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The return of children: a comparative study on the contemporary Turkish and Irish novel

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Abstract

In *Infancy and History* Agamben (1993) suggests, following Benjamin's footsteps, that true experience is only possible in infancy, a time that has not yet been expropriated by the bareness of modern life. The kind of potentiality that he attributes to infancy signifies the emergence of a new self, which, rather than moving into the mechanical domain of "work," prefers to remain in the creative territory of "play," where it is possible to transform old societal structures into new ones.

Agamben's approach to play and its non-chronological temporality offers useful clues in revealing the dynamics of the increasing number of contemporary childhood narratives in Irish and Turkish literature, where characters resist the linear structure of the *bildungsroman* and the corresponding model of progress, eventually forming a culture of adolescents resistant to maturity. Focusing on some common features of these novelistic characters, such as playfulness, self-experimentation, and messianic idealism, this paper argues that the return of children to contemporary Turkish and Irish novel opens a new terrain of possibilities that offer liberation from the poverty of experience Agamben attributes to modern society.

Keywords: Agamben; experience; Irish literature; Turkish literature; coming-of-age

Introduction

*We look at the world once, in childhood.
The rest is memory.*
— Louise Gluck

In his widely known essay *The Storyteller* (1936), Walter Benjamin reflects on the disappearance of genuine experience under the debris of modernity. Speaking of the immediate aftermath of World War I, he memorably writes that the violence of the war destroyed the possibility of authentic experience (Benjamin 1968, 83). Traumatized, disillusioned, and alienated, the survivors of the war call into question modernity's narrative of growth and improvement—that is, the progress of humanity towards civilizational maturity. While Benjamin observes a poverty of experience in

the face of a catastrophic war that changed every aspect of life in Western society, Giorgio Agamben finds the grounds for the loss of experience in the banality of everyday life. "Today, however, we know that the destruction of experience no longer necessitates a catastrophe, and that humdrum daily life in any city will suffice," he writes in *Infancy and History* (Agamben 1993, 13). Agamben warns that this does not mean that there is no longer the possibility of *esperienze*, a term which loosely corresponds to Benjamin's *Erfahrung* (i.e. communicable experience). On the contrary, there are experiences, but they are now beyond our reach: "Despite the richness of the events that surround us, we do not get access to real experience, because the whole world displays itself in the form of a museum, completely detached, sterile, and uninhabitable" (Agamben 2007, 96). While describing the impossibility of experience, Agamben draws a perfect picture of the banality of modern everyday life. In fact, as Durantaye suggests, his approach should be read in the same vein as Adorno, who writes in the epigraph of his *Minima Moralia*: "Das Leben lebt nicht" (Life does not live) (Adorno 1978, 17). What Adorno means by this dramatic remark is not that life has completely stopped, but that it has become "so corrupted and debased" by modern developments that it does not deserve to be called "life" anymore (Durantaye 2009, 81).

What interests us in this critique of modernity is the emphasis that Agamben puts on the relation between history and childhood. In shifting the emphasis from adulthood to infancy, Agamben challenges the modernist (and basically Hegelian) understanding of a chronological, historical, and linear time that unfolds towards an ultimate *telos*. He also suggests, following Benjamin's footsteps, that true experience is only possible in infancy, a time that has not yet been expropriated by the bareness of modern life. The concept of an extended infancy, however, when viewed from the perspective of the Hegelian dialectic and its narrative equivalent, the *bildungsroman*, can only be a fallacy. The idea of maturity is key to the rational and progressive aspects of the Enlightenment and the cultural and intellectual rubric of modernity. In fact, Kant's 1784 essay "An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?" regards the Age of Reason as mankind's final coming of age, the emancipation of the human consciousness from an immature state of ignorance (Neiman 2014, 36). The kind of potentiality that Agamben attributes to infancy signifies the emergence of a new self, who, rather than moving into the mechanical realm of "work" prefers to remain in the creative realm of "play," where it is possible to transform the old societal and political structures into new ones. Agamben's approach to play and its non-chronological temporality offers useful clues in revealing the dynamics of contemporary childhood narratives, where characters resist the linear view of history and the corresponding model of progress, eventually forming a culture of adolescents who refuse to grow up.

This article reads some of the contemporary coming-of-age stories in the Irish and Turkish literatures side by side, because not only does it subscribe to the view that the idea of childhood is embedded in the national imaginary of both countries, but it also suggests that Ireland and Turkey, being "infantilized nations" (as opposed to the grown-up and enlightened countries of Europe), are at an advantage in playfully engaging with new forms of resistance, where true experience becomes accessible.

In reference to the stories of self-cultivation written at the time of the Irish Revival, Declan Kiberd (1996, 102) writes, “childhood—like Ireland itself—had to be reinvented as a zone of innocence, unsullied and intense, from which would emerge the free Irish protagonist.” However, this romanticized image of Ireland as the “unsullied child” entailed a trap. According to Kiberd, the authors of the Irish Revival were caught in a double bind: on the one hand, they wanted to dig into their past and bring back memories of childhood in the hope of establishing a national identity and, on the other hand, by doing this they found themselves reproducing the ideology of the colonizer that regards Ireland as underdeveloped and immature. “This has the unintended but undeniable effect of infantilizing the native culture,” he concludes (Kiberd 1996 104).

The same is true for Turkey, especially when we consider the early years of the Republic. As a young nation, Turkey envisioned a process of nationalist revival as well as a development towards a Westernized and modernized future society. In this process, the role of the youth was crucial to serve the nation and protect it from future enemies. As part of the nation-building process, such emphasis on youth is probably not surprising as children are the primary focus of national policies, operating on the assumption that young people represent the nation’s future. However, the Turkish Republic, with its ultimate aim of replacing the Ottoman ethos with a new national identity, imagined the individual as a “non-entity” in a process of becoming a citizen. Hence, like his Irish counterpart, the Turkish individual was born into a society where he was regarded as an innocent but noble child, who, in his struggle for survival, will not only become a self-respecting and model citizen, but also help raise the country to the level of the civilized nations.

