

COMING OF AGE INSIDE, OUTSIDE THE BIG HOUSE, AND BEYOND: A POETICS OF AGEING AND DECAY THROUGH JOHN BANVILLE'S *BIRCHWOOD*

Marta Miquel Baldellou
Universidad de Lleida

RESUMEN

John Banville retoma las convenciones que caracterizaron al género de la *Big House* en la literatura irlandesa para cambiarlas y dotarlas de una forma que las hiciera más convenientes al postmodernismo. A lo largo de *Birchwood*, Gabriel, el último heredero de los Godkins, aspira a escribir sus memorias una vez ha vuelto a la mansión de su familia cuando ya se encuentra en su vejez. Su vuelta a la casa de sus ancestros le supone un incesante despertar de recuerdos que habían estado escondidos en su memoria. Es a través de sus recuerdos y del redescubrimiento de los diferentes espacios dentro, fuera y más allá de Birchwood, que Gabriel evalúa el concepto de identidad personal y familiar, mientras alude a eventos pertenecientes a la memoria histórica y colectiva de su país. Por consiguiente, Gabriel, a través de un viaje físico y psicológico, toma conciencia de su proceso de envejecimiento, desde su juventud hasta su vejez, al mismo tiempo que reflexiona acerca de los cambios acaecidos en Birchwood, y por extensión, en su familia, a causa del paso del tiempo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: género de la *Big House*, postmodernismo, proceso de crecimiento, espacio y tiempo.

ABSTRACT

John Banville takes the conventions that characterised the Big House genre in Irish literature in order to subvert them and convert them into a more suitable form for postmodern times. In *Birchwood*, Gabriel, the last heir of the Godkins, intends to write his memoirs once he is back to the manor house of his family at his old age. His return to the house of his ancestors arouses memories that had been deeply hidden. Through his memories and the rediscoveries of the different spaces within, outside, and beyond Birchwood, Gabriel reevaluates the concept of identity at a personal and family level, while making references to instances of collective and even historical memory. Thus, Gabriel, through his physical and psychological journey, undergoes his process of coming-of-age, from youth to old age, as he reflects on the changes Birchwood, and by extension, all his family had undergone due to the passage of time.

KEYWORDS: Big House genre, postmodernism, coming-of-age, space and time.

The great ruin presented its flat front
At us, sunstruck. The children disappeared¹.

In a postmodern attempt to reinvigorate the Big House novel, through *Birchwood* John Banville takes the different manifestations of the genre as a precedent in order to create the Big House novel of the new times. As Susanne Burgstaller remarks, John Banville uses and reworks the Big-House motif, taking over «its stereotypes, characters, plot structures, and social codes, working within the form in order to subvert it» (1992: 240). The standard figures that populate this genre such as the Anglo-Irish landlord, the tenants, the peasants, and the overwhelming presence of the family manor house are subverted through the memories of the last heir of the Godkins, Gabriel, while he pours down, as a writer, his personal story and his family history once he is back to Birchwood at his old age. The rendering of the memories of his childhood, the splendid past of his family and its subsequent degeneration gather, in a metafictional way, instances of ageing that manifest through the narrator himself, Gabriel Godkin. The gradual decay of the house, Birchwood, and the different instances of the passage of time, are often displayed through epiphanic moments that manifest a process of ageing. Gabriel's process of remembering is in a sense creative, recovering his past from oblivion, even though his account is one of degeneration and decay. His memory merges both his personal story of growth and the historical chronology of his family estate and possessions. In a sense, *Birchwood* depicts a merging relation of formerly well-structured and separate categories, which are now blurred as a metafictional manifestation of both the proceedings of memory and creation. The integrating quality of memory, as the creative powers of the novelist, merge as the house changes masters and as the nature surrounding Birchwood menaces to penetrate the threshold of the house. Past and present memories, as spaces inside and outside the house, merge through Gabriel's recollections. As Vera Kreilkamp concedes, through *Birchwood*, John Banville explores «the limitations of remembering and knowing in order to undermine the mimetic premises of the form [dwelling on] commentaries on the individual and the nation» (1998: 235).

Recalling his past from his old age, Gabriel Godkin depicts his own process of ageing inside Birchwood when he was a child; outside Birchwood, when he left the family estate in search of his supposed sister and joined a circus; and beyond Birchwood, when he came back to his childhood house as the sole heir of the Godkins. Thus, it is the aim of this essay to analyse in which ways ageing and the passage of time are manifested through the personal process of remembering and creating of the narrator and protagonist; the process of splendour and decay of Birchwood, and by extension, of the Godkins and the Lawlesses, and finally, the

¹ Thomas KINSELLA, «Tao and Unfitness at Inistiogue on the River Nore», *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Irish Poetry* (London: Penguin, 1990): 34. Ed. Peter Fallon and Derek Mahon.

