

Irish Native Autobiography: Tomás O’Crohan’s *The Islandman*

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The interest in Irish autobiography as a distinct theme in Irish literary studies had its onset in the 1990s with Seamus Deane devoting a separate section to the Irish autobiographical canon in the *Field Day Anthology* (1991), which provided a climate for a critical attention concerning this particular part of Irish literary history. Since then a number of monographs have been produced by notable Irish critics, such as Roy Foster’s *The Irish Story: Telling Tales and Making it Up in Ireland* (2001), Liam Harte’s edited volume *Modern Irish Autobiography* (2007), and Claire Lynch’s *Irish Autobiography* (2009), just to name a few. As Eamon Hughes argues, the specificity of Irish autobiography resides in its rich tradition and its direct link with the national identity (qtd. in Lynch 10). However, as some of the titles of monographs and articles on Irish autobiography suggest, this rich tradition neither has one form nor one definition of collective identity, since Irish self-writing may be divided according to gender, for example, Taura Napier’s *Seeking a Country: Literary Autobiographies of Twentieth-Century Irishwomen* (2001), class like Elizabeth Grubgeld’s *Anglo-Irish Autobiography: Class, Gender, and the Forms of Narrative* (2004), or the place of living such as the Blasket autobiographies, which comprise self-narratives written in Irish by people living on the Blasket Islands. The rich heritage of the oral tradition of Irish folktales, which are treated as the origin of Irish autobiography written both in Irish and English languages, is also a problematic aspect. The present paper questions the arguments treating Irish autobiography as a homogenous genre and rooted solely in oral tradition on the example of Tomás O’Crohan’s *The Islandman*¹ as a representative of Blasket self-narratives. These autobiographies represent the life experience of a small community, which differs from the national experience of the time to a great extent. Still the way of life depicted by O’Crohan and his followers has become a synecdoche for the idea of Irish national feelings. Furthermore, the analysis displays the hybrid nature of this particular Blasket autobiography as a native autobiography partially following the tradition of oral storytelling, but also being inspired by a foreign tradition of autobiography writing, namely Maxim Gorky’s *Детство* (*My Childhood*) and *Бродяжничество* (translated as *My apprenticeship* or *In the world*).

The fact that Tomás O’Crohan’s *The Islandman* has inspired two similar works coming from one place—the Blasket Islands—signifies the need and an unprecedented opportunity of this particular community to tell their own

life story. The three autobiographies—Thomás O’Criomhthain’s *An t-Oileánach* (*The Islandman*), Muiris Ó Súilleabháin’s *Fiche Bliain ag Fás* (*Twenty Years A-Growing*), and Peig Sayers’s *Peig, A Scéal Féin* (*Peig: The Autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island*)—have created a new subgenre of Irish self-representation, which significantly differs from other self-narratives of the time. For the purpose of this analysis the term “native autobiography” appears to be the most relevant, since it predominantly focuses on the specificity of the process of its creation. John Eastlake notes that native autobiography is a combined work of at least three people: the native, the editor, and the translator. The roles “are fluid by nature, often shifting between cooperation and resistance” (126). So is the case with Tomás O’Crohan’s text. Therefore, it seems incredible that at the time of the creation of Irene Lucchitti’s monograph (2009), solely devoted to the life and writings of Tomás O’Crohan, the scholarly attention was still principally revolving around the anthropological and linguistic side of the work, totally neglecting or even depreciating any literary quality of the text. Shocked by the Irish O’Crohan specialists’ comments on her interpretation of *The Islandman* as an autobiography, which oscillated between hostile and patronizing, Lucchitti found herself in the middle of a debate concerning the politics of culture (14). Her analysis of the phenomenon leads her to the ideology of the Gaelic League, which, from the very beginning, tried to control the way Irish language texts should be read. For Lucchitti, the main culprit of this rather erroneous image of *The Islandman* is Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha, known under the pen-name An Seabhac. His introduction as an editor of *An t-Oileánach* clearly praises Tomás’s work for its “authenticity,” claiming that both the language and the content was exempt from any foreign influence, and thus inaccessible to non-Irish readers (Lucchitti 26). The notion of an alleged authenticity has trapped the work on a shelf of anthropology and cultural artefacts for many decades. Already in an introduction to *Allagar na bInse* (1928) An Seabhac intends to convince the reader that Tomás

has no knowledge of any other outlook or any other way of life, nor of any literary forms or rules for telling the story Tomás is of the Gaeltacht. He knows nothing else in the wide world. He never put a foot outside Corcaguiney, he never spoke anything but Irish, he never read anything of literature except a little recently in Gaelic . . . not nurtured in learning and without literary training. (qtd. in Enright 4-5)