Looking closely at the works of Emrah Serbes, Alper Canıgüz, Paul Murray, and Oisín Fagan, all written in the last two decades, this paper traces how the coming-of-age narrative is transposed one more time in the twenty-first century, suggesting childhood as the only realm where true experience can manifest itself. Focusing on some qualities of these novelistic characters, such as playfulness, self-experimentation, and messianic idealism, this paper argues that child or adolescent characters open a new terrain of possibilities that offer liberation from the poverty of experience that Agamben attributes to modern society.

While occasionally returning to the themes of the previous century, such as class mobility, provinciality, or a feeling of belatedness, these narratives challenge the ideal of maturity and, its aesthetic corollary, the *bildungsroman*. These new narratives regard the notion of *Bildung* (acculturation, education) as a grown-up fantasy because of its ambitious claim of absolute knowledge, unshakable faith in a better future, and insatiable desire to possess the world as a totality. The outcome is that they abandon the idea of unifying, normalizing, and even totalizing processes of maturity, which rests on the chronological and historical time consciousness of modernity, and open a new realm of hope in the “here and now” of infancy.

The Turkish scene: early losers or young saviors

In a memorable essay titled “Child of Agony,” which focuses on the social and cultural changes following the 1980 military coup in Turkey, Nurdan Gürbilek discusses how the image of the innocent but noble child was propagated in Turkish literature and

cinema (Gürbilek 2011). Referring to a poster where a blond, blue-eyed child is depicted in tears—an image that was popular in Turkey in the 1980s—she suggests that there has been a long tradition of agonized child images in Turkey. Like the orphaned children portrayed in the Kemalettin Tuğcu novels,¹ which were popularized by Turkey's film industry in the late 1960s and 1970s, the “child of agony” emerges as the symbol of endurance in suffering and the embodiment of all national virtues (Gürbilek 2011, 123–124). The “child of agony” also provides the template of the Turkish *bildungsromane* until the 1980s, which envision resilient children, who, despite the trials and tribulations they go through, manage to remain morally intact and emotionally unblemished. On some level, therefore, this is the story of the nation as a whole, which will eventually overcome its childlike status and enter the world of adults, that is to say, the “imagined” world of Western civilizations.

Gürbilek also admits that the blond child in the poster was the last such hero, because this romanticized image was replaced by children who actually were suffering on the streets in the 1980s. “The sad child acquired a darker, swarthier, and more masculine countenance,” and the “child of agony” story was transformed into a different narrative. Gürbilek underlines this transformation and says what interests her is not the history of the image of the “child of agony,” but the moment when it was not convincing anymore: “[...] the peculiar thing was that the change occurred just when suffering became most visible in the faces of children, when the streets of big cities filled with children who really had been treated unjustly, as Kurdish villages were emptied and real orphans appeared in the big cities” (Gürbilek 2011, 127–128).

While Gürbilek very accurately designates the 1980 military coup as the point at which these completely different cultural climates in Turkey were separated, her analysis fails to cover the childhood narratives of the new millennium. The coup signifies the time in Turkish history when neoliberalism entered the country and was further developed under Turgut Özal, who served first as prime minister (1983–1989) and then as president (1989–1993) in the course of ten years. Turkey's neoliberal transformation culminated in the new millennium with the rise of the Justice and Development Party (JDP), which, when the country found itself in a process of rapid growth, claimed to have created an “economic miracle.” This “merciless growth,” which overlooked humans, the environment, and the commons “was driven by the construction sector, whose dynasts have passionate relations with the government” (Yeşilyurt-Gündüz 2015). The result was a “new Turkey” built upon “a triad of marauder capitalism, repressive government, and conservative Islamism” (Yıldırım 2014). In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the ever-growing oppressive regime spread discontent not only to the ghettos swollen with a bitter and frustrated migrant population, but also among the middle class not content with the present despotic administration, which criminalizes those who are unhappy with the

¹ Kemalettin Tuğcu (1902–1996) is the Turkish author of melodramatic tales mostly focusing on the troubled lives of lower class youth suffering from hardships in the newly expanding big cities. With more than 300 books to his name, Tuğcu's long career extended over a period of forty years (between the 1940s and the 1980s). Sometimes referred to as the Charles Dickens of the Turkish novel, he is generally accepted as one of most prolific and influential writers of Turkish children's literature, who shaped the worldview, mentality, and perceptions of several generations of young readers.

government's neoliberal policies. One memorable example was the Gezi Park protests in 2013.

The protests in the summer of 2013 united hundreds of thousands of people across the country against the increasingly authoritarian and neoliberal policies of Turkey's Islamist government. Opposition groups that would not normally come together, such as nationalists, socialists, Kurds, and even anti-capitalist Islamists, all took to the streets. The protest was initially triggered by the government's building plans for Gezi Park, the small green area on the edge of Taksim Square, but soon it turned into a mass movement. The protestors, mostly young people, occupied the park for a couple of weeks and lived in tents, organizing a library, medical center, food distribution, and their own media. The Gezi Park movement was a unique and singular instance in Turkey's history: a nonviolent uprising that morphed into a festival characterized by creativity, solidarity, and a joyful humor that knows no boundaries. The most active participants in the Gezi Park movement were the young "white collar" population in Istanbul and other big cities, as Michael Hardt observes, urging his readers to reconsider "the nature of the working class in light of such newly expanding labor categories." The new actors of the resistance are "urban, young, and highly educated, but often poorly paid and precariously employed" (Hardt 2014).