epiphanic manifestations through which transitional, or liminal, processes evoke the passage of time. The tripartite division that the novel presents makes reference to the elements of earth, air and fire, and water, echoing a process of decay and regeneration all throughout. The first part of the novel, entitled «the Book» of «the Dead,» goes back to the ancestors of the Birchwood family, and inherently, assumes the element of earth, which can be both associated with fertility and death. Moreover, it also seems to refer to creative endeavours, since Gabriel attempts to write his memories. The second part of the novel, entitled «Air and Angels», refers to the ethereal presence of Gabriel's deceased family members, most of whom, as we lately find out, are alleged to have died of combustion; thus, air and fire are intermingled. Finally, in the third part of the novel, entitled «Mercury», the element of water makes its appearance in an attempt to regenerate and reinvigorate the ever-permanently presence of death. This circular structure mirrors the continuity of the passage of time and the process of ageing about which Gabriel ponders through the writing of his family history. In a way, this tripartite structure, including the four natural elements, echoes the childhood, adulthood and old age of Gabriel's life, as far as his presence inside, outside and beyond the big house is concerned.

Firstly, we should analyse in which ways Gabriel Godkin, narrator and protagonist, undergoes and interprets his personal process of ageing. Gabriel is back to Birchwood, the house where he spent his childhood, the house of his family. His journey is both physical and psychological, since his coming back to the house implies a journey back to his past life. His renovated acquaintance with Birchwood awakens his memories which he inscribes in a book for the posterity as a means of personal legacy. It is through his intercourse with the house and his past that he gains awareness as regards the passage of time and his personal process of ageing. The quotation that inaugurates the novel refers to the duality the subject feels when remembering, the implied feeling of the present and the presumed presence of the past that is brought to memory. As Gabriel feels, echoing Catullus, he is torn into two, his former and present self. In addition to the dichotomy set between past and present, Gabriel experiences the duality of being both the narrator and the protagonist of his own memories, thus undergoing a process of both internalisation and externalisation, or even alienation, of his own past. After the lapse of time he spent far from Birchwood, he needs to undergo a process of reacquaintance with the house, and by extension, with his former life. As Gabriel states, «in this lawless house I spend the nights poring over my memories, fingering them, like an important Casanova his old love letters, sniffing the dusty scent of violets. Some of these memories are in a language which I do not understand» (11). Gabriel acknowledges the physical and psychological distance that has separated him from the house and the memories that are still inscribed on its walls and its corners. This is reflected even in his use of the language, which he feels at odds to use, since it is no longer his own. Gabriel requires a transitional process of acquaintance with the language of



the house so that he is ultimately enabled to read its memories. It is through the renovated physical contact with Birchwood that Gabriel initiates his gradual journey of personal knowledge, since it is through the house that he gains knowledge of his past, and by extension, of himself. As he confesses, «it was not until I ventured into the attics and the cellars, my favourite haunts, the forgotten corners, that the past at last blossomed in the present» (13).

After this renovated physical acquaintance with Birchwood, Gabriel pursues the reification of his knowledge through his writing. Through the scribbling of his memories on the paper, Gabriel both recalls and creates his memorial inheritance of his family and of his youth. Thus, the triad process of the physical contact with the house, the awakening of the memories and the writing of remembrances echoes the circular structure on which *Birchwood* is based. Through the process of remembering, Gabriel creates his own story, since memory is inevitably subjective. His writing process is creative to the extent that the formerly splendid past of Birchwood is only brought to life as long as Gabriel writes it down. As he admits, «while my stealthy pen blackens the pages. I have come into my inheritance» (14). Thus, it is only when Gabriel pursues the creative process of writing that the splendour that used to characterise Birchwood comes back into existence.

Through a both metafictional and epistemological procedure, Gabriel even reflects on his own process of remembering, describing it as a sensorial experience, where mind and bodily sensations mingle. Gabriel portrays his memories as silent visions through prisms rather than glasses, resembling silent echoes, mixing sensorial manifestations. After all, memory works through association. Moreover, he feels in an awkward position to distinguish between memories and imagination, since he says «such scenes as this I see, or imagine I see, no difference, through a glass sharply» (21). Gradually, though his process of remembering and imagining, Gabriel adds his own questioning of his memories, which implies his journey back to his past is also meant as an attempt to gain some possible knowledge. At some points, Gabriel acknowledges the impossibility of knowing, asking himself «what does it mean? That is the question I am forever asking, what can it mean? There is never a precise answer, but instead, in the sky, as it were, a kind of jovian nod, a celestial tipping of the wink, that's all right, it means what it means. Yes, but is that enough? Am I satisfied? I wonder» (77).