These words seem harmful to the reputation of O’Crohan as an author and they are definitely far from the truth. First of all, the variety of research on the

European heritage of Irish oral tradition Lucchitti recalls testifies that Irish literature has been in constant contact with other cultures long before the West of Ireland became a tourist attraction for linguists, philologists, anthropologists, and writers during the time of the Celtic Revival.² Secondly, the publication of An Seabhac's comment to *Allagar na hInse* disregards the literary status of storytelling, which the diary best embodies. Walter Benjamin just two years later provides an insightful analysis of Nikolai Leskov's literary output from the point of view of storytelling. The art of storytelling as oral tradition stands in opposition to the new form of communication—written accounts published in the form of books at the time dominated by the novel. The status of a storyteller as an artist is underlined by Benjamin, since his knowledge and wisdom not only nourishes the new generations but also creates a web of memory passed from storyteller to the audience. For Benjamin, the art of storytelling is coming to an end because life experience has lost its value in favor of information, whereas the oral tradition is pushed into the margins by the dominance of print (83). In the case of *The Islandman* it is the decline of the Blasket population that pushed Tomás to write down his life experience and wisdom, since he could not find people who would be able to pass on the art of storytelling to the next generations. Still, he consciously preferred to stick to his style of orality, for example, by including songs in his narrative.

An Seabhac's disregard for the oral tradition is visible in his editing of the text, since he cut many songs from the original version, which Tomás did not appreciate (Ó Coileáin qtd. in Lucchitti 60). His editorial decisions well depict his personal views on Irish literature. As a Gaelic activist, Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha in his early career as a writer and an editor praised the work of writers who collected the old myths and legends from the Gaeltacht community, but with time he changed his views in favor of a need for new Irish works. In 1916 in his journal *An Lóchbrann* An Seabhac announces the end of the storytelling tradition in modern Ireland by stating that

Someone will say that it is not worthwhile to save those stories from death, that their time has passed. Their time has not passed. It is the traditional storyteller whose time has passed, but print has now replaced the storyteller in the world, and it has more of an audience than the storyteller ever had.
(qtd. in O'Leary 473)

Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha markedly discredits the significance of oral tradition at the beginning of the twentieth century. Indeed, he strongly opts for the new medium of literary communication. Print, for An Seabhac, is better suited to

the new millennium, since it focuses predominantly on the present rather than the past. In fact, the editor of *An Lóchbrann* openly contends that he prefers to publish texts dealing with current issues rather than old legends and myths:

I have a great pile of manuscripts of Fenian tales, of stories of magic horses and giants etc., as well as of old folk songs, enough with which to fill *An Lóchbrann* with nothing else for five or six years. I do not, however, wish to put more than a very small amount of any of that kind of thing in this paper. That is not what people prefer to read, but rather something original—especially stories having some connection with life as it is now.
(qtd. in O’Leary 474)

It appears as no surprise that An Seabhac tried to make changes to Tomás’s text so that it fit his vision of the new Irish story based on more contemporary real life experience. This may also justify his promotion of *An t-Oileánach* as an authentic, thus not literary, account of current life on the Blasket Islands. The alleged authenticity, previously spiced by Ó Siochfhradha’s already mentioned famous introduction to *Allagar na hInse*, has become a catchphrase of all of O’Crohan’s writing. The image of Tomás created by An Seabhac may have sold well, but still shocks with its lack of any veracity. One of the first chapters of *The Islandman* touches upon the topic of an English school Tomás attended as a child. Not only could he speak English, but he also was able to read and write in this language. Only when his children started attending Irish classes did he educate himself in writing in Irish, about which he comments in a chapter called “I begin to take interest in Irish” (223). Robert Flower in his foreword underlines the presence of a strong literary tradition in the local community:

Tomás inherits from the poets and tale-tellers with whom he consorted eagerly in his young days. The island poet may have made him suffer, but he taught him much. And his own inborn genius for speech has refined his acquirements into an individual style. He has told me that, in writing his book, he aimed at a simple style, intelligible to every reader of Irish, using none of the “cruadh-Ghaoluinn”, the “cramp-Irish” of the pure literary form. (ix)

Flower, contrary to Ó Siochfhradha, spent some time with Tomás, so he was aware of his intentions. O’Crohan appears to have been familiar with classical literature; he must have read other literary works in Irish, let alone the fact that at school he most probably had contact with the English canon of the time. Tomás consciously rejects the artistic language opting for a transparent

and informative style, which best represents his community. For example, the Blasket poet Dunlevy would ask Tomás to write down his poetry, fearing that “the poem will be lost if somebody doesn’t pick it up” (86). For a young boy at the time, the composition of poems seemed “a pointless job,” however, by then Tomás was astonished that Dunlevy could “recite every word of it” from memory (86). With time, poet Dunlevy became a role model for O’Crohan, who favored orality over literacy.

The stories composed by Tomás were first published in a diary form as *Allagar na hInse*,³ were reformatted by Brian O’Ceallaigh, and later edited in Irish by Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha. The diary was still too stylistically primitive, in O Hainle’s words, or too oral, to comprise one concise written narrative, thus, the sketches served as material for the second publication, namely *An t-Oileánach*. The original, fragmented form of the stories made them unsuitable for publication as one text. The reasons behind choosing autobiography as a form for this narrative are manifold. As Claire Lynch rightly points out, Irish autobiographies at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century were created predominantly by social classes in danger of extinction. Therefore, the verge of centuries abounds in self-narratives of Anglo-Irish writers whose collective identity was first shaken by the Land War, then questioned after the Easter Rising followed by the War of Independence. The self-portraits of George Moore, W. B. Yeats, John Synge, or John Gogarty are characterized as intertextual, as each of them refers to other Anglo-Irish autobiographies as well as to the author’s own works. By this token, as James Olney underlines, Anglo-Irish autobiography was a literary performance, the act of self-creation and self-promotion (113). The aim of these autobiographies was to promote the writers but also the community with a focus on the Anglo-Irish point of view on literature, culture and Irish identity, which to a great extent overlapped with the pro-Treaty approach towards the future of Ireland.

Interestingly, the Anglo-Irish writers, who were the first to disseminate the oral tradition and praised peasantry as “the last living representatives of Celtic purity,” to use Tim Robinson’s words (xv), did not become their guides to the literary scene. Being landlords in many instances and following the English language tradition, the Anglo-Irish writers could not lead further development of literature in Irish and were naturally rejected by the working-class and those who promoted Irish language literature. Neither could they serve as a source of inspiration for people like O’Crohan, whose life experience differed significantly from the one lived by Moore or Yeats. As Muiris Mac Conghail asserts, John Synge’s visit to the Blasket Islands in 1905, which was recorded in *In West Kerry* (1907), was a certain

failure with comparison to the *Aran Islands* (135). The life experience of the Blasket community was so disparate from other western islands that “when the issue of creating their own literature arose, they chose to write in their own language and not to follow Synge” (Mac Conghail 135). Therefore, the emergence of the Blasket autobiographies seems to provide the other extreme margin of the Irish society represented by those few who were not only able to speak the Irish language, but more importantly, who also appear to have successfully maintained their oral tradition. The dismissal of Synge as their possible literary representative seems to reside in him representing written culture and high literature, which, at least Tomás persistently tried to avoid in his own writing.

