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**MAUREEN DUFFY'S EUROPEAN INTEREST: *ILLUMINATIONS*,
*RESTITUTION***

The remarkable range of Maureen Duffy's writing, stretching over four decades and comprising four volumes of poetry, sixteen novels, drama and biography, reflects the author's interest in British history and the present. In the last years of the millennium her preoccupation with the British past is moreover extended to European links and roots as is also confirmed by her first work of the new century, an outline of history, *England. The Making of the Myth* (2001) (cf. Franková 2002). Another important and closely related concern of Duffy's writing are the questions of identity. In other words, Maureen Duffy wrote about identity long before it became a fashionable topic of the late twentieth century although the accents of the identity debate and exploration in her prose vary and develop. In her two 1990s novels, *Illuminations* (1991) and *Restitution* (1998), identity and the European connection, both historical and present, come to the foreground together.

The long vertical line of history forms the backbone of one of Duffy's earlier, experimental novels about London entitled *Capital* (1975). In it fragments of a contemporary, slowly unfolding story create a complex mosaic with sometimes hazy sometimes clearer pictures from the history of London, from the first traces of man to the present day. The question is posed: who are all those figures of the past that participated in shaping the identity of today's Londoners? The European dimension is not particularly foregrounded although Duffy's novel character, a young Roman in Londinium writing a letter home to his father claims that "the Britanni and the Galli, as both Caesar and Tacitus have written, are one people" (73). A twentieth-century amateur archeologist is trying to prove that London did not cease to exist as a town even in the historically unrecorded Dark Ages after the departure of the Romans and the invasion of the Anglo-Saxons. But the archeologist himself and his contemporaries, too, are shown to be in fact part of the throng of figures of unclear identity that have been passing through the town in time.

That the "European" thematics of the novels *Illuminations* and *Restitution* are not accidental can be viewed in the light of Duffy's study of cultural and political history of the country, *England. The Making of the Myth*, which focuses on the European roots and mutual relations. The novel *Illuminations*, although it also has a contemporary time layer, goes back to the eighth century and the shared roots of European Christianity. *Restitution* was written by Duffy at the

time of property restitutions in postcommunist European countries, the time of renewed debate about the Holocaust and “dormant bank accounts” in Swiss banks. In those complicated webs of events and fates is to be traced the identity of the novel’s heroine. What both novels as works of art can only hint at is presented by Duffy as the thesis of her book of history, namely, that the past and the future of England/Britain have always been with Europe and that England could only forget it to her detriment.

England. The Making of the Myth emphasises the heterogeneous European origin of the inhabitants of the British Isles as well as England alone when it describes the waves of prehistoric tribes and other cultures, including Roman and early Christian, which preceded the arrival of the “English”, i.e. the Germanic, Anglo-Saxon pagan tribes in the fifth century. In turn the Anglo-Saxon language and culture changed remarkably following another wave of European influence after the Norman Conquest in 1066. Duffy traces, elucidates and demythologises the various building blocks of the “myth of England”, whose beginnings she attributes to the eighth-century Latin chronicle of the Venerable Bede, who was the first to give the name to the country and its relatively new inhabitants (Beda Venerabilis). Fighting the continental Vikings and Danes gave rise to the hero of the Old English heroic epic poems as well as the glory of the first king of all England, Alfred the Great. For a long time after the victory of William the Conqueror, the myth of England carried the imprint of connection with the European Continent through the language and lands owned by the Norman kings and their claims to the French throne during the Hundred Years’ War. The densely interwoven roots of the Arthurian legend, considered to be the core of the myth of England to this day, grew through the whole of the medieval period from Celtic, French, Old German and Middle English sources. Together with other European countries, medieval England derived her mythic origin from participants of Trojan wars. Duffy only finds intimations of English isolationism as late as post-Reformation England, from Elizabethan patriotism and Shakespeare’s myth of “this sceptered isle”, to the Stuart myth of beleaguered Protestant England, when the distance between England and the predominantly Catholic Europe was growing. The voyages of discovery and quickly growing colonial expansion diverted England’s attention from Europe to other parts of the world for the following two centuries. Even though the two world wars in the twentieth century forced England into both confrontations and alliances with European neighbours, in each case this was from the position of the Imperial power, the loss of which, in Duffy’s opinion, Britain has not yet come to terms. She is however convinced that England is part of the European cultural context and that is where she should see her future.