Gradually, Gabriel becomes aware of the concept of change through Birchwood, the former splendour and the present decay. Nevertheless, he believes his coming back to the house will bring it alive again, saying «I had expected, perhaps even hoped, that their arrival would immediately transform life at Birchwood. Nothing is simple. Things changed, certainly, but slowly, and in subtle ways» (45). The prevalence of change is especially signalled once Gabriel unveils his name and acknowledges his age stating «the name is Godkin, Gabriel. I feel I have already lived for a century and more. This can only be an advantage» (11). The fact that Gabriel does not state his exact age, but rather manifests his sensation of having lived for so long, endows him with a sense of eternity that also pervades the house. His newly acquaintance with the house implies the contradictory feeling of going back to his past, as if time had not passed, but at the same time, acknowledg-

ing the changes that have taken place. Recurrently, Gabriel makes reference to the dual manifestation of the passage of time by inferring that he has «gone down twice to the same river» (11), implying both his former and present existence in Birchwood.

Through remembering, Gabriel inevitably rethinks his past, and even, recreates it. As he states «all thinking is in a sense remembering» (11) and «we imagine that we remember things as they were, while in fact all we carry into the future are fragments which reconstruct a wholly illusory past» (12). Thus, Gabriel acknowledges that remembering is also creating, since the past we remember never offers an accurate picture of the past we actually lived. Consequently, we can only attempt at gathering various and isolated memories so as to attain some accurate knowledge of our past by the amalgamation of different scraps. Echoing Marcel Proust's famous scene, Gabriel admits that «these things, these madeleines, I gathered anew, compared them to my memories of them, added them to the mosaic, like an archaeologist mapping a buried empire» (13). In this sense, Gabriel's personal remembrance echoes that of the historian who, compiling certain facts and disregarding others, constructs the historical account of a nation which, in a way, is also inherently creative. Gabriel undergoes an epistemological process as if he was a child, despite the fact he feels as if he had lived a hundred years. His coming back to Birchwood after such a long time endows Gabriel with the feeling he has aged, and so he acknowledges the difference between his young self and his ageing present self. As he says, «I am surprised at the difference between the way things are and the way, before I find them, I expect them to be. [...] That was how it was, coming home, always the unexpected» (13).

Since he feels compelled to undo the gap that separates his former life from his present time at Birchwood, he realises that the only way to feel at ease in Birchwood again is beginning again, that is, coming back to his youth, and even before, to his infancy. Thus, Gabriel undergoes primary experiences of physical contact with this newly oldish environment, combating familiarity and alienation, as if trying to come to terms with his acquaintance of the world, now in old age. Once again in Birchwood, through the reflection of nature on the windowglasses of the house, Gabriel claims «I had to see everything, touch everything, as though by those contacts alone did I exist. Papa would have been proud of my performance, and amused by it. A real son and heir! By the windows in the dining room I halted in a haze of luminous pink light reflected from the garden» (171).

Gradually, in his renewed epistemological process, Gabriel realises that he is aware of his own existence through the house. The renovated relationship he establishes with the house is that of mutual symbiosis. He returns to his origins, while bringing Birchwood back to life through his narrative memories. Once Gabriel's physical contact with the house has been enacted and he is brought to the context of his former existence, Gabriel becomes acquainted with spatial emptiness. He remembers the people that populated Birchwood in his childhood, and becomes aware of the notion of loss and death. Once he acknowledges this loss, he must supply for this absence, which is replenished by the memories of his family, his loved ones. Gabriel finds himself wondering «how many have I lost that way? I began to write, as a means of finding them again, and thought that at last I had



discovered a form which would contain and order all my losses. I was wrong. There is no form, no order, only echoes and coincidences» (174). Consequently, for Gabriel, writing becomes a necessity to supply his sense of loss and absence with a presence in addition to making sense to his own existence. Gabriel realises that he exists through the house, but he also exists through the members of his family who inhabited the house. Thus, the house and his family become inextricably linked. In order to gain knowledge of the house, Gabriel must also reify, give shape, to the memories of his family, the Godkins and the Lawlesses. Nevertheless, in his pursuit to know the house, his family, and by extension, himself, he often feels hopeless, acknowledging the irremediable artificiality that language entraps in itself. All memories, all thoughts, ultimately need to be reified through language, and thus, they become words, human creations, and thus artificial constructions, instead of real entities. At this stage, Gabriel feels the inevitable result must be silence:

This world. I feel that if I could understand it I might then begin to understand the creatures who inhabit it. But I do not understand it. I find the world always odd, but odder still, I suppose, is the fact that I find it so, for what are the eternal verities, by which I measure these temporal aberrations? Intimations abound, but they are felt only, and words fail to transfix them. Anyway, some secrets are not to be disclosed under pain of who knows what retribution, and whereof I cannot speak, thereof I must be silent. (175)

In order to surpass this postmodern, and rather pessimistic, vision of the world, Gabriel must necessarily cope with his past experiences, and that inevitably brings to the floor his former family life. Being deprived of any heir to secure the continuity of his family, Gabriel must go back to the splendour of former times. As he discovers towards the end of the novel, «I began to consider seriously my past and future. It was the present I should have thought about, but the present is unthinkable» (138). Thus, he consequently begins a narrative account of the memories of Birchwood and his family in order to understand his own existence. His corollary of memories unveil a mysterious, and often, degenerate past which account for the decay and desolation of the house, now awakening to life by Gabriel's renewed presence and the surrounding strength of nature, whose presence is no longer menacing but invigorating.

