. For fourteen years I attended Catholic schools. For ten of those years I was in an all-boys school. In the same town as my secondary school – actually on the outskirts of the town – there was a school exclusively for Traveller children. Some people go to fee-paying schools; some do not. The university I went to was founded in 1854 as the Catholic University of Ireland. Penal Laws, secret masses, government ministers who wouldn't enter the church for their own president's funeral. Sectarian murder. Thatch set alight, cottages burnt, Big Houses razed. One of my earliest memories is of an effigy of Margaret Thatcher being burnt on a Halloween bonfire. I remember a friend biting the head off an orange jellybaby after greeting it as the Reverend Ian Paisley: "Hello Ian," he said, just prior to the beheading. I remember, in my mid-teens, being driven to work by a friend who rolled down his window and slowed the car to shout abuse at people living in caravans at the side of the road. One of the words he used is a word I began to hear again and again about a decade or more ago from students in the private language school where I worked. Spoken in say a Venezuelan, or Korean or Brazilian accent. They meant teenage boys in sportswear. People to be feared and avoided. In class, I went into the history of the word and why I thought it was unacceptable. From talking to the students I realised they had picked up the term from their teachers or from other language learners who had learnt it in a similar way. The teachers were all university educated and had completed further training in English Language Teaching. Some of my colleagues mimicked accents and told sensationalised stories that perpetuated negative stereotypes. More than once, I asked if they would be going on like that if they knew there were Travellers present. Their response – confused silence. Total presumption of absence, of otherness excluded.

In an interview featured on John Bowman's archive show on RTE Radio 1 in January this year, a man speaks of his reaction to large-scale housing development in Tallaght: "I'd still say it was a country village at the foot of the Dublin mountains and if you go to any part of Ireland there's no one likes to see strangers moving into their little village." A woman tells how she felt: "Oh the day when I heard...I got a sigh of sorrow. We weren't used to company. We wanted Tallaght to ourselves and we had it for years and the building put a dampener on it."

But the man's opinion changes: "I got used to them," he says in a later interview. "We've a wonderful community here in Tallaght, take from Killinarden down to Balrothery Cross. We have all mixes and classes of people from labourers up to bank officials and you name it but we are all one in Tallaght." Besides the hierarchy encoded in up, note how specific are the edges of Tallaght, where the "all one" finds its limit. We don't hear another word from the woman.

In a September 2016 issue of the *London Review of Books*, Ben Mauk wrote of Aldekerk, a small town near Germany's post-industrial Ruhr Valley: "you might have whiled away your entire life without breaking out of Platt, the Dutch-soaked dialect that renders speech lively and incomprehensible to outsiders. The most recent census gave the proportion of foreigners in the area as 2.8 percent." (There are only 232 people living in the village, one of my cousins said to me recently, and they want to move in 250 IPAs. IPAs mind you, not people.) Mauk goes on to describe something now familiar to us in Ireland. "As towns across Germany have accepted their federal allocation of asylum seekers, administrators have fashioned ad hoc shelters out of disused factories, offices, motels and parish houses, usually on the outskirts of town. In this way they hope to keep neighbourhood friction to a minimum. Even so, at the moment, someone tries to burn one of these improvised hostels to the ground every two to three days." Mauk's take on who to blame is nuanced: "two decades of research and arrest records suggest that Germany's xenophobic arsonists are something else altogether; normal people, semi-educated and often employed in blue-collar work, with no special interest in politics, who nourish deep economic resentments and an abiding fear of immigration. To classify arson as the exclusive work of gangs and fanatics is to underestimate its appeal as a weapon of the underclass."

Ringsend, Rosscahill, Clonmel. And more recently Coolock. By chance, in the days after protest turned to riot and arson in Coolock, I read another old article in the *London Review of Books*, from June 2020. Adam Shatz, writing of the widespread Black Lives Matter protests that followed the killing of George Floyd, quotes James Baldwin's 1960 description of the police officer in Harlem: "like an occupying soldier in a bitterly hostile country; which is precisely what, and where, he is, and is the reason he walks in twos and threes...he can retreat from his uneasiness in only one direction: into a callousness which very shortly becomes second nature. He becomes more callous, the population becomes more hostile, the situation grows more tense, and the police force is increased. One day, to everyone's astonishment, someone drops a match in the powder keg and everything blows up." Today we have women Guards. Otherwise Harlem may as well be Coolock. And not just the police become more callous. Banners held up by the Coolock protesters read: "Irish Lives Matter."



A couple of weeks ago, I found myself once again walking by the Liffey, this time headed west. On Merchant's Quay I saw a man folded in an alcove smoking something through blackened plastic. The third person in so many days and I've seen more since. Lanes, alleys and alcoves, the river boardwalk. Crack, I suppose. Scatterings of people idled by the MQI hostel and I remembered a homeless woman I'd met in a burrito restaurant who told me she'd been barred from that hostel by African Christians. And they'd phoned all around the other hostels, she said. She didn't say the word blacklisted, but I thought it. She gave no reason; I didn't ask. The woman had entered the restaurant and hurried towards my table. She was tall and thin and her face was aflame, livid with spots. After I refused to give her money, she went to the counter, then came back with a bowl of food. She sat near me and began to speak. The staff gave her free food, she said, because there was nothing for her there. She gestured across the cobbles at Focus Ireland. All meat, she said; she was a vegan atheist. African Christians, she said, they don't understand. Where do you sleep? I asked. In a bush.

