"CATHOLIC IRELAND AND CATHOLIC SPAIN. ONE CUT OFF FROM EUROPE BY THE PYRENEES, THE OTHER BY THE IRISH SEA": AIDAN HIGGINS'S DISCOVERY OF 1960S SPAIN AS "ANOTHER IRELAND" IN *BALCONY OF EUROPE*

Ute Anna Mittermaier
Trinity College Dublin

Abstract

The Irish novelist Aidan Higgins has received scant critical attention both in Ireland and abroad. This is partly a consequence of the writer's troubled relationship with an Ireland he considered excessively insular and puritanical and the resultant fact that he spent much of his adult life abroad and set many of his writings outside Ireland, which has complicated his straightforward classification as an "Irish writer." This paper analyses how Higgins's love-hatred relationship with Ireland manifests itself in his highly autobiographical novel *Balcony of Europe* (1972), which describes the escapist sojourn of the middle-aged Irish artist Dan Ruttle, Higgins's fictional *alter ego*, in an impoverished Andalusian fishing village amidst a colony of American and European (would-be) artists in the early 1960s.

Key words: Aidan Higgins, representations of Ireland and Spain, autobiographical readings of the nation.

Resumen

El novelista irlandés Aidan Higgins ha recibido escasa atención crítica tanto en Irlanda como en el exterior. Esto se debe en parte a la relación complicada del escritor con una Irlanda que consideraba excesivamente insular y puritana, debido a que el escritor pasó gran parte de su vida adulta en el extranjero y situó muchos de sus escritos fuera de Irlanda, lo que complicó el que se le considerara un "escritor irlandés" *sensu stricto*. Este artículo analiza cómo la relación de amor-odio con Irlanda de Higgins se manifiesta en su muy autobiográfica novela *Balcony of Europe* (1972), que describe una estancia de relax del artista irlandés de mediana edad, Dan Ruttle, el alter ego en la ficción de Higgins, en un pueblo empobrecido de pescadores de Andalucía rodeado de una colonia de (futuros) artistas americanos y europeos, a principios de los sesenta del pasado siglo veinte.

Palabras clave: Aidan Higgins, representaciones de Irlanda y España, lecturas autobiográficas de la nación.

Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses, 68; April 2014, pp. 43-54; ISSN: 0211-5913

The Irish novelist, short story and travel writer Aidan Higgins,[1] born in Co. Kildare in 1927, has received scant critical attention both in Ireland and abroad. Apart from other factors, including his exigent style, Higgins's "relative obscurity" can also be attributed to his troubled relationship with an Ireland he considered excessively insular and puritanical and the resultant fact that he spent much of his adult life abroad[2] and set many of his writings outside Ireland (Murphy, "Introduction" 13-14). In this paper I look at how Higgins's love-hatred relationship with Ireland manifests itself in his autobiographical novel *Balcony of Europe*, first published in 1972[3] and set in Ireland and southern Spain in the 1960s. The paper analyses the hetero-image of Spain and the Spaniards conveyed in the novel and draws conclusions about what the first-person narrator's comments on Spain and Ireland and his explicit and implicit comparisons between the two countries reveal about Higgins's auto-image of his native country. I want to show that in *Balcony of Europe* Higgins presented Spain much more as Ireland's *alter ego* than as its exotic 'Other'. The narrator's observations of historical and cultural parallels between his home and host countries alternate with, but eventually outweigh, his descriptions of significant differences, making Spain emerge from the novel as "anOther Ireland," both different and the same, as well as reflective of the author's frustration at Ireland's political and cultural isolation at the time of writing, i.e. in the 1960s and 1970s.

Just like hundreds of other artists and would-be artists from all over Europe and America, Higgins discovered the south of Spain as an ideal refuge for destitute, individualistic, and liberal-minded artists and writers in the 1960s, when Spain was still governed by the dictator General Franco. Most of his successful debut novel *Langrishe Go Down* (1966) was written in the Andalusian village of Nerja, where he and his South-African wife spent some time in the early 1960s (Mayrhuber 7). Higgins's second novel *Balcony of Europe* (1972), written during another stay in

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 68; 2014, PP. 43-54

[1] Higgins's first publication was the short-story collection *Felo de Se* (1960). The author is best known for his debut novel *Langrishe Go Down* (1966), which won him the James Tait Black Memorial Prize. His later works, comprising the travel book *Images of Africa: Diary (1956-60),* five novels, two (travel) story-collections, and an autobiographical trilogy, reissued as *A Bestiary* in 2004, were generally less well-received. Higgins also produced a substantial body of literary criticism and reviews, partly collected in *Windy Arbours* (2005), as well as 'ear plays' for BBC radio networks, published as *Darkling Plain: Texts for the Air* in 2010. In the same year the American imprint "The Dalkey Archive Press" also published *Aidan Higgins: The Fragility of Form*, a kind of *festschrift* (Owens; "Aidan Higgins", *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*; "Aidan Higgins", *PGIL EIRD*ata; Sweetman 445-50; Dukes 191).