Thus, Gabriel becomes aware of his personal process of ageing through his coming back to his childhood house. Being now aged, Gabriel is compelled to go back to his former self, as a child, in order to begin his pursue of knowledge of Birchwood. The temporal and physical gap that has been formed through the passage of time forces Gabriel to go back to his origins in order to come to terms with his present self. After all, his existence, as an aged man, is the result of all his former experiences. Thus, he needs to remember in order to understand. However, he is well aware of the fact that remembering, by definition, is necessarily a fragmented process, since memory is selective and is reified through language which is, in a sense, creative, and thus, artificial. Though memory, present and past merge, while spaces inside and outside Birchwood become mingled, as the hierarchical



structures that separated landlord and tenants became blurry. Temporal and spatial frontiers are gradually blurred through the passage of time. Gabriel's memories are awakened through the spatial contours of the house.

Once Gabriel has gained entrance into a possible way of understanding his reality, his epistemological endeavours, he recollects his process of ageing through his renewed existence in the house and through the memories of his family members. The overall memories he gains contribute to constructing his identity. The house and the family are inextricably linked, since the splendour and decay of the house reflect both the grandeur and the degeneration of the family. After his arrival, Gabriel begins to work in the house, while memories awaken all around. It is through the present intercourse with the house of his ancestors that he realises the changes time has inflicted upon Birchwood, and by extension, upon all his family and upon himself. Images of decay abound, surrounded by the overwhelming presence of silence and immobility, as if the different elements contained within the house, assembled as remnants of the past, resembled ghostly dormant entities just pretending to be dead. Gabriel contemplates the house interior examining the different elements in isolation, as if trying to gather some kind of consistency out of the chaos and decay consuming Birchwood. By gathering all the scraps, he may be able to attain some knowledge about his own identity. Firstly, Gabriel focuses on the furniture, conceding «the windowpanes were smashed, withered leaves littered the carpet. The shards of shattered glass retained wedged of a stylised blue sky. The chairs crouched in menacing immobility. All these things pretending to be dead» (12). The decay within the house is counteracted by the vitality of the nature surrounding Birchwood. Gabriel welcomes nature's entrance within the domains of his family house, and startled by the decay that haunts the house, he even considers leaving. However, for Gabriel, life only seems to exist within Birchwood. He does not feel part of the life outside the house and he seems well-aware that he, as the last representative of his family, belongs to another time and feels the need to pay some tribute to the struggle of his ancestors. As he admits

The summerhouse was invaded by pigeons, starlings, a hive of bees. I let them stay there. They were alive, and I had enough of death. Perhaps I shall leave here. Where would I go? Is that why they all fought so hard for Birchwood, because there is nowhere else for them to be? Outside is destruction and decay. I do not speak the language of this wild country. I shall stay here, alone, and live a life different from any the house has ever known. (174)

Gabriel Godkin cannot deny his belonging to the house. Birchwood becomes more than a manor house. Birchwood becomes a concept in itself. Birchwood is Gabriel's family, it is his past and his present. It represents all that his family fought for during all their lives. Birchwood was also the place where he grew up as a child



and where his consciousness began to arise. He learnt from the world from within the house. All his memories are located there. In a way, Birchwood is the reification of all his past, or rather, the remnants of his life. There is an ongoing interaction between Gabriel and the house, as if Birchwood was a living entity, Gabriel's double. He cannot conceive reality from another perception, and so, he inevitably keeps going back to Birchwood. The fact that the house arises as a character on its own is confirmed when Gabriel admits: «Birchwood always took itself too seriously, turning its face away from the endless intricate farce being enacted under its roof, but on its good days, when one was willing to accept it on its own terms, it was magnificent» (70). Thus, Birchwood is endowed with living entity; the amalgamation of all of Gabriel's relatives who perished within its walls. Birchwood is Gabriel's family, and so he is unable to separate his existence from that of the house.

Thus, despite its apparent decay, Birchwood gradually comes alive once Gabriel enters its walls. The nature surrounding the big house also contributes to awakening Birchwood into life. There is an interactional rhythm moving inside and outside the house that contributes to enacting a mutual symbiosis, since that seems the only way for Birchwood to survive. As Gabriel concedes, «I looked down on the broken fountain, at last year's leaves sunk in the dead water. The windows of the house were blinded with light» (12). Nature surrounding Birchwood partakes of its own decay, but the house is also nurtured by the light surrounding its fortifications. Gabriel acts as the meeting point where the two realities blend; the inside and the outside realities, the past and the present.