Since the local community did not want people like Synge to represent them, the Blasket islanders must have felt alienated from the inhabitants of the mainland. O’Crohan in his narrative underlines that his account testifies to the exclusiveness of the Blasket community: “You may understand from this that we are not to be put in comparison with the people of the great cities or of the soft and level lands” (243). The form of a self-narrative proved to be the best way to express the uniqueness of the Blasket life experience with regard to other Irish people, because as Claire Lynch argues, “[a]n autobiography offers an antidote to these divisions by allowing individuals to explore their own sense of identity and how it conflicts or conforms to accepted standards, national or otherwise” (2). O’Crohan seems well aware of his role as a storyteller and an autobiographer and intends to capture the essence of life on the island by using his life story as a synecdoche for the whole Blasket community. In the chapter “This and That,” which originally was the closing one, Tomás concludes his work in the following way:

What you are reading now, reader, is the fruit of my labours. I was putting the world past me like this for some time more; people coming in ones and twos and threes, and every one of them having his own sittings with me.
(240)

Tomás delineates how the material for the work was gathered. Contrary to traditional autobiographies, O’Crohan does not limit his narrative to the individual experience of a fisherman. His statement well illustrates that his life account is one of a storyteller, who gained his experience not only from his own life but also, and even more importantly, from the stories delivered by other people. Thus, his aim was to tell a tale of his community so that future generations may read the story. By this token, Tomás tries to preserve the memory of the Blasket community:

I have written minutely of much that we did, for it was my wish that somewhere there should be a memorial of it all and I have done my best to set down the character of the people about me so that some record of us might live after us, for the like of us will never be again . . . One day there will be none left in the Blasket of all I have mentioned in this book—and none to remember them. (244)

The self-consciousness of the writing process and its future effect on the memory of the place and its people dislodges a high intentionality of the author to depict the Blasket community as unique in time and space. To a great extent he foresaw the end of the Blasket community: while in the 1890s it counted 130 people, due to emigration and hard life conditions it ceased to exist in 1954 with the last family moving to the mainland, some seventeen years after Tomás's death (Ó Háinle 133). What caused the community's extinction is also what made it unique. The remoteness and the insular character of the place allowed for the development of a community that lived aside historical events and national ideologies. The scarcity of written culture resulted in the prevalence of the oral tradition together with the Irish language, whereas the natural conditions had an influence on the development of a specific diet and local customs. Consequently, the author does not agree on the Blasket community being compared to the rest of Ireland: "We had characters of our own, each different from the other, and all different from the landsmen; and we had our own little failings, too" (O'Crohan 242). Despite the difficult conditions, lack of food and physical exhaustion, Tomás claims that his way of life is better than the one lived on the mainland. "People do not know what is best for them to eat," (101) the author reassures the reader, believing that "a starvation diet" keeps them "alive and kicking" (101) because the Blasket Island is "the healthiest island in Ireland" (187), though the scarcity of food in certain periods of the year seems to be a taboo. Imported products, for example, such as tea were unknown to the local community for a long time. When salvaged from a shipwreck, tea was given to pigs or used to dye clothes (71-73). However, the way Tomás presents this story to readers does not imply any backwardness of the people, but rather serves as an ironic hint at his community's disregard for the symbols of prosperity, so desired by the middle-class citizens of the time.

The scarcity of news about the current affairs in the country as well as abroad results in a different perception of time. There are very few instances when the world changes reach the remote island. The First World War means little to the local community apart from the goods they find adrift in the sea,

later to be sold for a good price in Dingle, since none of its content is of their interest. For O’Crohan, the independence of Ireland is superseded by the founding of the Gaelic League and followed by the change of teachers in a local school, who started teaching Irish instead of English. But it is only when people from the outside of Ireland arrive to study the Irish language that he realizes the value of his mother tongue. This is also the moment when Tomás recognizes the value of his experience and the oral tradition of the Blasket community.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to reiterate An Seabhac’s statement that O’Crohan and his community did not have any contact with the outside world, and thus, no foreign influence is traceable in his writing. In *The Islandman* O’Crohan mentions the visits of his children who live in America, implying that at a certain point of his life he had a closer contact with the world overseas than the mainland Ireland. Even Synge in his account “In West Kerry” is surprised by the themes of the local ballads. “A long ballad about the sorrows of mothers who see all their children going away from them to America” (301) or “another ballad on the Russian and Japanese war” (292) are just the two examples he mentions. However, in Lucchitti’s view, this testifies to Synge’s and Yeats’s unawareness of the rich European cultural material of the oral traditions they came into a contact with (41). So it might have been with An Seabhac, who, likewise Synge or Yeats, did not realize how much the Blasket community’s culture was embedded in European oral tradition. Still his negation of any foreign influences in Tomás O’Crohan’s works may have a different justification, having its roots in the ideology of Irish nationalism of the time.