[2] Aidan Higgins was born into a Catholic Big House family in Celbridge, Co. Kildare, in 1927. He was educated at the Jesuit Clongowes Wood College. Following their decline in fortunes, the family sold their estate and moved to Co. Dublin. In his twenties Higgins moved to London, where he worked in several factories. From 1958 to 1960 he toured Europe and South Africa with a marionette company. He lived in Spain, Germany, and Britain before returning to Ireland in the mid-1980s.

[3] *Balcony of Europe* was reissued by The Dalkey Archive Press in 2010 in a trimmed version, i.e. "reduced by a fifth" (Mahon 11). The present analysis, however, is based on the original version of 1972.

Spain, this time in the village of Cómpeta (Sweetman 447), is based on the author's personal experiences in Nerja and is thus strongly autobiographical like all of his other novels and short stories (Mayrhuber 9; Murphy, *Irish Fiction* 37).[4]

Although nominated for the Booker Prize (Sweetman 447), *Balcony of Europe* met with a mixed critical reception[5] for its lack of plot and loose narrative structure.[6] Instead of a coherent, chronological story-line, Higgins created a "spatial narrative" foregrounding epistemological issues and (post)modernist concerns such as the writer's inability to represent past and present experiences undistortedly; the result is a thinly veiled autobiography embodying a compromise between "the highly problematic realm of the mimetic novel" and "the excesses of some extreme postmodern novels which deconstruct their universes of dialogue to the point of nihilism" (Murphy, "Aidan Higgins" 66). Considering that Higgins also said in an interview that "you can only write about your own life" and that "[he] [has] no message" (Haverty 14), any attempt to attribute the images of Ireland and Spain surfacing from the pages of *Balcony of Europe* to the author's express intention of conveying a particular (political or other) message seems a futile enterprise. Nevertheless, a close reading of Higgins's comments on Ireland and Spain yields interesting insights into the author's relationship with both countries.

Part I of *Balcony of Europe* is set in Dublin City and Dun Laoghaire in autumn 1961. The first-person narrator Dan Ruttle, a painter by profession, conveys a very bleak, Joycean image of Ireland as a perpetually grey, misty, and rainy country populated by spiritually paralysed people. His sickly parents, who have long drifted apart, live in great poverty in a dark, semi-derelict basement flat in Dun Laoghaire, following the same routine day by day. Sickness and death loom large in this first, Irish part of the novel, with the narrator telling us about the premature decease of his 38-year-old cousin and describing the last agonising days in the life of his mother, who falls into a coma after suffering a stroke. Finding it difficult to come to terms with his mother's death in the oppressive atmosphere of Dublin, Dan decides to

[4] That the first person narrator Dan Ruttle represents Higgins's fictional "alter ego" has been confirmed by the author in an interview (Donnelly 92) as well as in part one of his autobiography: "I have freely pillaged from both [his novels *Balcony of Europe* (1972) and *Scenes from a Receding Past* (1977)] for sections of this present work [...]. The transported elements of these 'liftings' now serve different purposes [...]. They have become my own stories again" (*Donkey's Years* 323-324).

[5] Eamonn Wall recognises echoes of *Ulysses* in *Balcony of Europe* and considers it as "a major novel that deserves serious attention" (81), while Dermot Healy praises the novel as "a masterwork of portraiture" (183); the negative critical reactions, however, seem to outweigh the positive: *Balcony of Europe* has been dismissed as a "a mismanaged novel" (Share 161), "a rather hapless attempt at experimenting with narrative discourse" (Imhof 75), "a distinguished failure" (Garfitt 229), and "an intelligent tourist's notebook jottings" (Lubbers 241).