The narratives of children and adolescents return to the Turkish scene at the time of this social and cultural transformation. The young protagonists of the new Turkish novel differ from their predecessors in that they cannot find a narrative arc that offers a possibility of formation. While they are occasionally portrayed as provincial or lower class, they do not always suffer from physical poverty. Rather, they are marked by an impoverishment of the soul that exhausts their strength, vitality, and joy of life. Being born into a world that holds no promises for a better future, these young characters are mostly gripped by confusion, vulnerability, and uncertainty.

In an essay on the Turkish literature of the twenty-first century, Seval Şahin argues that Emrah Serbes's story collection *Erken Kaybedenler* (Young Losers, 2009)² signifies the beginning of a period of transformation, which manifests itself as the return of children to the literary scene:

The view of the world through the perspective of children and adolescents, a kind of crooked view, has become the common denominator of many literary works. Authors such as Mehmet Erte, Türker Ayyıldız, Hande Gündüz, Figen Şakacı, Bahri Vardarlılar, Mahir Ünsal Eriş, Deniz Tarsus, Ece Temelkuran, Alper Canıgüz, Yaçın Tosun placed children (mostly boys) at the center shifting the focus of the narratives (Şahin 2016).

While Şahin argues that this "crooked view" mostly serves to shed a different light on old narratives, such as the troubles brought by the 1980 military coup, she also acknowledges that it is a new perspective that reveals new sensibilities, as in the case of Emrah Serbes's *Erken Kaybedenler*.

This collection of coming-of-age stories is narrated from the viewpoint of young characters whose lives are shattered by traumatizing experiences: parents get

² Translation mine.

divorced, fathers lose their jobs, mothers are on the verge of nervous breakdowns, neighborhood girls are sent away for arranged marriages, and teenage brothers die in a war they do not believe in. These youngsters, unable to accept the dishonesty of the adult world, but powerless to hold onto the innocence of youth, express their frustration and grief in desperate acts. In the story titled “*Anneannemin Son Ölümü*” (Last Death of my Grandma), the ten-year-old narrator, a frustrated orphan who has joined forces with his eighty-four-year old grandmother against an army of nosy neighbors, cruel teachers, and other unsympathetic adults, tells us why he hates the idea of growing up:

[A]s I got older, my desire diminished, my amazement decreased, and my expectations shriveled. As I aged, I had shrunk so much that there was nothing left inside of me. If there is a cost to growing up, that was it. I had grown a half a meter, gained twenty kilos and given up on the world. (Serbes 2009, 15)

Serbes’s characters are typically young boys who have suffered a loss (abandonment, abuse, or the premature death of a parent), which has left an indelible mark on their psyche at a very early age. This is probably why they almost always identify with the outcasts, misfits, and losers of the society. What is remarkable, however, is that these young characters never give up on the possibility of a lucky turn of events, an opening in history, that will reverse their fate and change the narrative altogether.

The possibility of such a new beginning is what characterizes Emrah Serbes’s 2014 novel *Deliduman* (The King of Taksim Square).³ The novel, which takes place at the time of the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul in 2013, tells the story of Çağlar Eyice, a seventeen-year-old provincial youth whose life is shattered by the divorce of his parents. Çağlar lives with his depressed, pill-popping mother, his good-for-nothing uncle, and his nine-year-old sister. The story opens in Kiyidere, a hypothetical little town on the coast of Marmara Sea, but in the second half of the book Çağlar leaves his hometown and goes to Istanbul to find his sister who has run away to join the Gezi Park protesters in order to perform the “Moonwalk” dance act she has been preparing for a talent show. *Deliduman* is a ferociously funny but moving story about the pain of growing up in an indifferent world. Serbes writes in his trademark style, combining this deeply emotional story with crackling prose shimmering with humor and wit.

Echoing Michael Hardt’s comment on the new actors of the resistance, several critics drew attention to the link between *Deliduman* and the Gezi Park protests. They suggested that, being both melancholic and hopeful, the novel portrayed a new generation of young characters engaging with the world in a playful manner. It is not a coincidence that Emrah Serbes sends his protagonist to the Gezi Park protests in Istanbul, where the demonstrators managed to establish a *utopian* social order, albeit only for a brief period. Çağlar’s encounter with the protestors is meant to be a learning process, an experience that will change his perspective on masculinity and transform his life in a fundamental way. Like many other Serbes characters, Çağlar is

³ The title *Deliduman* is a combination of the words “crazy” and “smoke,” which can be roughly translated as “Wild at Heart,” but is probably also a wordplay referring to summer of 2013, when the whole city of Istanbul was living under a cloud of teargas. In 2015, Emrah Serbes’s *Deliduman* was translated into English by Mark David Wyers and published with the title *The King of Taksim Square*.

fascinated by the stereotypes of masculinity and displays a tendency towards toughness, aggression, and violence. In her article on the novel, Ayşegül Tözeren argues that Çağlar's anger towards the world takes the form of hypermasculinity, with an emphasis on physical strength, aggression, and sexuality (Tözeren 2014). Referring to his attitude towards women and his messianic fantasies of saving the world, she suggests that Çağlar is actually representative of a more conservative culture typically found in the provincial areas of Turkey. He is a defender of family values, despises his father for being a political activist, and cherishes manly ideals such as courage and heroism. "I wanted to grab my sister's hand and get away while shooting in the air," he says early in the novel, referring to the celebratory gunfire typical of a form of violent male subculture in Turkey (Serbes 2015, 8). In the second half of the novel, however, when Çağlar finally makes it to Taksim Square and meets the protesters, he is forced to question his conservatism. He walks from one tent to the other, is kicked out of some, gets rescued and protected by others, all while trying to figure out what the people are united against. He understands that this movement promises something that the adult world is incapable of offering: the possibility of recovery from the state of complete decay and hopelessness. He realizes, probably for the first time in his life, that there is way of life where differences are recognized, accepted, and even celebrated (Gümrukçüoğlu 2014). Yet, despite its hopeful notes, the novel ends with police intervention and tear gas destroying the tents of the protesters and killing the street animals. In the last scene, we see Çağlar watching a seagull suffocate on the pavement and echoing probably the most frequently voiced question in Turkey in the last decade: "Who is going to close those gaping holes in our soul? Who is going to take away the pain of our stung pride? When will the time come for happiness, for goodness, for justice?" (Serbes 2015, 344).