Above all, Birchwood is an idea. Birchwood represents Gabriel's ancestors, and by extension, Birchwood becomes a parallel embodiment of Gabriel himself. In a way, the decaying walls of Gabriel's manor house mirror his own process of ageing. As the house decays, Gabriel grows old. While he beholds the rooms that witnessed his process of growing from childhood to adulthood, Gabriel becomes aware of his ageing. As he conceals at this point, «my childhood is gone forever» (34). He becomes aware of all the changes that have been taken place during all those years, but since Birchwood arises as a concept rather than a physical entity per se, for Gabriel, it still remains the same. At this point, Gabriel reflects on the way memory works, and how remembering is in a way thinking, and by extension, creating. Memories always arise transforming the factual events that took place in our past, and so they are entirely subjective. As Gabriel points out, «the past comes back transformed only to startle us with its steadfastness. It is our fractured vision which has transformed it. My broken kingdom all was changed and yet was as it always was» (165).

Gabriel's first coming to terms with his process of maturation was enacted through the physical changes taking place within the house. When he lived with his family in Birchwood, the earliest signs of decay of the house became evident. The passage of time manifested through the somnolent movement of the hands of the clock. It is through this echoing timing that the Godkins were doomed to disappear. As Gabriel begins to remember, he firstly became aware that it was at this point that «Birchwood and its inmates were disintegrating around me, and I hardly noticed» (68-9). Once this thought has entered Gabriel's mind, he can only recol-

lect images of decay that began to accumulate in his mind when he was only a child. One of the most remarkable images is the collapse of the schoolroom ceiling, when Gabriel, his mother and his half-brother Michael contemplated «up in the rotten cavity, a decayed hanging forest of rank green growths stirring like seaweed in the swell of crossdraughts» (69). In a way, this proves the beginning of Birchwood's end, since the natural elements struggle to penetrate the house and recover its own domain. The fissure that nature inflicts on the house has its counterpart in the family, since Gabriel's relatives become tainted with the marks of illness, insanity, ageing, and ultimately, death.

At this stage, Gabriel begins to recollect his family's history. The first masters in Birchwood were the Lawlesses until Gabriel's great-great-grandfather, holding his own name, Gabriel Godkin, arrived at Birchwood. At that time, the house was already in ruins, since «the land had been hacked into tiny holdings where the tenants were strangling the soil to death in their frantic efforts to meet the rents and feed their annually expanding families» (15). In a way, the Lawlesses felt compelled to marry somebody from outside so as to invigorate their race. The history of Birchwood arises as a struggle between different factions to win control over the house and the family heritage. This cyclical pulling of forces pervades through all Birchwood. This is reified through the repetition of the family members' names which are recurrent through the passage of time. Squires and tenants, the Lawlesses and the Godkins, the family members and nature itself exchange places, and it is through their intercourse that the history of Birchwood writes itself. As Gabriel admits, both the Lawlesses and the Godkins fought for Birchwood, and eventually, «Gabriel won, and his fortunes flourished [whereas] demoralised by defeat, the Lawlesses languished» (16). However, it is implied that the possession over Birchwood irremediably haunts its inhabitants with a curse; that of power and ambition to secure the continuity of a race that is slowly doomed to extinction. As Gabriel so concedes, «while the Lawlesses grew solid and sane the Godkins were stalked by an insatiable and glittering madness born» (16).

Once his original ancestors are mentioned, Gabriel proceeds to describe his own parents. Gabriel attempts to unveil the intricacies that led his father to marry his mother. Actually, Gabriel admits that his father, Joseph, «set himself to fall in love with Beatrice» (16). He acknowledges that his father was not in love with Beatrice but he married her anyway, despite Granny Godkin's fervent opposition. In turn, Beatrice somehow became fascinated by Joseph, since her decadent and languid nature harshly contrasted with Joseph's invigorating character. As their son Gabriel admits, «what she found fascinating in him, did she but know, was the muted but savage anguish that hounded him all his life, and which, in order to live with it, he transformed into fury or passion» (17). It is implied that there was a plot whereby the Lawlesses attempted to regain Birchwood. The metafictional nature of John Banville's novel is implied through the names of the rival families. It follows that the Godkins resound as the rightful inheritors of Birchwood, whereas the Lawlesses are merely outlaws. Nevertheless the exchange between both families, the pulse between the decadence of the Lawlesses and the invigorating vitality of the Godkins arises as the throbbing force whereby Birchwood survives. The ongoing

change of masters has its reflection on the house, within which decay and vigour move in constant struggle. Once Gabriel's parents became engaged, and Beatrice entered the house of her ancestors, it is stated that «she walked back to the house that was changed now beyond all recognition» (18). Celebrations in Birchwood are always undermined by a sense of gloom and decay that pervade all throughout. A meaningful example is Gabriel's parents' wedding which is portrayed through images of draughtiness, slothfulness and dismay. The marriage is considered a cataclysm that would ultimately disrupt the family, since the pure blood of the Godkins would mix with that of another family. In a way, the portrait that is given of the wedding bears some resemblance with that of a funeral:

They were married in the spring. [...] The wobbly music of the organ marched her [Beatrice] out into the churchyard, where her heart stopped dead for an instant at the sight of the April sunlight shining gaily on the tombstones. Joseph suffered it all in a mood of tired boredom which he succeeded in enlivening only once, when he paused for a full five seconds before saying Yes to the contract. [...] Beatrice's mother, who was to die within a year, let loose a gulp of woe and slumped down in her invalid chair, and, for many years, Papa was to remember the occasion with a warm glow of spite. The Lawlesses attended the wedding in force. They wept in the church, and stood solemnly to attention outside while their photographs were taken. (18)

Nevertheless, despite the marriage, Birchwood was still the whole possession of the ageing Granny and Grandpa Godkin. Their power as patriarchs of the house is reflected by Gabriel's reflections on the fact that «not the dawn over the fields began the day at Birchwood, but the first light breaking in Granny Godkin's bedroom» (21). Birchwood arises as the Godkin's microcosm, outside which nothing really matters. Beatrice, now Joseph's wife, is responsible for looking after her ageing mother-in-law in a task that proves rather unnerving due to the old lady's character. Beatrice's sweet-tempered nature harshly contrasts with Grandma's prejudice against her. However, the ageing lady always bears a «watchful silence» (21) over Beatrice, considering her an intruder, not truly belonging to the Godkins. Beatrice gradually notices that her presence diminishes her mother-in-law's existence. Nevertheless, Joseph often replies that his mother would not die as long as Beatrice lives, thus implying it is the conflicting tension between both families that brings forward life in Birchwood. Grandma's senility and incredible longevity is remarked during her last birthday. It is at this point that Gabriel realises that someday he will become the master of Birchwood. As he sarcastically remarks «the old woman's say was a celebration not of longevity but of spite, for she was incredibly old, and the unspoken though general opinion was that is she had any sense of decency she would be dead [...] My father in his cups was often heard to wonder in an apprehensive undertone if she was after all immortal» (34). Granny Godkin's ageing is also reflected through her husband's senility. Gabriel remembers him as «a wicked old little man» (23) and remarks he never spoke to his wife. Grandpa emerges as a ghostly presence haunting Birchwood, although it is assumed his wife is the real master. In any case, Gabriel admits that it was the house itself who urged the death



of its matriarch, stating that «the house, weary of this wild old woman, finally turned on her and extinguished her itself» (22).

While Grandma's life approached its end, Gabriel began to become aware of his place in Birchwood. Continuity and circular movements are ever present through the family's history. Gabriel reflects that his grandmother may have «found in [his] infancy, an echo of her own senility» (27). Nevertheless, Gabriel felt quite detached from all the Godkins, and instead, the relationship he had with his mother, Beatrice, seemed quite close. Actually, Gabriel's mother appears in his earliest memories. As Gabriel points out, he is well aware that his memories are also doomed to ultimate extinction, as the house itself, and so he claims «what I remember best would be best forgotten, but the fragments that remain of the first years I guard with a jealousy which grows more frantic as I grow older, for I am forgetting them» (26). In any case, her mother proves an ever-present person in Gabriel's earliest memories. As opposed to his ever absent father, who permanently appears as deeply concerned with inheriting the property of his ancestors, Beatrice, being a Lawless, an intruder in the realm of the Godkins, arises as the only kind memory in Gabriel's childhood. Gabriel feels her dim presence in Birchwood, conceding «it is as if she did not die, but rather was dispersed like vapour into objects of more endurance than she could ever claim, as if indeed she never existed, not what we call existing» (27). In a way, Gabriel is conscious that her mother was overwhelmed by the presence of the Godkins, who were not only the alleged inhibitors of the house, but its truly masters. Gradually, Gabriel becomes aware of the importance of property once he begins to crave his identity as the truly heir of the Godkins. Inevitably, this awareness could only be made effective through conflict.

This clash is embodied through Gabriel's father's sister, Martha, and her son Michael. According to Gabriel's memories, Martha «was the black sheep of the Godkins, if such a term means anything when speaking of my family» (40). Martha proved a flirting young girl who became pregnant out of wedlock. Due to her dubious and unrepressed behaviour, as Gabriel states, «hell broke loose in the happy house of Birchwood» (40). After some years away, Aunt Martha and her son Michael come back to Birchwood, reclaiming their inheritance. Michael's presence haunts Gabriel to the extent that he describes him as «an odd-looking fellow, small and frail, with sly bright eyes and a fearsome set of teeth» (38). Nevertheless, despite his ghostly appearance, otherwise remindful of the rest of the family members in Birchwood, Michael proves a gifted magician, resembling one of the members of the circus crowd that eventually pervades the otherwise immaculate yard outside Birchwood. At this stage, it is presumed Michael may be the son of one of the circus artists. However, Michael's surprisingly true identity is not revealed until the end of the novel. Aunt Martha, whose way of instructing bears no resemblance to any traditional education standards, becomes Gabriel's tutor. Despite deeply disliking his aunt, Gabriel concedes he was ignored by the rest of his family except for his mother, and consequently, felt deeply flattered by her aunt's attention. In any case, it is revealed Martha becomes his nephew's teacher out of necessity since the Godkins cannot afford to send Gabriel to a proper school. It seems meaningful enough that the Godkins' financial problems precisely arise soon after Aunt Martha and her son

arrive at Birchwood. Actually, serious economic problems emerge, as the ageing family patriarchs and matriarchs vanish from the world of the living.