[6] Higgins declared on various occasions that he was not interested in plots or character development ("Imaginary Meadows" 119; Haverty 14; Donnelly 94) and said in a letter to the critic Morris Beja that in *Balcony of Europe* he "wanted to dispense with plot, do it that way: tenuous associations that would ramify, could be built upon, would stay in the mind better than the plotted thing—all lies anyway" (Beja 172).

move to southern Spain, where his Canadian friend Roger seems to be having the time of his life amidst a colony of Bohemian writers and artists. Parts two to four of the novel are set in the Andalusian village of Nerja, where Dan and his wife Olivia stay from winter 1962 to autumn 1963.

The dreary image of Ireland emerging from the novel's opening section reflects Higgins's own fraught relationship with his home country, which, as has been mentioned, led him to spend much of his adult life in exile and to choose foreign settings for most of his novels and short stories. In an interview of 1983 Higgins complained that "[i]n Ireland, the air is dense and it has, like Catholicism, too many stiffs. Too many dead. [...] I can't work here. I only love Ireland at a distance. When I was young, it took me a long time to escape" (Haverty 14). Similarly, in 1982 Higgins decried that "the Irish have never left [the past]," "can never leave [their] great dead in peace," and were "about to enter the 20th century just as the rest of Europe is preparing to leave it" ("Heroe's" 108-112). Looking back in 2008 the author stated that in the 1960s/70s he "wanted to write books that were as un-Irish as possible"; he made the male protagonist in his debut novel *Langrishe, Go Down* German "in order to bring Europe into the book. To associate what I was writing with greater Europe. That Ireland wouldn't be as isolated as it seemed to me most Irish writing was at that time" (Donnelly 92).

Despite his estrangement from his native country, Higgins admitted in an interview in 1973 with Niall Sheridan for RTÉ that wherever he went, he took Ireland with him: "I'm never absent from Ireland. To be away from Ireland is better than to be in Ireland" (qtd. Mayrhuber 24). While he had originally planned to set *Balcony of Europe* completely outside Ireland because he resented "the Irish itch to describe itself," he soon realised that it was a "mistake" to "turn my back on something that was my feed" and that it was actually "a great privilege to be Irish."

Given the autobiographical nature of *Balcony of Europe*, it is not surprising that Ireland has a similarly strong hold on the narrator Dan Ruttle's mind. His thoughts and dreams take him repeatedly back to his home country, which also serves as a frequent reference point for descriptions of the Spanish countryside. Thus, the terraced fields surrounding Nerja (called "Nerka" in the novel) "were as elongated and stony as the walled plots of Inishere"; a "boulder" at the beach strikes him as "bigger than the Split Rock from the ice age on the roadside near Easkey on Sligo Bay" (357),[7] and he wonders whether the *sierra* visible from his favourite beach was "higher than the Knockmealdown Mountains" (366). Most significantly, the sight of weeds, hens, and staring children in a primitive Andalusian village prompts the narrator to comment: "It was like Ireland, the country I had never left" (340).

The frequent comparisons between Irish and Spanish landscapes and scenes convey the impression that the narrator does not experience southern Spain as all that different from his home country. On the one hand, he certainly leads a more

[7] All quotations from *Balcony of Europe* are taken from the edition listed in the "Works Cited."

carefree existence in Andalusia, where he enjoys a Bohemian lifestyle and indulges in an extra-marital affair; their anonymity and the hot, sunny climate, which provide the lovers with frequent opportunities for amorous encounters in the open air, make Dan conclude, "I had left a damp country where the cold girls said no, and come to the *Tierra Caliente* where the girls were beautiful and hot and said yes" (348). What Dan disregards, however, is that the girls who succumb to his own and his Anglo-American friends' seductive powers are not the Spanish, but the foreign women of "the expatriate slum of the Spanish coast in the sixties" (Liddy 167). There is no indication in the novel that the Spaniards themselves share the expatriates' liberal attitude to extra-marital sex, or that Spanish society in the 1960s was any less morally conservative than the Irish.[8] The only significant contrast between the mentalities of the two peoples Dan identifies is that the Spaniards seem to have a more relaxed attitude to death than the Irish and "behave quite informally" on cemeteries; there is no kneeling or ostentatious prayer [...] or telling of beads, but loud gossiping and emptying out of dead flowers; not the deep infestive gloom of damp cypress ride and Celtic cross and mossy ways, matching the hushed and reverent tones of my fellow countrymen... (210).

