Unappealing Ethnicity Meets Unwelcoming America: Immigrant Self-fashioning in Mary Gordon's *Temporary Shelter*

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Many academics nowadays tend to assume the redemptive power of asserting one's ethnic identity in the United States. But the issue is a complex one: all ethnicities are not equally benign, and there are a number of different relationships one may have both to one's ethnicity and to the country's dominant group. For example, there is a huge difference between a third generation Japanese-American student who acquaints herself with her ethnic heritage by majoring in Asian studies, and her Japanese-speaking grandfather who was interned in a "relocation center" for two years during World War II. Hers is, in the words of Berndt Ostendorf, "ethnicity by memory ... more symbolic than existential," while his ethnicity is "real" (584). The young woman has undoubtedly been subject to anti-Asian prejudice--some of it pretty nasty--and she can therefore relate to the more virulent prejudice suffered by her grandfather. But she is also worlds away from him: she speaks perfect English, has a higher class status, and enjoys the endorsement of her actions by a good part of the American intelligensia. She possesses what Jules Chametzky refers to as a "composite self"' (14) and has been able to integrate, or at least hold in creative tension, both her American and her Japanese sides.

I'm conflating two ideas here. One is Chametzky's and William Boelhower's notion that all American immigrants must come to terms with "two worlds and two selves [to achieve] a new birth," but that this process is "a doubling, not an erasing" (Boelhower, qtd. in Chametzky 14). Chametzky sees this concept of a composite self as "a liberating, not a debilitating or disabling possibility" (14).[1]The other idea is Ostendorf's more jaded suggestion that as this process

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[1] According to Chametzky , the composite self does not "flinch at or worry about such designations as African American or Jewish-American (with or without hyphens) or indeed even

continues through the generations, it becomes more self-conscious and sentimental. "Symbolic" ethnicity is only possible in the U.S. "after a certain measure of participation in the larger market and a mutual cultural accommodation are assured" (580).[2] Both ideas, nevertheless, [103] lead us to believe that the end product will be positive, that neither the "composite" nor the "symbolic" ethnic will be a monster, but rather an evolved, complex individual. As we grapple with this notion of immigrant self-fashioning, I think it is very important that we also consider how many different ways the process of becoming a multifaceted American can go awry. Whether the immigrant be first, second, or even third generation, his or her evolution is not always a happy one.

Almost everyone is willing to concede that the resistance and condescension of the dominant culture toward immigrants limit their options. However, another huge limitation--one that is not cited as often--is the *nature* of an immigrant's ethnicity. As I mentioned at the beginning of this essay not all ethnicities that make up the U.S. populace are equally benign. What happens, for instance, if the culture from which an immigrant hails contains elements that are not particularly admirable to the dominant culture? What if the immigrant culture is perceived to be clannish, repressive of women, steeped in inferiority from hundreds of years of

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more fluid multiple designations shifting with history. Nor does it deny the possibility, the *inevitability* of learning from and incorporating other selves--which are frequently projections of parts of ourselves--in our resolutely syncretic society," "Beyond Melting Pots, Cultural Pluralism, Ethnicity--or, *Deja Vu* All Over Again," MELUS 16.4 (1989-90): 3-17.

[2] According to Ostendorf , "real" ethnicity prevents assimilation, but "symbolic" ethnicity is a result of having learned the rules of American political gamesmanship (580). He further asserts that "The culture of ethnic renaissance fits into the American tradition of backward utopias, the myth of the golden age. Shortly after the American Revolution a yearning for origins set in. And again and again American culture has called for a renewal of the old and--unhappy with the present--sought for the future in the past" (585).

colonial oppression, and prudish about human sexuality? In short, what if an immigrant is Irish?[3] Three stories in Mary Gordon's *Temporary Shelter* --"Delia," "Agnes," and "Eileen"--chronicle the difficulties of Irish-Americans who try to buy into the promise and the freedom of the dominant culture. Two of the three title characters end up dead and the third returns to Ireland. Because the mainstream society of America is not particularly welcoming, the survivors either retreat further into their Irish ethnicity or become hardened, conservative first and second generation Americans. In other words, their self-fashioning is reactive and defensive, rather than a free choice. Gordon's subtext in these stories disabuses readers of two mistaken assumptions. The first is that clinging to one's ethnicity is always a positive way of coping with the difficulties of a new life in America. The second is that Americanization does not leave scars.