Birchwood's so-far safe and sound grounds begin to collapse towards death and decay. Inter-marriage, Martha's dissolute behaviour, Joseph's hunger for richness and the deaths of the family ancestors gradually lead Birchwood to ultimate destruction. Gabriel bears witness to the disappearance of his loved ones. Most of them are depicted as living ghostly figures so that their death proves fairly irrelevant. Gabriel is summoned to his Grandpa's deathbed to behold how his grandfather «gazed through [him], into his private pale blue eternity, and it was as if he were already dead, a mere memory, he was so thin and faded» (57). Significantly, Grandpa's dead corpse is found at the yard outside the house, «curled like a still-born infant in the grass [with] his false teeth sunk to the gums like vicious twin pink parasites in the bark» (59), in a last attempt to nurture himself from the living nature outside the dead realm of Birchwood. Well-aware that the Godkins race, in its purity, is bound to choke within Birchwood, Grandpa's ultimate intercourse with nature points to a need for cyclical regeneration.

Grandma is the next to disappear from the realm of Birchwood. Gabriel's father, Joseph, appears to welcome this fatal event since he finally comes into his inheritance. Nevertheless, the change in masters proves the beginning of Birchwood fragmentation, since Gabriel remembers that «on the very day the will was read, confirming his freedom, Papa sold off fifty acres to old man Gaddern of Halfmile House, who, it was rumoured, was financing the rebels in the area» (60). Moreover, it is also at this point when some kind of incestuous relation between Joseph and Martha began to form in Gabriel's unconsciousness. As a result of the extravagance and degeneration of the newly inheritors, Michael and Gabriel begin to resent the consequences when they are made to work in the fields together with «a ragged army of tenant children and their grandmothers, and a few decrepit old men no longer capable of heavier toil» (64). It is implied that the accumulation of fatal events that the new times bring about cause aged Grandma's death. She dies of rage after having been made to bear the shame and degeneracy that has tainted her family name. Consequently, Grandma dies of spontaneous combustion. Her death became a prevalent proof of Birchwood's inevitable cataclysm. In a way, it is implied that it is the house itself, aware of its own impotence to survive, who expelled the matriarch from her alleged place sanctioned through time.

The deaths of the family's eldest members prove crucial to the final disintegration of Birchwood. Increasingly, economic restraint and family madness become critical factors for the ultimate obliteration of the Godkins. Gabriel's mother begins to show signs of insanity, when rumours hint at an incestuous relation between Joseph and Martha, brother and sister. Gradually, as Beatrice ages, she resembles Granny Godkin. As Gabriel remembers, «some days she would go raging through the house, an uncanny replica of Granny Godkin» (89). At this point, Joseph discovers that Beatrice's father, the Lawless patriarch, is already in possession of a large share of Birchwood. Moreover, Aunt Martha dies in a fire while, as Gabriel asserts, «Mama still stood, still smiling placidly» (97). Her extinction through fire is reminiscent of Granny Godkin's combustion. Actually, there is a recurrent parallelism



between different characters such as Aunt Martha and Grandma, and especially, between Michael and Gabriel.

It is at this stage that Gabriel remembers the conversation he held with his father. As Gabriel narrates, Joseph «was getting old, beginning to crack. It was nothing to do with wrinkles or gray hairs, but it was a slackening of an inner fibre, a loosening of grip, his great word, grip» (91). Joseph, well-aware of the disintegration of their old world, initiates Gabriel into a journey of discovery so as to «learn what life is about, the hard way» (92). Gabriel admits he leaves Birchwood in search of his sister. However, he leaves his family house in order to find the answer to a numerous series of questions: «Why had Aunt Martha died? Did Rosie set fire to the shed in revenge for my abandoning her? Where was Michael? And my sister? All these questions, and many more. I longed for answers. O but no, I did not really long. They could wait, for another time» (99). Gabriel's hesitant nature and his scepticism are unequivocal of the new times where there are no truths to give answer to every doubt. Nevertheless, he joins Silas and Angel, and the rest of the circus integrants, who had menacingly set their camp on Birchwood yard. Surrounding external forces permanently menace the stability of Birchwood. Nature, personified through insects and butterflies, is often encountered through the interstices within Birchwood. These epiphanies can be interpreted as both natural elements attempting to recover their original space or rather regenerating the choking atmosphere that pervades the interior of the house.