Overall, however, Higgins is far from presenting us with an exotic, Orientalised or romanticised image of Spain. Visits to the Alhambra in Granada, a bullfight, and the Holy Week procession draw no particularly enthusiastic response from the narrator and his American friends, and Richard Ford, the famous champion of "Romantic Spain," is only cited for an anti-Semitic comment as well as his statement that Spain was "the region of hot passions," which, however, is immediately refuted by the narrator's remark: "but it was cold enough in the bar" (166). Moreover, the novel does without any sultry, dark-eyed "Carmenesque"—señoritas or fiery "flamenco"—dancers featuring so prominently in most travel accounts of Andalusia. The beaches around Nerja are littered and overgrown with weeds, Spain's rivers resemble "brackish streams" (81), the orange trees are "dusty" (232), and the countryside is strewn with "mouldering" churches (232) and crumbling fishermen's huts. The only Eden-like place exhibiting lush Mediterranean vegetation and overpowering scents is spoiled by the presence of a Spanish watch guard. Still, the narrator's interspersed comments on Andalusia and its native population reveal no deliberate, sustained effort on the part of the author to debunk the myth of "romantic, exotic Spain," or to foreground the appalling poverty and backwardness afflicting Franco's Spain.

Generally, the narrator shows very little interest in his surroundings and "the Spanish natives" are "neatly tucked into the background" of his narrative (McGonigle 178). He briefly notes the inadequate infrastructure, the derelict build-

[8] While Higgins does not address the Franco regime's puritanical character, which led it to ban pornographic material from the country, in *Balcony of Europe*, he points out in *The Whole Hog* (2000), the third and last part of his autobiography, that "Franco's Spain could be puritanical in its own funny Fascist way" (174). However, only "a year after the demise of the prudish or maybe prudent Generalissimo" Spain was flooded with "girlie nudist magazines" (230), and "young *Fräuleins* were diving into the sea in smaller and smaller bikinis" (175).

ings, the Spanish Civil War memorial plaques, and the social disparity manifesting itself, for example, in the division of the local cemetery into one section for "the rich dead" and another for "the common dead" (209). He also relates that the barman Antonio only "took a day off twice a year" and that his middle-aged "spinster sister," who "made fiery 'tapas'" and looked after their ailing parents, "dreamed of love," but was "tied to old stale flesh and bedpans" (163). With a hint of compassion, he describes the hardships of a "rheumy-eyed" woman in her eighties with "semi-paralysed hands" (164), who wakes him every morning with her thin voice offering fresh bread. Likewise, he seems affected by the sight of an "unlettered" Andalusian boy, "born without privileges" and physically deformed by an unknown disease (342). But these symptoms of deplorable working and living conditions in Spain are only mentioned in passing and are not brought into relation with the political regime in place. Indeed, General Franco is only referred to in a few cynical, frivolous comments which tend to make light of the dictator's totalitarian power and reduce him to a comic figure. Take, for example, Dan's observation that the *peseta*-coins were "stamped with the suffused features of the little pop-eyed (mark of intelligence, ambition, vision, will-power) Generalissimo" (165), and his rumination as to whether the idea of a poor old couple to make money from "road-verge weed-cutting" (i.e. from selling herbs) had originated from "a brainwave of the War-on-Poverty Generalissimos" (343).[9]

If Dan generally expresses little sympathy with the plight of the impoverished and politically oppressed Spanish people, he articulates outright contempt for most of the Spanish men crossing his path. He feels disturbed in his sunbathing by the Spanish boys playing football on the beach and "shouting all the time as only Spaniards can" (359). Yet he is even more annoyed and disgusted by the lecherous Spaniards crawling beast-like towards the scantily dressed female tourists on the beaches and masturbating.[10] Every decent-looking Spanish man strikes the narrator as a rival for his mistress's attention and is suspected of having seduction on his mind. Thus, while Higgins does without many clichés typically found in travel books on Andalusia, he confirms the stereotypical image of southern Spaniards as sex-crazed "Don Juans" all the more vehemently.

Higgins's failure in *Balcony of Europe* to engage with the socio-political conditions in Franco's Spain and to bring the Spanish characters to life as well as

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 68; 2014, PP. 43-54

[9] In his autobiography *Dog Days* (1998) Higgins offers another flippant description of General Franco: "The dictator who had made Hitler wait and kick his heels while he took his siesta was a small, portly, choleric man who nursed his phlebitis, took his pills, nursed memories of north Africa and the Rif, the fight for Malaga [sic] and perhaps the names of those executed by his orders. [...] All dictators have this in common: they take little mincing steps, fussy as goats. Perhaps their jackboots are killing them?" (142).