In Serbes's depiction of the Gezi Park movement and in the development of his adolescent protagonist, we do not observe a linear path towards normalization or social integration. Instead, we are presented with an amalgam of bitter disappointment and tragic hope. This kind of hope, which "flourishes only in a time of absolute hopelessness," as discussed by Fredric Jameson in relation to Benjamin's concept of messianic hope, comes into being "when radical change seems unthinkable, its very idea dispelled by visible wealth and power, along with palpable powerlessness" (Jameson 2009, 176–77). It is true that Çağlar undergoes a transformation, but this change is not the result of a long process that sets its eye on an indeterminate future that promises fulfillment and completion. Instead, all that he has is the present, pregnant with the opportunity for change. The dialectical movement of his transformation rests on that opportune moment when he encounters the protesters in the park, who offer him a world he has not encountered before. This is what Agamben, with reference to Benjamin, calls "dialectics at a standstill" (Agamben 1993, 123), which involves "a messianic freezing of events" or, when viewed from a more materialist perspective, according to Durantaye, "a revolutionary opportunity."⁴ Instead of

⁴ Though at the first glance it seems to be a contradiction in term, "dialectics at a standstill" does not completely dismiss that Hegelian dialectics that can only be perceived within a linear and chronological time frame. According to Durantaye, it just attempts to free it from its "abstractness," focusing on a revolutionary conception of history "in which knowledge is situated not in an impossible future, but, through 'exploding the continuum of history,' right now" (Durantaye 2009, 120).

leaning on an abstract ideal of better future, the protesters of the Gezi Park create a standstill in the present, which offers a potential for creating a new world.

Like many others in contemporary Turkish novel, Serbes's characters suffer from the broken structures of Turkish society under the polarizing, populist policies of the government which penetrate even the remotest corners of the country. In their daily lives, they are trapped in the double bind of abuse and oppression. However, they manage to turn the tables and show that they are capable of feeling hopeful, which is only possible by disrupting the chronological temporality and the homogeneity of everyday life. Theirs is the kairological time,⁵ the time of festivals and fantasies, which derives its name from the youthful god Kairos, who could not be controlled or possessed. It moves back and forth, manifesting here and there, without boundaries or an ultimate end. In positioning themselves against the government's increasingly authoritarian policies, the protesters in *Deliduman* refuse to comply with the established order and its rationalized temporality. As in their emblematic slogan "Kahrolsun bazı şeyler" ("Down with some things!"), they humorously express their rejection of the existing order: "Something was wrong with the way things were, but one needed to go beyond the conventions of language and reason to be able to address it" (Dağtaş 2016). Hence, the youth of the Gezi Park protests, as represented in Serbes's *Deliduman*, playfully invest in the possibility of change and regeneration brought about by the Kairos, a moment in the flow of history when different circumstances coincide or converge so as to bring people together around a single movement.

Alper Canigüz, another prominent figure among the new generation of authors, offers his own version in breaking down the chronological temporality of the coming-of-age story through his extraordinary child character Alper Kamu, whose name signals a double allusion to Albert Camus as well as the author himself. With its pitch dark humor contrasted against a striking amount of sentimentality, *Oğullar ve Rencide Ruhlar* (Sons and Suffering Souls, 2004) famously opens with a lament on the loss of childhood and innocence: "Five is a person's most mature age; then decay sets in" (Canigüz 2004, 7). Canigüz's child-detective Alper Kamu is a five-year-old burdened with the consciousness of a middle-aged man, who strikes the reader as being hopelessly suicidal. Habitually quoting Nietzsche, Dostoevsky, and Turkish cult novelist Oğuz Atay, Alper spends most of his time contemplating the human predicament and wondering why there is so much suffering and pain in the world. Part of this misery is the obligatory interaction with adults, he confesses at one point. Wise, experienced, and talented way beyond his years, Alper is a great conversationalist and an absolute charmer. When a young woman, surprised by his sharp wit and grown-up

⁵ In *The Time that Remains*, following the footsteps of Benjamin and Heidegger, Agamben makes a distinction between chronological and kairological time. Chronological time is a measurable time; it is what Benjamin calls the "homogenous, empty time" of modernity and what Heidegger refers to as "the clock time." Kairological time is the opposite of chronological time in that it is based on an understanding of the uncertainty of time. It is a "now" that can happen any moment—not a future that will eventually arrive. One important difference between chronological and kairological time, therefore, is that the first one promises a *telos* and the peace and security derived from that notion. Kairological time, on the other hand, is based on an understanding of the radical insecurity of human existence. Even without any mythical or apocalyptic element, it is possible to understand this temporality as the inherent unpredictability of human existence (Agamben 2005, 63).

manners, asks him whether he is a midget, he says, “Only time will show” (Canıgüz 2004, 85), without losing his composure.