Beyond Birchwood, Gabriel begins a journey with Prospero's magic circus. As opposed to the decay that characterises Birchwood, the circus integrants are loud and lively. Gabriel undergoes a process of learning which proves totally alien. Having spent all of his childhood within Birchwood and having lately discovered the nearby population surrounding his family state at youth, even having an affair with one of its integrants, Josie, Gabriel becomes part of a circus. Significantly, despite it is called Prospero's circus, its leading figure proves a mysterious figure that Gabriel can only attempt to imagine. Shakespeare's leading figure in *The Tempest* has no counterpart in *Birchwood*. In a way, the circus is aimed at producing magic, although Gabriel soon discovers magic tricks are just faked and real magic does not really exist. As opposed to enchanting endeavours, it is throughout his journey with the circus that Gabriel firstly becomes acquainted with war and famine. For the first time, he faces physical death. He beholds some of his companions, such as Sybil and Angel, killed by soldiers. As opposed to the deaths of his relatives, caused by ultimate decay and longevity, all the deaths Gabriel beholds outside Birchwood are violent and physical. Physicality and reality abound outside Birchwood. Despite his former relation with Josie, it is at this stage that Gabriel has some kind of intercourse with Mag, described as «a squat heavy girl, all bone and muscle, a year or two older than I, with fuzzy red hair and a button nose and hands like cut steaks» (130).



Nevertheless, at the end of his journey, Gabriel eventually reaches back his own place, Birchwood. No matter how far Gabriel travels, he acknowledges that his journey «described a wide circle the centre of which was, unknown to me [...] carrying me with it toward its goal by some mysterious intangible magnetism» (157). The ultimate goal of Gabriel's journey is Birchwood, since circularity inevitable brings back Gabriel to his origins. There, an ever haunting presence awaits him. Michael is the sole remaining inhabitant of the house, while his father is dead. It is back at Birchwood that the true origin of his family is unveiled. As Gabriel reflects,

what a mixed relief it must have been to discover that Beatrice was barren, for by the time that fact became plain Martha had come up trumps with her two-card trick. I wonder how many of the family knew of the misalliance between brother and sister. Granny Godkin did, but not Granda. I knew, but denied the knowledge, as Beatrice did for as long as her fractured brain would allow, and then went conveniently mad, and died caged. (172)

The hinted incestuous relationship becomes a reality. To welcome back home Gabriel from his journey, his twin, Michael, awaits him. Gabriel confesses that he «made [him] want to murder him» (168). As a result of his mischievous deed, Gabriel is left as the last remaining successor of the Godkins. The degeneration of Gabriel's family pervades Birchwood. As Robert Mighall admits in relation to the gothic genre and its haunted houses, «curse narratives show how crimes belonging to the ancestral past can blight both the present and the future» (1999: 80).

In a way, as Nuala C. Johnson states, «using the theme of insanity, Banville tells a tragic story of personal tragedy and social insanity in which [...] [he] contrasts gentry declension with the growing assertiveness of the peasant class» (1996: 556). In the case of Gabriel, the last representative of the declining family of the Godkins, he narrates and in a way creates, since remembering is necessarily thinking, his own process of ageing which is influenced by his intercourse with Birchwood, his manor house and all that it represents, that is, his family and his origins. During his childhood, Gabriel begins his perception of the world inside the house, within his family cloister. At youth, he begins to notice the first signs of external menace which threaten to penetrate his family estate. Eventually, in his pursuit towards adulthood, Gabriel moves beyond Birchwood to behold the decline of his family and those of his race. In his old age, Gabriel ponders over his memories trying to gain some knowledge of his family, and by extension, of himself. While remembering and writing, he reifies his own identity. Birchwood is in a way Gabriel's entrance into understanding the world he inhabits. By revising his history he writes his own fiction, and by revising his fictional rendering he ultimately creates Birchwood. In a way, John Banville's novel is a story of the fall and the rise, rather than the rise and the fall, of the big house since it is through Gabriel's memories that Birchwood is brought back to life, as it is through Banville's recreation of the big house novels that this genre is brought back to mind. Moreover, it is through this fall and rise of the big house that Gabriel's ageing is depicted, since it is through

his intercourse within the house, outside the house, and beyond, that Gabriel pursues his own process of ageing.

REFERENCES

- BANVILLE, John (1998): *Birchwood*, London: Picador.
- JOHNSTON, Nuala C. (1996): «Where Geography and History Meet: Heritage Tourism and the Big House in Ireland», *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 86: 3 (September): 551-566.
- KREILKAMP, Vera (1998): *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- MIGHALL, Robert (2003): *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- RAUCHBAUER, Otto, ed. (1992): *Ancestral Voices: The Big House in Anglo-Irish Literature: A Collection of Interpretations*. Dublin: The Liliput Press.