[10] The language used to describe these Spanish "onanists" (334) is quite disturbing in the way in which it relegates them to the status of animality. Thus, one of the Spaniards stands out for his "dark eyes and the slanted nipples of a gorilla"; He walked in a stiff manner, rocking a little on his heels, conscious of his hands, a dog on its hind legs, a little beige-coloured manikin full of lust. [...] He was seeking a foreign bitch on heat" (335-336).

the numerous erroneous Spanish phrases in the novel have been commented on by various critics (Mayrhuber 259; Kerrigan 119; Share 162). The author's friend Bernard Share, for example, found it puzzling that Higgins's Spanish setting "was still, for all his years' residence, an outsider's Spain"; while "the Spanish was wrong" in the book, "the Spanishness was wronger" (162).[11] According to Share, Higgins himself has said that "the Irish episodes [...] are the only ones that are any good."[12]

However lamentable it may be that Higgins's Spain does not really come off the page, the narrator's indifference to Spanish affairs is perfectly in keeping with his obsession with his lover Charlotte and his full integration into the writers' colony. Whereas Dan makes no effort to learn Spanish and mix with the native population, he socialises a lot with American and European expatriates, who are—like himself— "restlessly peripatetic" escapists (Beja 173), would-be-artists and scholars, and individualists in search of self-fulfilment and creative inspiration. They share his political apathy and spend their days and nights languishing on the beach, drinking, partying, love-making, and occasionally dabbling in artistic creation. Their life-stories are marked by frequent moves from one city, country, or continent to another motivated by unhappy love-affairs, criminal records, and/or political persecution. Together with the protagonist's own record of restlessness, they contribute to "the novel's central theme, the transience and flux of all things" (Garfitt 230).

That Higgins's main concern in the novel was not with Spain, but with the world outside it, is already intimated by his choice of the novel's title, *Balcony of Europe*, which is also the name King Victor Emmanuel gave to the "paseo" or promenade of Nerja "because of its view" (68). As O'Neill has noted, "[t]he balcony

[11] The impression that Higgins never got to know his host country intimately is reinforced by his prose pieces about Andalusia of the 1960s and the immediate post-Franco years collected in *Ronda Gorge & Other Precipices* (1989). The latter are made up of reminiscences randomly jumbled together without amounting to a coherent narrative. They again betray the writer's ignorance about Spain and his condescension towards the natives. Take, for example, the following passages from "Autumn in Cómpeta": "Their [the Andalusians'] language well reflects the charming and uncomplicated nature of the people themselves. [...] Abstract thought is unknown to them and when they hear it attempted they become embarrassed. Hence perhaps the need for nights of loud convivial shouting in the bars, with which the village is liberally supplied, after a day spent labouring on the land" (117). These observations are preceded by a section peppered with stereotypes, where the author obviously confuses the Catalans with the Basques: "In the north they speak another language: Catalán. Another race altogether, stolid, unimaginative, hard-working; a people whose chief gifts to España have been bankers and industrialists, latterly terrorists in the cause of independence. Their language is inherited from the Stone Age, now slowly dying out because unsuited to modern times, and so difficult that no one can learn it" (116-117).

[12] Higgins considered *Balcony of Europe* a failure and said in 1995 that it would stay out of print in his lifetime (*Donkey's Years*, 323-24). Still, the book was republished by the American "Dalkey Archive Press" in 2010. He said in 2008 that he had "suffered" in the "eight years" it took him to finish the novel (Donnelly 92). Part of the difficulty seems to have consisted in having to overcome his reluctance to construct a plot in order to please his editors. While he added the Irish sections to the first edition of the novel "at the suggestion of editors to help 'explain' it" (Donnelly 88), he had to cut these and other parts significantly for the second edition to make it "a much more manageable book... that reads more like a novel and less like a demanding literary experience" (Mahon 11).

of the title" suggests a position of "detached observation: a balcony is a privileged location, a border place, neither wholly outside nor wholly inside, from which one can observe the world going by without the inconvenience—or the joy—of becoming involved in it" (102).

This position of the detached observer is taken first of all by the narrator, who—from his elevated "balcony"—level "overlooks," in the sense of "ignores," the socio-political conditions in Franco's Spain as best as he can and remains preoccupied with his own past and that of the other emigrant artists resident in Nerja, most of whom are of European extraction. While the Spanish Civil War and its legacy are never explicitly addressed in the novel, World War II, the Holocaust, and the ensuing Cold War figure prominently in Dan's conversations with an unrepentant Finnish Nazi-Baron, the Jewish dancer Rosa Munsinger and his Jewish lover Charlotte Bayless, whose parents had to escape from the Nazis in Austria and Poland respectively, and a British homosexual writer telling him about his sexual exploits in Soviet Russia.