Gordon is a storyteller, not a polemicist, but in the *Temporary Shelter* stories under consideration here, she clearly is debunking the immigrant myth dear to the hearts of mainstream culture and of many Irish Americans as well. The myth goes something like this: "My grandparents came here, struggled, worked hard, and succeeded." In dissent, Gordon grimly demonstrates that immigrants often die or return home. If they remain and survive, it is either by

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[3] These traits compose only one vision of the Irish. There are others; for example, Charles Fanning's critical study *The Irish Voice in America* (Lexington: UP of Kentucky, 1990) observes a broader spectrum of Irish-American types and traits in a wide range of writers. He finds Gordon's works "fueled by personal rage and bitterness" (329) and "mean-spirited" (330), and her perspective "skewed" (330). However, Catherine Ward in her article "Wake Homes: Four Modern Novels of the Irish-American Family" *Eire-Ireland* 26.2 (19): 78-91, reserves her highest praise for the Gordon novel. She asserts that Gordon in her immigration novel, *The Other Side*, "avoids the debilitating romanticism and pathos of Mary Doyle Curran and the caustic bitterness of Maureen Howard. [She] also goes further than Elizabeth Cullinan, who rests content with a realistic appraisal of the cost a family pays when it subscribes to an illusory myth of its specialness. Mary Gordon's purpose in *The Other Side* is to analyze and expose the Irish-American character" (91).

developing a hard shell or by staying fiercely ethnic. These stories were written between 1975 and 1987 when the "culture of ethnic renaissance" (Ostendorf 565) was beginning to take hold, and they do a good job of highlighting the fact that the strategy of using ethnic pride to help

[104] broker one's success in America does not always assure a positive outcome. Success (and happiness) are contingent upon the *nature* of the ethnic characteristics involved.

The three Gordon stories, "Delia," "Agnes," and "Eileen," are viewed through the changing and hardening sensibility of Nora Derency, a second generation Irish-American. In "Delia" she is a child who is bright, observant, full of promise, and free of prejudice. She was born with one leg shorter than the other and this handicap will, it turns out, severely curtail her options in life. It becomes quite obvious as the stories unfold that the short leg is to be taken as a physical

manifestation of her inferior status as an immigrant in the U.S. A physical lack--whether it be in height or in cleanliness or in general presentability--is a familiar topos in the literature of American immigrant groups.[4] The less than physically perfect Nora, then, is perceived as a less than perfect American, a second class citizen. Her trials and her coping mechanisms provide a paradigm for survival--but not necessarily for happiness--in the U.S.

What Nora witnesses in "Delia" are two versions of the American immigrant experience:

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[4] The list of blighted immigrants is long: the protagonist in Nicholasa Mohr's *In Nueva York* (Houston: Arte Publico, 1988) stories is a dwarf; the narrator of Anzia Yezierska's "Soap and Water" is never clean; even Emma Lazarus's poem etched on the base of the Statue of Liberty refers to immigrants as "wretched refuse." I might add that this lack of presentability is not limited to immigrants but extends to many other non-mainstream groups, such as Native Americans, African Americans, and gays.

the dream and the reality. She briefly sees the immigrant as first-class citizen, enjoying all the rights and privileges of the society, but this vision quickly disappears so that only the image of the immigrant as second-class citizen, insular and ignored, remains. Nora's aunt Delia, the youngest and most beautiful of the O'Reilley sisters, seems to be living the American dream. She has Americanized more than her three sisters, who clannishly reside in the same town, make practical, loveless marriages to Irish Catholic men, and spend a great deal of time together. In contrast, Delia has entered into happy and romantic match with John Taylor, a Protestant, and moved away to Delaware. Rather than judging people by their appearances, religion, or ethnicity (as the sisters do), they are without prejudice or condescension. This fairness is not lost on Nora, whom they treat as an individual, not as a cripple: "They knew how to walk with her. Most people walked too slowly" (38).

Delia's life seems to epitomize the American ideal. She has moved away from her very Irish family and found happiness with an Anglo-American. John is not a rich man, but he is thoughtful, kind, and handsome. The obvious sexual attraction between him and Delia seems shameful to the sisters, but completely natural to Nora, who only dimly perceives that "the way they looked at each other had something to do with the baby" they are expecting (38). Had she stayed in Ireland, Delia would never have enjoyed such mobility, the freedom to express her sexuality nor the chance to marry a Protestant man she loved. She has taken advantage of the life, liberty, and man [105] she loved. She has taken advantage of the life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness that her adopted country has offered her.