The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century marks a period of heated debate between the proponents of a cosmopolitan and nationalistic view on the future of Irish literature (Kiberd 155). Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha promoted a nationalistic approach towards new literature evolving in Irish. O’Leary contends that An Seabhac “found the entire contemporary European ethos as expressed in the literature not only obsessed with the sordid, but also antagonistic to the very spirit of the Irish language” (36). He would encourage Irish authors in articles to compose “truly Gaelic” literature since “Gaels created out of their own spirit when they had no knowledge of or contact with any storytelling but their own” (qtd. in O’Leary 36). Contrary to revivalists, who urged reading European literature, An Seabhac still in 1909 advocated for the opposite: “the old stories the old folks have and the old stories in the old books and the old stories that have been retold for us in modern Irish” were supposed to serve as models to follow (qtd. in O’Leary 103). He gradually realized that if Irish literature is to develop, it needs new forms of

expression different from old folk legends and myths, yet he remained rather restrained about any foreign influence. The exception to the rule may be the publication of his Irish translations of Russian stories by Lev Tolstoy in the journal *An Lóchrann* (O'Leary 493) due to a constant lack of new Irish compositions. Brian O'Ceallaigh in his Foreword to *Allagar na hInse* clearly enunciates that he brought Tomás *Iceland Fisherman* by Pierre Loti and two volumes of Maxim Gorky's autobiography translated into English to read as examples of stories about everyday life written by simple folk people. As O'Ceallaigh clarifies: "he [O'Crohan] preferred Maxim Gorky's stories which portrayed the harsh life of the people of Russia. Gorky showed Tomás that a fisherman could write a book as well as a learned man" (qtd. in Enright 4). Pádraig Ó Siochfhradha, having edited the entire text, certainly read this foreword. It might be tentatively claimed that that An Seabhac in his introduction to the very same text negates the Russian influence O'Ceallaigh admits having introduced to O'Crohan. These two introductory remarks to the same text serve as a good illustration of the ongoing conflict between Irish cosmopolitanism and nationalism of the time.

The choice of Gorky's autobiography by Brian O'Ceallaigh, apart from its appropriate content and form, may have a direct link with cosmopolitan ideology. Philip O'Leary notes that some proponents of the Gaelic Revival aimed to provide literature in Irish with European sources of influence, first of all, to liberate it from the English domination, but also to introduce new, more contemporary forms, since the traditional folktale would not make Irish literature competitive on the European literary scene (39). If Irish literature was to thrive, it needed new genres, which could better express the experiences of the modern nation. Therefore, Padraig Ó Conaire in 1908 advocated Russian literature because

In Russia, a country that was dependent on folktales and folk songs until a hundred years ago, a group of distinguished writers arose – a group that drew back from no question that was of interest. Some of them began digging deeply in search of the truth, for they were in earnest. They had faith and they were not satisfied with the lying fables that were put before them. When they came up out of the hole in which they were searching, they had a filthy, smeared thing with the shape of a human being, and they cried out at the tops of their lungs: Here is the human! (qtd. in O'Leary 39)

Russian literature was praised by prominent Gaelic Revival activists, among them Douglas Hyde, for "the Russian temperament" and for the command of new genres such as the short story. In 1905, Pádraig Pearse criticized the

ignorance of the Irish literary community towards new European literature: “What does Ireland know of Maeterlink, Ibsen, Bjorson, Tolstoi, Gorki, Jokai? . . . How far are we being influenced by the young literatures of Russia, Finland, Norway, Hungary, Brittany, Provence?” (qtd. in O’Leary 81), whereas a year later he drew attention to the fact that “Gorki rather than Dickens suggests the style” (qtd. in O’Leary 82). In 1907 Russia was enumerated by Pearse as one of “the four ‘livest’ [sic] countries in the matter of pure literature of the present day” (qtd. in O’Leary 81). This ideological turn towards Russian literature could not have gone unnoticed by the people involved in the revival of the Irish language and literature. It appears far from coincidental that Brian O’Ceallaigh chose Gorky’s work as an illustration of an autobiography, which markedly differed from those composed by Yeats, Synge or Moore. Brian O’Ceallaigh, with his revivalist approach towards Irish literature, seems to have believed in one of the core ideas of cosmopolitanism and world literature that distant reading: “allows to focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes—or genres and systems” (Moretti 48-49). As Franco Moretti asserts, distant reading leads to the creative merging of “foreign form, local material—and local form. Simplifying somewhat: foreign *plot*, local *characters*; and then, local *narrative voice*” (57, emphasis in original). Moretti’s recipe for a cosmopolitan novel is exactly what we receive in the case of O’Crohan’s native autobiography, which is a foreign form of autobiography, local community and a local narrative voice of an Irish storyteller.