At the same time, the sense of detachment encapsulated in the title also relates to the narrator's and the other expatriates' conscious aloofness from and condescension towards the native population epitomised in such disrespectful terms as "warty Latins" and "rowdy Spaniards" (198). We are told that one American, who turns out to be a fraud on the run from the FBI, feels like a "King amid loyal subjects" (172) in Spain. Indeed, it is easy for the emigrant artists to imagine themselves as the decadent aristocracy living *la dolce vita* among illiterate peasants in "backward" Andalusia. Whereas in their home countries they could barely survive on their meagre income from writing and painting, they can lead a life in plenty without having to lift a finger for months on end given the low living costs in Franco's Spain. The above-mentioned waiter, by contrast, can only afford to take two days off per year. Their proprietorial attitude to their place of residence manifests itself not least in their resentment of the touristic development on the *Costa del Sol* gathering momentum at the beginning of the 1960s. Exempting themselves from the despised status of "the tourist," they are not prepared to share their Eden with the newly arriving hordes of foreign invaders. Thus, Dan contemptuously refers to Torremolinos and Marbella as "tourist ghettos" (80) and "the Sodom and Gomorrah of the Costa del Sol" (172). Charlotte's husband Bob, after a trip to Catalonia, reports in horror that "[f]rom Benidorm up north it's no longer Spain but hell, especially after Barcelona. I never saw so many accidents, so many road deaths, smashed cars, stout and hot-tempered Northern and Middle Europeans killing each other en route to the overcrowded beaches" (396). Nerja, by contrast, has fortunately not lost its charm of a primitive fishing village, and though there has been "talk of a new luxury hotel to be erected," Dan's Canadian friend Roger is "glad to say" that "nothing much comes of" all this "talk in Spain [...] of improvements, modernization, urbanization, progreso" (68). Obviously, the expatriates would like Spain to remain poor, backward, and isolated so they can resume their easy way of living and turn a blind eye to the troubles of the rest of the world.

The notion that Spain does not really form part of Europe because of its geographical position, its socio-economic backwardness, and its neutrality in World

War II is explicitly stated on three occasions (164, 185, 338), and on the last of them it is also extended to Ireland:

> Six waves of invaders, centuries of occupation, then expulsion, then Civil War, in Catholic Ireland and Catholic Spain. One cut off from Europe by the Pyrenees, the other by the Irish Sea. Both on the outer fringes of Europe, both saved from two world wars by their long-nosed leaders; neither part of Europe. (338)[13]

The eponymous "Balcony of Europe" can therefore also be read as a metaphor for the long-lasting political, economic, and cultural isolation of Spain and Ireland, which was only beginning to be reversed in the early 1960s. With regard to Spain, the backwardness resulting from this isolation seems to be regarded as a virtue rather than a vice, though, for the narrator tells a friend that "[he] like[s] backward countries" (426), and the fact that Spain stayed out of World War II makes the country an ideal refuge for escapists uprooted by that war.

However, any illusions the expatriates may harbour about being sheltered from the horrors of the world outside the Spanish "cordon sanitaire" are belied by the numerous U.S. warplanes and flak-ships crossing the skies and coastal waters of Andalusia, which serve as reminders of Spain's strategic role in the Cold War as the site for several U.S. American military bases. Spain's breakout from its political and economic isolation in the 1960s is likewise exemplified by the change of the name of Dan's favourite bar from "Bar Alhambra" to "Balcony of Europe" and back to "Bar Alhambra," which lends the book's title yet another level of significance in that it alludes to the Franco regime's efforts to sell both a modern, European and an exotic, Orientalist image of Spain to the world to attract international investors and the tourist masses respectively.

Apparently sensing the corruption of their paradise by the massive influx of tourists and the U.S. army,[14] the artists gradually desert the colony and disperse across the globe. The novel's concluding Part V, set in autumn 1963 and after, sees

---

[13] Higgins again emphasises Ireland's un-European character in his autobiography *Dog Days*: "Ireland is the most westerly country in Europe. It is twice the size of Switzerland but not itself a part of Europe, geographically or in any other way" (188). In *Donkey's Years* (1995), the prequel to *Dog Days*, the author draws further parallels between Ireland and Spain: "The Spanish and the Irish, with miserable histories not too dissimilar, are much alike in their fervent phobias about open homes and giving hands that must never waver. The fear and uncertainty that underlie such token hospitality is an Irish Catholic neurosis which can be detected behind the wish to please so evident in the works of 'Frank O'Connor' (a Cork civil servant by the name of Michael O'Donovan), the Monaghan bogman Kavanagh and in the broth of a Borstal Boy himself; here again the craven urge to please, to be amusing at all costs" (328).