While at first glance they appear as examples of the crime novel genre, *Oğullar ve Rencide Ruhlar* and the follow-up novel *Cehennem Çiçeği* (The Hellflower, 2013) are both laden with an existential question: can we find a home in this world? Like his namesake, Alper Kamu responds with a firm “No.” We can take the journey but we will always be strangers to this world. In the infinite irony of the novel, the five-year-old spends most of his time in complete isolation, that is, in his hide-away under the bed contemplating the ways of the world and how he can set things right. In his speedy toy car, he roams the streets of the city chasing dangerous criminals only to return to his small bed where he sleeps with a plastic doll. “I was living the fastest days of my life,” he says, “I was surrounded by enemies to fight and women to love. My gun is made of plastic. So are my women. So be it.” (Canıgüz 2004, 95)

Armed with a razor-sharp wit and a squirt gun, Alper Kamu is determined to bring order to the world. Nothing escapes his observant eye and ruthless tongue: negligent parents, cruel educators, corrupt policemen, ignorant civil servants, or empty-headed young urban professionals. He is especially keen on the education system, which, he believes, has been established with the sole purpose of teaching obedience and silence, qualities that later come in handy when one grows up and is expected to become the fabric of the society (Canıgüz 2004, 31). When he goes to the *meyhane* to bring his alcoholic father back home, his father scolds him saying that the pub is not a place for children. “Neither was the kindergarten,” snaps back Alper, “but you sent me there anyway” (Canıgüz 2004, 137).

The world of adults, as it appears to Alper Kamu, is a cold and dark place where contact of any kind is barely possible. Relationships are loveless and uncommunicative. Both of Alper’s parents feel frustrated and are emotionally numb or drained. Observing his parents and other grown-ups, Alper comes to realize that adult life is a long-term imprisonment where you are stuck with people whom you do not like. In fact, at one point in the novel he explicitly refers to the Sartrean dictum “Hell is other people” (Canıgüz 2004, 81). And once you enter hell, you leave all hope behind. Yet as long as you stay in the realm of childhood, there is the possibility of creating another world, a world of play and fun, which may freeze time and force the universe make an exception for you. Whether there is a way to connect with other people—even momentarily—or to be able to go beyond the rigid facts of this universe, which knows no privileges and treats everyone with the same brutal indifference, is a question that lies at the heart of the Alper Kamu novels.

In the Alper Kamu series, Canıgüz successfully plays on the paradox embodied by his child-adult protagonist: Alper’s very existence is an indication of a future contained and canceled in an eternal present. While he constantly struggles with the idea of growing up, we, the readers, feel that he will forever remain a child. The temporality of Canıgüz’s character signifies a strong diversion from the classical coming-of-age story on at least two different levels. First, it offers a narrative opportunity to challenge the teleological structure of the coming-of-age story by representing both the actual (immediate) and the potential (mediated) consciousnesses of the child and the adult in a single entity. Secondly, it destroys the chronological and historical time consciousness of modernity by allowing the protagonist to remain forever in the immediate present of infancy, which provides access to genuine experience as well

as a playful engagement with the rigid structures of the adult world, which is a theme we will revisit in our discussion of contemporary Irish narratives.

The Irish scene: in the wake of the Celtic Tiger

Resistance to normative maturity is not a new pattern in Anglo-Saxon literature. Franco Moretti draws our attention to the fact that the novelistic characters became much younger in twentieth-century English literature because “historically, the relevant process is no longer growth but regression” and “[t]he adult world refuses to be a hospitable home for the subject” (Moretti 2000, 231). Jed Esty, on the other hand, who focuses on postcolonialism and the possibility of multiple modernities having existed and existing at the same time, argues that the Anglophone *bildungsroman* is characterized by a pattern of arrested development, which he calls, “frozen” or “unseasonable” youth, as in the case of James Joyce’s *Portrait* (Esty 2011, 38).

Irish modernism’s suspicion of linear time continued well into the second half of the twentieth-century, as we observe in the case of Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* (1992), where Mansouri finds another version of the “non-conformist, ahistorical modern protagonist” typical of Irish novels of formation (Mansouri 2015, 90). Set during the 1960s and after, *The Butcher Boy* reflects the spirit of a generation that witnessed Ireland’s passage from a rural country into a prosperous urbanized one. In fact, McCabe’s novel can be regarded as an early indication of a period of transformation because, while belonging to the category of the “failed” *bildungsromane* that promise neither social integration ((Bolton 2010, 10) nor a “socially viable subject” (Castle 2013, 374), it voices a loud objection to societal structures and subverts the narrative of the “unsullied youth.” The centuries-old victim-child seems to have returned to the scene, but this time with a vengeance (Mikowski 2015). Francie’s rebellion against the conservative societal structures of Ireland becomes an early sign that change is about to come as the country approaches the turn of the millennium.

Ireland’s newly gained confidence during the Celtic Tiger years (1995–2007) no doubt had to do with economic welfare. In the late 1990s Ireland focused on attaining economic achievement rather than confronting its history of colonization and nationalism. Prior to this period of rapid economic growth, Ireland had been one of Europe’s poorest countries for more than two centuries. Ireland has improved greatly in the last couple of decades not only economically, but also in terms of social and cultural issues. Constitutional amendments permitting divorce (1996), same-sex marriage (2015), and abortion (2018) have created grounds for the perception that Ireland has become a progressive and liberal country (Bielenberg 2018) catching up with the rest of European countries. In that respect, Ireland appears hardly comparable to Turkey, a country that has been moving away from democratic discourses and practices, especially since the coup attempt in 2016. Yet beneath the surface of progress and democracy in Ireland, the rapid transition into a welfare economy has resulted in the fragmentation of family structures and dramatic change in urban life. While the Celtic Tiger period promised the political and economic autonomy that Ireland was craving for centuries, its downfall caused a sense of failure and depression, not to mention the immediate commodification of human relations, which added to the feeling of loss and defeat. It was not just money that has been lost; in fact the country’s “cultural memory has indeed been one of the casualties”

(Gibbons 2005, 206). Ireland's renowned journalist Fintan O'Toole puts it very succinctly when he writes that the banking collapse of 2008 "didn't just kill off the arrogance and acquisitive mania, it also swept away hopefulness and the sense of possibility" (O'Toole 2010, 3–4). Struggling with long-term consequences of neoliberalism, which has eroded the social bonds and solidarities, Ireland has had to confront yet another episode of traumatic history following the recession. Present-day Irish society is deeply troubled by "the lingering effects of post-Tiger austerity, an unprecedented housing crisis, the rise of violent drug and gang crimes, new family structures, and inadequate provisions for young people suffering with poor mental health" (Owens 2020), which emerge as recurrent motives in the ever-increasing number of contemporary childhood narratives.