The main aspects of native autobiography may as well be found in Andrew McNeillie’s definition of autobiography, which he provides in *An Aran Keening*:

Autobiography, oral or written, is everyman’s genre, the impoverished genre of the people, the genre of the poor (of means as well as wit?), the democratic genre. That’s what makes it the worthiest of them all. Who’s not got a story to tell? Who won’t be silenced? (Every bore on earth.) But no wonder the autobiographer tries so persistently to compensate for his plight, his imaginative poverty, his inability to figure other worlds of mind and soul from the template of his own, consciously or unconsciously, straining at the leash of fact and hearing off, unruly, unskilled, and even remorsefully, into the true flesh woods and pastures new of fiction. (130)

McNeillie draws attention to the oral heritage of autobiography. The self-narrative is, first and foremost, a story, which may take different forms, but its primary aim is to share life experience with others. Furthermore, McNeillie names autobiography the genre of the poor, and in the case of Irish literature

it seems to be the most democratic of all genres, as it is one of the first to allow peasants to enter the realm of literature. With hindsight, it transpires that autobiography is a genre which provides a link between oral and written traditions; whereas its democratic character allows for greater flexibility in terms of its content and form. By reading self-narratives of other writers representing lower classes, O’Crohan realized that in an autobiography he was capable of combining his oral tradition of storytelling with a new medium of communication, meaning a written text, to create his own version of autobiography. This is also the argument used by Tomás’s son, Seán, who recalls that “[w]hen Tomás saw that these gomeral had come out to tell their life-stories, he said: ‘Yerra, if they are gomeral, I’ll make myself a gomeral too’” (qtd. in Ó Háinle 135). The word *gomeral*, used by Tomás, refers to Maxim Gorky and Pierre Loti.

Indeed, Gorky’s autobiography presents the formative years of a man from the lower class. Gorky’s childhood ended early and abruptly at the age of eleven. With the death of his mother, he had to leave school before finishing the third grade and started working as a shoemaker’s apprentice. The short time of his childhood is described in the first volume, whereas the second volume covers the time of his teenage years spent “among people” by wandering from place to place in search for temporal jobs. Tomás presents his narrative in a similar tone as Gorky’s depiction of the low-life of provincial Russia, for instance, when he comes to a conclusion that the inhabitants of the Blasket Island “are poor, simple people, living from hand to mouth. I fancy we should have been no better off if we had been misers” (O’Crohan 242). Gorky’s open presentation of his formative years abundant in hardships and hunger must have appealed to the Irishman’s self-consciousness, since *The Islandman* does not idealize life close to nature, as the Irish Revivalists tried to present it, but dislodges the tragedies of everyday life, such as poverty or the fate of his children, the majority of which died before reaching maturity.

Gorky’s autobiography not only summarizes the formative years of the writer, but more importantly it reveals his pre-revolutionary views on society and literature. The Russian writer uses his life narrative to comment on the current situation of peasantry and other representatives of the lowest classes at the end of the nineteenth century. At the time of writing his autobiography, Gorky was already well-known for the promotion of new romanticism in Russian literature, which idealized the heroic life of the common people paying special attention to vagabonds (босяки), who are to embody the essence of freedom, which is homelessness as a choice and not fate. Tramps, described by Gorky in his previous texts, personify the downplayed potential of the peasantry, which seems to have been forgotten