[14] Higgins's personal antipathy to the two agents of the "corruption" of the Costa del Sol, tourism and the U.S. army, can be glimpsed from his comments in *The Whole Hog*: "Soon the whole eastern coastline from Estepona near Gibraltar to Gerona near the French border will have gone the way of Marbella and Torremolinos, the Sodom and Gomorrah of the Costa del Sol, and it will be left to hardy souls to move on Ponteverde [sic] or La Coruña. American bombing colonels out from the air base at Moron de Frontera quaff Cognac as if it was beer" (259).

Dan and his wife Olivia back in Dublin, which, though apparently as isolated and backward as Spain used to be, does not allow Dan the same freedom to "act out his role as a middle-aged playboy of the west end world of Europe" (Beja 79) as he keeps running into acquaintances in a claustrophobically small city inhabited by "dead citizens" (425). For a truly peaceful sanctuary he needs to go further west. It is only in the "regenerative waters of the Aran Islands" (Liddy 176), his "Tir na nÓg" or, Land of Youth (346), that Dan can overcome his obsession with Charlotte and become reconciled with his wife. As O'Neill points out, the triteness of this happy ending [...] is effectively (and parodically) relativized by the geographical consideration that Ireland too [...] is very much a "balcony of Europe"—and that Aran, "the last landfall before America" (*Balcony of Europe* 429) [...] is by the same token a "balcony of Ireland," a doubled balcony of Europe. (102)

In other words, the fact that the couple's reconciliation takes place in yet another refuge for escapists even more remote from modern European civilisation than southern Spain might indicate that it stands little chance of outlasting their return to everyday life in Dublin for very long.[15]

If Higgins, however haphazardly, does convey a message in *Balcony of Europe* despite all protestations to the contrary, it is that escapism is futile as we take our troubled selves and memories with us wherever we go. Although Franco's Spain forms the setting for the playing out of this theme, its representation in a particularly positive, idiosyncratic or negative, stereotypical way does not seem to have formed a major concern for the author. Higgins's image of Spain in *Balcony of Europe* suggests neither a particularly pronounced "Hispanophilia" nor "Hispanophobia"; what it does show, however, is the author's and his fictional *alter ego*'s evasiveness and disinterest in Spain's political affairs. His auto-image of Ireland as a drab place with an inhospitable climate and a stifling atmosphere, by contrast, clearly reflects his personal alienation from his home country at the time of writing, i.e. in the 1970s. Still, it is paradoxically both because of his discovery of similarities between the landscapes, geographical positions, and recent histories of Ireland and Spain and his apolitical pose that Higgins did not set Spain up as a colourful, vibrant "Other" to dreary, depressing Ireland in his autobiographical novel. Rather, he presented a Spain which ultimately evinces more parallels than contrasts with Ireland.

Received for Publication: September 1, 2013; Acceptance for Publication: March 7, 2014.

[15] The happy ending to this autobiographical novel on the pristine Aran Islands appears particularly ironic given that firstly, Higgins's marriage "never recovered" from "the blow" that his adulterous affair in Spain had dealt it (Sweetman 445) and ended in divorce, and secondly, his description of Connemara in *Dog Days* reveals his impatience with romantic-nationalist representations of the West of Ireland as embodying the spiritual essence of Ireland: "The sun is low there in winter, the days are short and weak daylight fades away in the afternoon, the nights long and black as a skillet. Day breaks reluctantly again, the low clouds dripping rain; high water and floods everywhere... There are signs... and sounds... of human habitation, of the humans themselves there is no visible sight. Is this the essential charm of the West, under the flying clouds? Its emptiness." (188-89).

WORKS CITED

"Aidan Higgins." *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature*. Ed. Robert Welch. Oxford: Clarendon, 1996. Print.

—— *PGIL EIRData*. Princess Grace Irish Library, Monaco-Ville, MC, n. d. Web. 2 Feb. 2010. <http://www.pgil-eirdata.org/html/pgil_datasets/index.htm>.