Referring to special issue of the journal *Eire-Ireland* on "Children, Childhood and Irish Society" (Luddy and Smith 2014), Sylvie Mikowski reminds us that "[r]epresentations of Irish childhood have dominated cultural production" (Mikowski 2015) in the last couple of decades, such as Roddy Doyle's *Paddy Clarke Ha Ha* (1993), Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1996), or John McGahern's *Memoir* (2005). To this list we can add more recent coming-of-age stories like Colin Barrett's sublime portraits of provincial youth in the story collection *Young Skins* (2014), Sally Rooney's depiction of class-conscious Irish millennials struggling with mental health problems in *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018), Mike McCormack's provocative inquiry into the effects of technology on the psyche of young people in *Notes from a Coma* (2005), and Lisa McNerney's portrayal of a teenage drug-dealer against a backdrop of the criminalized Cork city in *The Glorious Heresies* (2015) and *The Blood Miracles* (2017). The existence and experiences of these young characters (mental instability, poverty, drug related problems, alcoholism, social marginalization, etc.) contradicts the image Ireland wishes to project of itself as a country that has finally "arrived." Yet all these narratives, while presenting a bleak portrayal of modern society, leave some room for their teenage characters to entertain hope for change.

Despite its thematic concerns orbiting around loneliness and isolation, Paul Murray's tragicomic novel *Skippy Dies* (2011) is written in a tone underlying such hope. Set in a Catholic boarding school, the novel reflects the cultural transformation of Dublin youth in the post-Celtic Tiger period. *Skippy Dies* mainly focuses on the lives of Daniel "Skippy" Juster and other schoolboys of Seabrook College lost in a spiral of drugs, abuse, and consumerism. The young characters of the novel gradually come to realize that the future does not hold possibilities, but provides instead a monotonous life devoid of true experience.

Gradually the awful truth dawns on you: that Santa Claus was just the tip of the iceberg—that your future will not be the rollercoaster ride you'd imagined . . . that the world occupied by your parents, the world of washing dishes, going to the dentist, weekend trips to the DIY superstore to buy floor-tiles, is actually largely what people mean when they speak of 'life.' (Murray 2010, 25)

Abandoned by his family and invisible to his teachers, Skippy's life at the boarding school is a constant struggle with existential angst. As the novel unfolds, we discover that beneath the surface of adolescent fascination with sex, drugs, and power, Skippy's theme of loneliness is the crux of the whole novel. Like Canigüz's Alper

Kamu, who philosophizes on the tragic solitude of the modern man, Skippy's roommate Ruprecht, after leading lengthy discussions on quantum physics and wondering about the asymmetrical nature of the universe and of love, realizes that our universe "is actually built out of loneliness; and that foundational loneliness persists upwards to haunt every one of its residents" (301). Skippy's love interest Lori sees, almost like in a vision, that her life is going to be much more painful and complicated than she had imagined: "In that same moment she feels herself grow older, like she's finished a level in a video game and moved on invisibly to the next stage; it's a tiredness that takes over her body, a tiredness like nothing before, like she's swallowed a ton weight" (513). The idea of maturity is presented as the intensification of this loneliness, because going out into the world means facing betrayal—as we observe in the case of Howard Fallon, Skippy's alter ego, a failed investment banker who has returned to Seabrook College to teach history. Early in the novel, he explains his early retirement from trading futures in London with the ironic remark "Don't you read the papers? Not enough futures to go around" (16). This theme of "no futures" later becomes a leitmotif in the novel as Howard, while teaching the Seabrook kids about the First World War, draws parallels between the youth then and now. Like the survivors of the war, who "returned from the battlefield grown silent—not richer but poorer in communicable experience" (Benjamin 1968, 83), the young men of Seabrook, who were initially promised a future, are now betrayed by the previous generations. Thus, having failed to become "the fabric of society," Howard yearns for the possibility of true experience, "A direction. A point. A sense that it's not just a bunch of days piling on top of each other" (Murray 2010, 135).

Skippy Dies addresses some Ireland's persistent problems, such as the overbearing authority and abuse in the education system, but what makes it interesting for us is that it also marks the rapid change in the country's cultural identity as the national narrative fades at a time of social and moral transition. The story takes place in the melancholy aftermath of the Celtic Tiger, which is evident in the stories of the Seabrook kids, who use drugs to be able to cope with the problems resulting from this change. Skippy's suicide is brought about by a series of incidents, all of which have to do with this new culture (drug abuse, violence, dysfunctional institutions) and especially with the betrayal of the adults: his negligent and probably overworked father, the abusive teachers at Seabrook, and, first and foremost, "the Automator," the principal who is only interested in preserving "the good name" of the school and making more profit. They all function as part of a large mechanism designed to cover up the fact that they are responsible for Skippy's death.