by the rest of the society. Other classes do not expect much of them, which is a mistake, because peasants are capable of rebelling since they have nothing to lose. In the pre-revolutionary period, Gorky cherishes the collective character of lower classes, who find it easier to unite in a cause than the middle or upper classes with their high individualism (Bjalik 1973, 71). The Irish autobiography seems to follow a similar line of argument. The Blasket community performs their activities together like fishing, hunting seals, retrieving cargo from shipwrecks, saving drowning people, as well as mourning their dead. O'Crohan even provides an account in which the Blasket people unite in a local rebellion against the authority represented by bailiffs and the police coming to collect the rent and the tax from the Blasket tenants. The courageous women of Blasket throw stones at the newcomers, one of them being in such a frenzy that she almost flings the child she has in her arms at them (O'Crohan 54). The Blasket people successfully chase away the intruders, which, according to Ó Háinle (141), is embellished in the autobiography by comparison to the diary: "[w]hen the report got abroad that a steamship had been in the Great Blasket with armed men aboard, and that they had failed to get either rent or tax, it set all Ireland wondering" (O'Crohan 54-55). With this example Tomás intends to illustrate the rebellious nature of the simple folk, their ability to stand against the oppressor, here represented by the authority of the police and bailiffs.

The inspiration of Gorky's text is not limited to the plot of the autobiography, but is also noticeable in the form structure. There is no denying that *The Islandman* depicts a strong influence of Irish oral tradition, in which the author was brought up. Still, the loose and anecdotal structure visible in Tomás's autobiography is akin to the form of Gorky's text. The Russian writer's self-narrative is considered to break with the tradition of writing autobiography required previously to describe events precisely with facts from the public life of the society and dates adding to authenticity of the author's accounts (Bjalik 1989, 163). Gorky, previously interested in bildungsromans, fails to follow the linear organization of the narrative in his autobiography. Instead, his life account is organized by a set of associations governed by his memories. His life narration is often interrupted by digressions, comments which not only enrich the plot, but more importantly draw the reader's attention to the process of the interrelation between the individual and the society as well as its influence on the development of the author from childhood to adulthood.

In many instances Tomás follows Gorky's organization of the narrative. The Irish autobiography is clearly divided into two periods of the author's life: childhood and manhood, with marriage marking the end of one

and the beginning of the other. The small chapters, which organize the narrative, frequently lose linear chronology and revolve around certain topics presenting a set of associations the author has with a given period of his life. Even a cursory glance at the two narratives reveals the similarities between the Russian model and the Irish analogue in terms of their content as well as their form. Consequently, O’Crohan has managed to construct a unique text which combines a foreign form with his local skill of storytelling, a written tradition with an oral one. As a result, a new genre has been introduced into Irish literature, namely a native autobiography.

The analysis of Tomás O’Crohan’s *The Islandman* testifies to it being the first Irish life-narrative of simple folk, the first to represent the Blasket community, the first to define the Blasket identity, as well as the first to combine the Irish tradition of storytelling with a foreign influence of writing autobiography. Furthermore, the impact of Gorky’s self-narrative, observable on the level of the organization of the narrative and the choice of topics, testifies to the cosmopolitan character of the text. The originality together with the significance of O’Crohan’s work has resulted in many fallacious myths being created about this particular text. Paradoxically, *The Islandman* has become an epitome of a nationalist approach towards literature, which disregards Tomás’s European heritage of storytelling, his knowledge of English, his family relations with the outside world, and finally his personal encounter with Gorky’s autobiography.

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Notes

¹ Tomás O’Criomhthain’s *An t-Oileánach* was originally published in Irish in 1929. The English translation by Robin Flower appeared in 1937 with the title *The Islandman* and an anglicized form of the writer’s surname, O’Crohan. Since I use the English translation for the analysis, I apply the anglicized version of Tomás’s surname throughout the paper.

² Lucchitti gathers different scholarly works that analyze the features of European epic in Celtic tradition, the dialogue between Celtic culture and other cultures of the Continent, the German interest in Celtic literature due to a supposedly shared heritage, as well as Homeric qualities of the Blasket Island literature, and many more (see Lucchitti’s “Chapter 2: Oral Tradition and Literacy on the Blasket Islands”).

³ *Allagar na hInse* was published in 1928 and was only translated into English in 1986 with the title *Island Cross-Talk*. For the analysis I use the English version translated by Tim Enright.

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