Beja, Morris. "Felons of Our Selves: The Fiction of Aidan Higgins." *Irish University Review* 3.2 (1973): 163-178. Print.

Donnelly, Neil. "Aidan Higgins in Conversation with Neil Donnelly." *Aidan Higgins: The Fragility of Form*. Ed. Neil Murphy. Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2010. 91-95.

—— "*Balcony of Europe:* Difficulties for Dramatists." *Aidan Higgins: The Fragility of Form*. Ed. Neil Murphy. Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2010. 87-90.

Dukes, Gerry. "Aidan Higgins: Forging Fictions and Memoirs." *Aidan Higgins: The Fragility of Form*. Ed. Neil Murphy. Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2010. 189-198.

Garfitt, Roger. "Constants in Contemporary Irish Fiction." *Two Decades of Irish Writing.* Ed. Douglas Dunn. Cheadle: Carcanet, 1975. 207-243. Print.

Haverty, Anne. "The Saturday Interview." *Irish Times* (2 July 1983): 14. Print.

Healy, Dermot. "Towards *Bornholm Night-Ferry* and *Texts for the Air*: A Rereading of Aidan Higgins." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3.1 (1983): 181-191. Print.

Higgins, Aidan. *Balcony of Europe.* London: Calder & Boyars, 1972. Print.

—— *Dog Days.* London: Secker & Warburg, 1998. Print.

—— *Donkey's Years: Memories of a Life as Story Told.* London: Secker & Warburg, 1995. Print.

—— "The Heroe's Portion: Chaos or Anarchy in the Cultic Twoilet." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3.1 (1983): 108-114. Print.

—— "Imaginary Meadows." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3.1 (1983): 114-123. Print.

—— *The Whole Hog.* London: Secker & Warburg, 2000. Print.

Imhof, Rüdiger. "The Prose Works of Aidan Higgins: Fiction, Fictionalised Autobiography, Travelogue." *Anglia: Zeitschrift für englische Philologie* 114.1 (1996): 57-91. Print.

Kerrigan, Anthony. "Threads Flex, Hues Meeting, Parting in Whey-Blue Haze: Aidan Higgins and *Balcony of Europe*." *Malahat Review* 28 (1973): 117-124. Print.

Liddy, James. "Notes on the Wandering Celt: Aidan Higgins' *Balcony of Europe*." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3.1 (1983): 166-68. Print.

Lubbers, Klaus. "*Balcony of Europe*: The Trend towards Internationalization in Recent Irish Fiction." *Literary Interrelations: Ireland, England and the World.* Ed. Wolfgang Zach and Heinz Kosok. Tübingen: Narr, 1987. 235-244. Print.

Mahon, Derek. "Life as Story Told." Rev. of Aidan Higgins's *Balcony of Europe* and *Darkling Plain*, and *Aidan Higgins: The Fragility of Form*. *Irish Times*, (6 March 2010): 11. Print.

Mayrhuber, Ursula. "Aidan Higgins. An Analysis of His Works." Diss. University of Vienna, 1990. Print.

McGonigle, Thomas. "51 Pauses After Reading Aidan Higgins." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3.1 (1983): 175-180. Print.

Murphy, Neil. "Aidan Higgins." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 23.3 (2003): 49-84. Print.

—— "Introduction." *Aidan Higgins: The Fragility of Form*. Ed. Neil Murphy. Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2010. 13-22.

—— *Irish Fiction and Postmodern Doubt: An Analysis of the Epistemological Crisis in Modern Irish Fiction*. New York: Edwin Mellen, 2004. Print.

—— ed. *Aidan Higgins: The Fragility of Form.* Champaign: Dalkey Archive, 2010. Print.

O'Neill, Patrick. "Aidan Higgins." *Contemporary Irish Novelists.* Ed. Rüdiger Imhof. Tübingen: Narr, 1990. 93-108. Print.

Owens, Coilin Don. "Aidan Higgins." *Dictionary of Irish Literature*. Ed. Robert Hogan. Westport: Greenwood, 1996. Print.

Share, Bernard. "Down from the Balcony." *Review of Contemporary Fiction* 3.1 (1983): 162-163. Print.

Sweetman, Rosita. "Aidan Higgins at Eighty." *Studies* 96.384 (2007): 445-450. Print.

Wall, Eamonn. "Aidan Higgins's *Balcony of Europe*: Stephen Dedalus Hits the Road." *Colby Quarterly* 31.1 (1995): 81-87. Print.