Further along the quays, I came to Usher's Island and the house where Joyce set much of his short story "The Dead". In one of the sash windows – behind the glass but in front of the partially opened shutters – was a sign, handwritten in screaming capitals. I took a photo. On the frame above the sign there was a seven candle bridge – traditionally lit against the darkness to guide workers home – and above that, hanging from the upper sill, an Irish tricolour, the green clamped in place by the shut window, the white and orange left dangle. In the bottom of the shot, the rusted prongs of the front railings. The sign read: NO DANGEROUS UNVETTED MEN HERE PROTESTS EVERY MONDAY, WEDNESDAY + FRIDAY 1257 INNOCENT IRISH RAPED, STABBED, MURDERED OR ASSAULTED FROM JANUARY 2024 TO AUGUST 2024 ENOUGH IS ENOUGH, RISE UP EIRE AND FIGHT FOR ALL OUR FUTURES



Who, I wonder, is in that ALL and in that OUR? Surely not the “UNVETTED MEN”? On the Irish Times Inside Politics podcast after the local and European elections, a journalist said that two anti-migrant candidates had been elected to local councils. Moments later, the same journalist said that several candidates who had immigrated to Ireland were also elected, which, she said, was good news for everyone. “We’re better than this,” said then Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar, after the riots of November 2023, seeming to invoke what Jacqueline Rose calls a dangerous ideal. As though our better selves are what we are. Varadkar went on: “This is not who we are. This is not who we want to be. And this is not who we will ever be.” To which we might ask, so who is this we? The rioters are not we, not who we want to be, not who we will ever be. If we will never be a we that includes the people who rioted, how can they ever be in a we with us?

How can we – whoever we are – ever hope to find the “continuity of sentiments” that Freud writes of in “Why War?” There are, Freud writes in his letter to Einstein, “two factors of cohesion in a community: violent compulsion and ties of sentiment (identifications in technical parlance) between the members of a group.” What ties could possibly link into a cohesive community Leo Varadkar, whoever wrote the sign in the window, me, you, the young people trespassing on my roof or shooting fireworks at each other on the street, an illiterate migrant who arrived at Dublin Port in a refrigerated container, the crack smokers, a Kurdish nationalist lawyer, a vegan atheist who sleeps in a bush, the staff at the LinkedIn office in Dublin, the Minister for Justice, Helen McEntee and the people she branded “thugs and scumbags”, 232 people in a village and their 250 new neighbours; and many many more besides? And that in a time when we may be witnessing the end or at least diminishment of the nation state, when power has shifted from national governments to multi-national corporations (in Wolfgang Streeck’s phrase – from government to governance); when the communications and transport technologies – newspapers, radio and television, rail and road networks – that fostered nationalism and national identities and made possible the formation and endurance of nation states have been superseded by others more conducive to tribalised echo-chamber in-groups and vast deterritorialized and decultured religious movements like Wahhabism and Pentacostal Christianity; when, as Toni Morrison wrote in her essay “The Foreigner’s Home”, more and more people feel “the threat and promise of globalism”, and more and more of us have “an uneasy relationship with our foreignness, our own rapidly disintegrating sense of belonging.”

### ***Jouissance***

I’d like to finish – or nearly finish – with a brief note on your term *jouissance*, which as it migrated to English, became by way of a u mistaken for a v or y, not *jouissance* but



jovisaunce or joyance, similar to jovial, as in related to the god Jove, or of cheerful disposition. An early adopter of the word was Edmund Spenser, among the most prominent advocates for the Elizabethan plantation of Munster and the plantations that followed. In his *A View of the Present State of Ireland*, available in manuscript in 1596, in print from 1633, Spenser advised that the government of Elizabeth I use extreme coercive means, including terror and enforced starvation to subjugate the Irish, in Spenser's infamous formulation: "the most barbarous nacion in Christendome". (What he had to say of those beyond Christendome, we have, as far as I know, been spared.) In the historian David Edwards's paraphrase: "only the prospect of certain extermination would induce the wild Irish to become civil like the English." From the *View*, I'd like to turn now to what Thomas Herron calls Spenser's "self-celebratory wedding poem 'Epithalamion'". The setting for the poem is Spenser's Kilcolman Castle, in Co. Cork – granted to him by the poet Philip Sidney after its initial confiscation by the Crown from the Earls of Desmond in the wake of the Second Desmond Rebellion in the early 1580s. And the wedding is to Elizabeth, daughter of Spenser's New English planter neighbour, Richard Boyle. Listen – amid all the merry-making, and the shifts from our to you to man – to the glorying in conquest, see the furniture and walls spattered a deep red, hear the screams echo from the woods.

Now al is done; bring home the bride againe,  
Bring home the triumph of our victory,  
Bring home with you the glory of her gaine,  
With joyance bring her and with jollity.  
Never had man more jofull day than this,  
Whom heaven would heape with blis.  
Make feast therefore now all this live long day;  
This day for ever to me holy is.  
Poure out the wine without restraint or stay,  
Poure not the cups, but by the belly full,  
Poure out to all that wull,  
And sprinkle all the postes and wals with wine,  
That they may sweat, and drunken be withall.  
Crowne ye God Bacchus with a coronal,  
And Hymen also crowne with wreathes of vine,  
And let the Graces daunce unto the rest;  
For they can doo it best:  
The whiles the maydens doe theyr carroll sing,  
To which the woods shal answer and theyr eccho ring.

Finally, to finish. A few days ago I was myself on Talbot Street, and, out of the chaotic affray I distinctly heard, in a whiny Dublin accent, a “What’s the story pal?” And, then, not so long after that, a gruff and giggly, “Giz a fewadem bruddur!” To which you might say, “So what?”

***Closing Slide***

“Before he was sent off to detention, he said he had been chained to a radiator and beaten at the Ukrainian border. ‘We don’t come to Somalia, so don’t come to Ukraine,’ he’d been told.”

From Daniel Trilling’s *Lights in the Distance*