It is in the face of this bleak picture that Paul Murray's takes his child characters to the basement of Seabrook College, where they look for possibility of bringing Skippy back to life. Stricken with grief at the death of his best friend and convinced that there are parallel universes in the dimensions we cannot perceive, Ruprecht decides that Professor Tamashi's modified string theory (M-theory) is the only way to unlock parallel universes and bring back Skippy. "This eleventh dimension," he explains to his friends, is "closer to your body than your own clothes. And on the other side of it—who knows? There could be another universe just one millimeter away, only we can't see it because it's in another dimension" (154). Ruprecht gathers everyone in the basement and tries to create a small black hole, which would create a vortex that

connects our universe with other universes in other dimensions, so that they can all send a final message to Skippy. As Ruprecht fails to reverse the flow of time and communicate with his dead friend, Lori, Skippy's love interest, tells Ruprecht that maybe one does not need a foil-covered pod to reverse time and bring back our loved ones. Maybe we just need to understand that all the times coexist in the "here" and "now" of the present. We just need to act like the strings that connect all these different universes, that is to say, tell stories of the lost ones and make sure that they stay close.

In implying that it is not "work" but "play"⁶ that defines the human subject, Paul Murray's novel bears echoes of Agamben, who reintroduces us to infancy, the only realm where experience is possible. In *Skippy Dies*, Murray is taking us back to the parallel universe created by children, where it is possible to experience and transcend grief. The children of Seabrook do this through play, the major activity of the child, which opens up the road to true experience in a world taken over by the pure abstraction called knowledge. The creativity of their act at the basement implies a rupture in the established temporal and social continuum, because, driven by imagination and immediacy, they are capable of going beyond the limits of the existing social order.

The actual practice of play is an inseparable component of the novels that we have been discussing in this paper. In fact, play or self-experimentation emerges as an alternative to the notion of normalizing "experience" in the traditional *bildungsroman*, which leads protagonists to social integration. The novelistic characters of the twenty-first century narratives experiment with the rigid structures of the world as children who encounter new objects and play with them in unexpected ways. By doing this they enter a temporality different from the chronological flow of events: a new construction of time that has come into being through the creative use of old objects. Like Emrah Serbes's Gezi Park protesters in *Deliduman*, who enter a "playground," and, through imagination and creativity, transform an ordinary park into a civil utopia based on mutual respect and recognition, Paul Murray's novel creates an alternative universe for Skippy, which comes into being, even just momentarily, through the "time travel" experiment carried out in the basement of Seabrook. In a way Ruprecht, Lori, and the other children succeed in bringing back Skippy from the dead, as he is never extradited from the narrative. Skippy is so alive "that even when he's dead, as he is for much of the book, we feel that he's still hovering right next to us, closer to us than our own clothes" (Naranayan 2014).

"Being Born," the opening tale of Oisín Fagan's *Hostages* (2016) presents a similar rupture in the established temporal continuum signifying the "birth" of something new. Whether this leads to catastrophe or to utopia, however, remains unclear at the end of the story. Set in a "semi-rural, pre-suburban, yet also pseudo-industrial town" (Fagan 2016, 1) the novel presents a picture of post-Celtic Tiger

⁶ Breaking the homogeneity of everyday life has to do, according to Agamben, with the profanation of the objects of the status quo, which is possible only through play—a form of self-experimentation. In that sense play is different from the repetitive nature of "work," which defines the world of grown-ups and is based on the dull reproduction of the everyday. The creativity of play means, therefore, that the object's new use creates a rupture in the established temporal and social order, signifying an opening in time when the new and the different is born. (Agamben 2007, 87).

Irish society, where everything seems to be in constant transition. The sense of incompleteness in the architecture continues into the lives of the adolescents in their transition year to senior high school. The first time we see him, Fergus Nolan, the main character of the story, is suffocating in a class of 22 teenagers of mixed genders all looking “as if they were locked in a mental asylum with their big zombie eyes staring everywhere, staring at nothing” (7).

Tension accumulates, however, as students find out that Steo, a well-liked third year, was taken away by child services the week before for dealing ecstasy tablets. Forensics eventually discovers that they were only aspirins, and child services brings the boy back. When the school is locked down on the morning of 1 May and Principal Kennedy announces over the intercom that everyone is to stay in class until further notice, the students start a riot and take control of the social area, invoking the history of Labor Day and the labor union movement. We are told that the students are completely transformed in the rebellion against the school administration: “[T]hese students who had previously been seen as dozy, wild or just future fuck-ups, became shining emblems of insouciance and freedom; brave rebels of inactivity who were merely evolving into more daring versions of themselves” (21). Targeting their anger and frustration not only against the school, but against the adult world as a whole, they stand up and demand justice. This is not only about Steo anymore; it is about a whole new system, as Fergus announces through the megaphone: “[. . .] yeah, a few teachers may be in hospital, but ye hospitalized our hopes. Yeah, there’s shit on the walls: but ye put shit in our souls. Yeah, the CCTV was broken, but not before ye broke our spirits. For years ye did it and it never stopped” (37).

We can hear the urgency of the present in Fergus’s response to the principal when he asks the young boy to “allow yourself [himself] a future” (62). Fergus is not interested in what he calls “the future tense” unless it speaks to his dreams—most of which are composed of idyllic fantasies in the countryside with Sharon Fitzgerald. Instead, he wants the present. The messianic tone in Fergus’s oration, however, is unmistakable when he addresses the other students who have gathered in the basketball court: “Now it is up to ourselves to decide who we are and what we want. We decide and we make it happen” (72).

Children’s literature scholar Karen Coates argues that childhood emerges as the necessary condition for messianic idealism and concludes that “[. . .] contemporary heroes and heroines have to save the world *before* bedtime, that is, metaphorically speaking, before they become integrated adults” (Coates 2007). Being still a child, Fergus’s feet are rooted in the immediacy of the present. He has grasped the opportunity and brought time to a standstill, where true experience is accessible. Largely because it is not viewed as a form of incomplete knowledge constantly postponed to an impossible future. Fergus’s time is the time as it is lived. In his ecstatic speech to the students he urges them to consider this opportune moment of changing history as a potentiality, where the past, present, and the future come together as a unity. By focusing on this decisive moment, he refuses the idea of *Bildung*—or any dialectical formation, for that matter—and shifts the possibility of self-actualization from distant future, an indefinite “end of time,” to the “Now” of the present.