The arguments from distant and recent history of *England*, which Duffy offers to confront the contemporary British Eurosceptics, also seem to be the *raison d’être* for her two 1990s novels, at least as inspiration. *Illuminations* begins with an assertion that England had its prolonged love affair with Europe during the Renaissance, Baroque and Classicism, when European painting, sculpture and music meant civilisation, but it was put to an end once and for all by the French Revolution. Nevertheless, the two parallel stories of the novel, though twelve

centuries apart, undermine the foundations of the statement by showing that there is no real barrier between England and Europe at all. For the older one of the stories Duffy went far back into medieval Anglo-Saxon history and with the help of the Boniface correspondence, Alcuin's letters and biographies of Charlemagne and St. Lioba, created a historical, eighth-century pastiche about an English nuns' mission on the outpost of the then Christian world in Germanic Thuringia. By means of credibly merging fact and fiction, Duffy has created a story out of not-so-well-known-but recorded history of very early relations between England and Christian Europe. St. Boniface (660–755) was educated in the Exeter Monastery and in 718 sent by Pope Gregory II to the Germans, where he preached and laid foundations to monasteries. What is more, by highlighting the participation of women in spreading Christianity, Duffy draws on contemporary, predominantly feminist research into the possibilities of women in the Middle Ages in terms of education, independence and power. It is believed that in the early medieval period the nuns in English monasteries received the same kind of education as monks and that they could both read and write in Latin (Stevenson 1993). The Abbess Hilda of the great Northumbrian abbey at Whitby was probably not an entirely exceptional example of a woman participating in the power of the Church in the seventh century.

Duffy begins the fictional story of the nun Tetta in continuation of three real letters of the English nun Berthgyth which she wrote at Clingen near Erfurt and sent to England to her brother Baltheard, and which are contained in the collection of Boniface correspondence (Duffy 1991, "Author's Note"). Duffy's heroine follows in the footsteps of her aunt Berthgyth to carry on her work in a small convent at Erfurt. In letters to her father she first describes her perilous journey via Frankish Rouen and Rheims to Aachen, where she is none too kindly received by Charlemagne and has to accept his anger at her race for "their murder of Kings and neglect of God's Church" (31). The destruction of the oldest monasteries of Lindisfarne and Jarrow by heathen Vikings is considered to be God's punishment for those sins. Many other monasteries throughout England were sacked and burned at the time and the following decline of learning probably resulted in poorer education of nuns and women. Duffy comments on this development in references to the fate of the monastery at Wimborne, sacked by the Danes in 990, out of which came her fictional heroine Tetta as well as her historical predecessor Berthgyth. Although Duffy never completely leaves England out of sight, the plot of the medieval part of the novel is firmly situated in Thuringia, at the time part of Frankland, while the motif of mutual influence and enrichment of the different European cultures keeps recurring. The epistolar form of the medieval story affords both historical and literary-historical verisimilitude. The reader is always reminded that Tetta's letters are written in Latin, because in the eighth century Anglo-Saxon prose was practically nonexistent. Fascinating in Duffy's pastiche is the plethora of detail from medieval life, the dangers of travel, ritual of social custom, everyday routine, women's healing skills, the deeply experienced faith in God and the need to spread Christian teaching. Duffy also underlines the ability of the nuns to read and write and thus

actively participate in the principal task of the monasteries to promote faith and learning – by copying manuscripts. The pastiche of Tetta's letters just as well as the debates of the second storyline set in our time fulfil the novel's motto taken over from Václav Havel's speech, delivered in 1990: "...Literature is a means of human self-awareness and it reflects the spirit of time, of place, of history, of civilisation."

In spite of that and somewhat unfairly, Janet Barron describes the historical parts of the novel as distracting deviations lacking connection with the main, contemporary, plot (Barron). This however may seem so only if we disregard Duffy's subtle network of parallels of her European agenda and focus on the development of the lesbian relationship between the contemporary heroines, a middle-aged English historian Hetty and her young German colleague Helge, and Helge's involvement in political protest. Unlike Barron, Hetty does not take a feminist perspective to analyse the recorded story of Tetta, in whom she senses a kind of her own *alter ego*. Hetty, similarly to her creator Maureen Duffy, is striving for a broader view of the world than the feminist perspective affords. At a conference on Europe in Frankfurt, Hetty offers the same thesis as Duffy in *England. The Making of the Myth*, calling upon the historical connection and against England on the margins of the European world. As Duffy has always written socially and politically involved prose, the political debate of *Illuminations* is not restricted to the European theme only. It also tackles the question of public protest and street violence, which she already debated in a much earlier novel, *I Want to Go to Moscow* (1973), and homosexuality that is never absent from Duffy's fiction. But there is no disjunction. At a more general level Helge's and Hetty's preoccupations are part of the present hopes for a better world just as were Tetta's Christian mission and service in the Middle Ages.