The students in Oisín Fagan’s “Being Born” play with the established structures and institutions, subverting their function and opening up the possibility of a new temporality. Through the playful act of the rebellion, they introduce the “the

now-time” (Benjamin 1968)⁷ into the established order. In doing this, they challenge the humanist ideal of education, which has become an abstraction in the hands of the modern institutions. The students’ rebellion calls the existing order into question and asks for social-political change. However, the way they stage the uprising indicates that they are playing with the instruments of the old power structure (the slogans, the bomb, the rebel leader), while attributing a new meaning to them. The question is: can this moment of experience can be translated into a form of *Bildung*? While at the beginning of the story, we have the impression that a revolution is fermenting and that this will have an impact on the lives of the students in the future, we understand that this is not a transitional episode in a developmental narrative as the story comes to an end in a syncopated moment. A moment of standstill charged with messianic intensity. The standstill is brief but signifies an opportunity, a favorable moment to be seized to change history. The title of the story is ironic in that sense. It becomes clear towards the end that the unidentified narrator of the tale is actually the bomb that is in the process of “Being Born.” However, what is also “being born” out of the anger and the frustration of the students is an opportune occasion that is rich with a potential of a new beginning.

In the ambiguous ending of the story and the standstill we are left with, we recognize the emergence of the Benjaminian “now-time”—the time of the radical opportunity that every moment brings with it or, to use Agamben’s take on the concept, the dynamic instant as opposed to the progressive and normalizing continuum, that is, the modernist understanding of time and history.⁸

Conclusion

The return of children to the literary scene in Turkey and Ireland should be read as the expression of the desire to go back to the realm where genuine experience is still possible or, in Adorno’s words, where life still lives (Adorno 1978). Without doubt, it is possible to argue that resistance to adulthood is a recurrent motive all over Europe, where the narrative of progress finds its strongest expression. However, it is a theme more strongly embraced in peripheral geographies, such as Ireland and Turkey, which break relatively easily from the totalizing discourse of modernity, because they fail to identify with the position of knowledge and authority attributed to the center. Despite Ireland’s newfound identity of independence and progress at the time of the Celtic Tiger and Turkey’s neo-Ottomanism and short-lived economic welfare, both countries, as infantilized nations, resist the normalizing power of modernity and its institutions. These new stories subvert the narrative of infantilization and turn it into a possibility of hope while taking a stance against the strongest narrative of modernity: the idea of maturity, which has been

⁷ In the 14th Thesis on the Philosophy of History, Benjamin mentions this concept, which he terms the *Jetztzeit*, a moment laden with potential that rejects the chronological, linear time of modernity and progress. He writes that “history is the object of a construction whose place is not that of a homogenous, empty time but is instead filled with now-time (*Jetztzeit*)” (Benjamin 1968, 252–253).

⁸ According to Agamben, the essential problem that historical materialism faces is that it presents a revolutionary understanding of history but lacks an equally revolutionary notion of time. The outcome is that we have to rely upon a traditionally Western conception of linear, chronological time characterized by the present as fleeting instant—which destroys the possibility of true experience (Agamben 1993, 91).

part of the European psyche since the Enlightenment and its literary expression, the *bildungsroman*.

As mentioned above, the chronological and historical temporality of the *bildungsroman* favors the future over the present, which it regards only as a means serving the ultimate end. Hence, it is concerned with an abstract future, a tomorrow that lies, at least hypothetically, within the reach of humanity but beyond the lifespan of a single individual. The characters of the new childhood narratives, however, notwithstanding their bleak outlook on the ways of the world, are endowed with a sense of hope, which stems from the possibility of a change that will rupture the narrative of modernity and open up a hole in chronological time. Although they do not rely on a historical process that will eventually unfold into a utopia, they believe in the momentary opening in history that will turn everything upside down and set the world right. In other words, instead of giving in to the sequential time of Kronos, the time of modernity, the time of clocks and calendars, they choose to commit to the nonlinear and unquantifiable time of Kairos. Their temporality, unlike the temporality of modernity, liberates them from the unsettling notion of constant advancement, because, instead of moving inexorably out of the determinate past toward the determined future, it focuses on the possibilities of the present.

What is common to all these narratives is that, though presented in various forms, the contemporary self is portrayed as an adolescent—but without the negative connotations attached to the concept in the previous century. Adolescence, which was viewed as a preparatory stage into adulthood, is no longer regarded as a pathology that needs to be cured. The young adult's unwillingness to make a commitment, lack of faith in the ideology of progress, and messianic idealism are not viewed as disagreeable qualities anymore. Instead, they are portrayed as a youth full of vigor, like Kairos, the Greek god of opportunity, who is personified as a young, athletic man with wings on his feet and back that propel him swiftly forward. The young people portrayed in twenty-first century literature are capable of reviving the past (like Skippy's friends who dare to speak on behalf of the dead), resisting the destruction of experience (like Alper Kamu who remains in the state of infancy), and creating a rupture in the established temporal and social continuum (like Fergus or Çağlar who challenge old structures through play). Despite the bleakness of the world around them, all these characters find a way of resistance and shape their identity around it. The traditional adult is limited by an understanding of selfhood that posits a developmental trajectory (like that in a *bildungsroman*), where the meaning of experience can only be attained in the form of knowledge at the end of the process—ironically when it ceases to be experience. Being liberated from such an itinerary of maturity, the adolescents and children in question are capable of living in the immediacy of the present without subscribing to an understanding of time based on dialectical completion. These young characters, represented as the contemporary self in the Irish and Turkish novel, open up a space of liberation as they give up on the idea of a perfect future and embrace the uncertainty of the present.

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