The novel *Restitution* (1998), too, begins with an outline of the history of an English family with emphasis on its European roots and their multiplicity. Even more important though proves to be the recent past, which affects the identity of some of the protagonists acutely and painfully. At almost thirty years of age Betony Falk suddenly learns that the family history behind her name was different from what she has always been told. Her grandparents were not English with a family tree reaching back to William the Conqueror, but part German, part Jewish, for which they had to send their newborn son to England and safety from a Nazi death-camp. This was Harry/Herman Falk, Betony's father, who learned the truth about his origin unexpectedly, and solved the sudden loss of his identity by suicide. (Harry Falk's story may remind us of Anita Brookner's novel *Latecomers*, 1988, which also thematises the question of unclear identity in a similar context.) Having learned about the true reason for her father's suicide, Betony, too, lives through the trauma of an identity crisis. However, rather than a psychological drama of lost identity, Duffy develops the dimension of national and European identity. The case of Betony Falk serves her as a metaphor of European identity – interwoven, both happy and painful, beautiful and potentially lethal. The twentieth century, most of which the novel covers, knew periods of interest in general progress and prosperity, interest in other cultures, languages

and otherness, but it was also marked by periods of suspicious and hateful nationalisms, which divided what could have been united.

In *Restitution* Duffy reaches a wide geographical, temporal and ideological radius by means of three narrative voices. Besides Betony Falk in London, there is her real grandfather Anton von Falk in Berlin writing a detailed memoir addressed to his dead Jewish wife Minna, and young Gill Idbury sorting out his thoughts in his grandmother's dialect. All the three voices are intensely concerned with problems of their own identities and roots, the national and European contexts playing a vital role in them. At the same time and critically, Duffy targets various aspects of Englishness, such as the cold aloofness and snobbery of the upper classes and, at a more general level, the English isolationism reflected in the lack of knowledge and interest about what goes on outside England. John Falk had probably never heard about Goethe (93) and Betony's Gran Bet "only half understood all the stuff about Jews and not Jews" in Germany before the war (148). Betony in the 1990s admits that she knows very little about the Holocaust and why her real Grandmother Minna and countless other victims had to perish in it: "How little she knew. How little most people knew. And yet it didn't go away, all that history. It went on being passed down in the mind and in the blood of millions of people. She was part of it too. She couldn't turn her back on it" (216). Like Leontes at the end of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (quoted in the novel's motto), Betony needs to fill the gap between her own present and the past of her newly discovered Grandfather in Berlin, she needs to fill the gap with a completely different family history than she knew:

"We have that in common of course. Those would have been my ancestors too. They still are. And yours."

"I am trying to understand it all. To get used to the idea of being someone different."

"But you aren't. You are you." (192)

Betony's identity crisis reflects another myth of Englishness – the proverbial English reserve and unemotionality. In a context so strongly charged with emotions her strict English upbringing appears to be a handicap: "she had been buried under a mudslide of information riddled with emotional demands that cried out for her attention like the lost souls in a painting by Bosch" (195). Betony, brought up in the stiff care of Grandmother Betony and an English private school instead of her mother, who died in childbirth and father, who committed suicide when she was seven, this Betony must now come to terms with a throng of ghosts of relatives introduced to her by her German Grandfather von Falk. On the other hand, Betony has internalised enough of the "cool" young generation of the nineties: she can be hard, unemotional and sometimes a little rude to her grandparents – a proof that not only family roots determine our identities:

I could blame my upbringing, of course, that taught me so little about the real world of other people, the yuppie years when nothing

seemed to matter except making money and spending it. Maybe that had something to do with all of us not wanting to think about the past any more, not wanting to feel guilty ourselves for any of it, encouraging the belief that most things are beyond our control and nothing we can do or say really changes anything. (245)

Maureen Duffy does not share the pessimism and relativism of the end-of-the-century era, nor does she consider it right to relativise history or neglect the study of history. Although Betony in *Restitution* offers the contemplation that time and truth are distant from each other like galaxies and that time was dethroned from its primacy as a measure of the universal (104), she is eventually affected by long past facts and events with irresistible urgency. In *Restitution* a great deal more is involved than the restitution of Jewish property in Germany and nationalised property in its postcommunist part: it is primarily about restitution of lost lives, forgotten stories and human tragedies.

A similar reconstruction is achieved by Duffy's *Illuminations* and *England* with a result that according to Cressida Connolly "would make even the most resolute of Eurosceptics flinch". To her readers Maureen Duffy presents history as a source of information and knowledge about human identity, about the ways our ancestors lived and what myths they had created about themselves, all of this with an unabashed pro-European message.

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