But she dies in childbirth. Most readers are puzzled as to what Gordon is telling them through this twist of plot. The fact that John does not immediately contact the family is more

baffling still. Two months after Delia and the baby have died, he appears at Nora's house to explain what has happened, only to lose his nerve when he finds out that her mother is in labor, about to be delivered of her fifth child. John tells only the seven-year-old Nora the news, then gives her a coin and asks her not to divulge the "little secret" (44). His inability or unwillingness to communicate with his wife's family marks the great divide between the American immigrant dream which Delia had been blissfully living and considerably less pleasant American immigrant reality of the sisters. The message is a hard one to swallow: Don't count on the country's ideals; stick with your own; settle for less. In this and the other two stories, the soft and trusting immigrants--the buyers of the dream--perish. The hard survive.

In "Eileen," Nora experiences firsthand what she only witnessed in "Delia." Encouraged by the nuns who have taught her, Nora aspires to become a teacher and is accepted at the Upstate Normal School. However, when she appears for her interview, she is quickly rejected because of her physical handicap. The nuns who had recommended her did not have the courage to mention Nora's disability to the Yankee men at the Normal School because they, too, were laboring under a "disability"--that of their Irish Catholicism and their own recent immigrant status. Hearing about her rejection, Nora's enraged father impotently threatens the "Yankee bastards," reciting the familiar litany about it being "a free country" and that "you didn't get away with that kind of behavior here" (145), but he does nothing. He accuses his wife, who accompanied Nora on the trip, of behaving "like some bog-trotter thrown off the land by an English thief" (145), thus underlining the similarity between the family's second-class status in Ireland and its second-class status in America. It is not as free a country for Nora as it is for the Yankees. Neither she, nor her mother, nor her father, nor the nuns who have taught her are confident enough or powerful

enough to take on the representatives of the mainstream culture.

This setback does not kill Nora, but it kills something in her. She becomes a commercial secretary, a very good one, but hard and sharp, with no time for people without ambition and "push" (149). Among the people she rejects are Eileen Foley and her young brother Tom. Although as a young teenager, Nora felt grateful for the friendship of the older Eileen, who for a time lived with Nora's family, she [106] is no longer patient with Eileen's unassuming, agreeable ways. Without actually becoming powerful herself, Nora imitates the powerful and shows no empathy for Tom when Eileen requests that Nora use her influence to help him find a job. She rationalizes to herself that Tom would not "work out" (150), sounding very much like the Yankee men at the Normal School, who rationalized away her presence and her dreams.

Tom, employed as a Western Union messenger, is killed accidentally when a stray bullet lodges in his heart. Like Delia, Tom seems to die because he is too soft, too vulnerable to exist in what is the land of opportunity only for those immigrants who are hard, strong, and do not aspire too high. Eileen returns to Ireland, chastened for believing in the promise of America. Before she retreats to Ireland, however, she retreats into her Irish ethnicity: "what had been her richness had turned itself to stone; her body life, which once had given her and all around her pleasure, had poured itself into a mold of dreadful, bitter piety" (151). Again, as in "Delia," release from the life of suppressed sensuality fostered by Catholicism in Ireland is short-lived in America. Eileen's physicality is not sexual, but rather a broader pleasure in the material world and a willingness to hope for satisfaction in this life. Unlike the Catholic church, the American dream has promised her that her life will not be a vale of tears. But the dream proves false.

In her tirade against "the lying tongues, the gold-in-the-street stories, the palaver about

starting over, making good," Eileen indicts American materialism: "Money was God here, and success" (151). Her words are angry and extreme, and her solution of returning to Ireland is questionable, but there is truth in her assessment. The commercial nature of America is a fact, as well as an emblem of no-nonsense American reality. Eileen's words make the reader recall that when Nora was blocked from realizing her dreams as a teacher, she became a *commercial* secretary. And back in "Delia," John Taylor gives Nora *money* to keep the secret about Delia and the baby's deaths. If money is not God in America, it is, Gordon seems to be saying, a substitute for happiness and emotional well being among immigrants. Material success is often proof of one kind of acceptance in default of another, higher kind. Nora cannot have her dream, but she can have a modest success in the business world. Like Nora, John must also turn hard in order to survive. Bereft of his wife and child, he loses the ability to speak feelingly and sensitively. When Delia is alive, he can give Nora gifts such as his leather watch pouch as a pocketbook for her doll. After Delia's death, he cannot even explain himself, and he can only give Nora money. [107]

What Nora does with the silver dollar John gives her seems odd, if one only reads "Delia." In the light of what happens to her in "Eileen," however, the gesture becomes symbolic. When John leaves, Nora puts the coin behind the elastic of her drawers: "First it was cold against her stomach, but then it became warm from the heat of her body" (45). She presses the money to a place where a baby of her own will never grow. Her short leg--that is, her immigrant status--will not allow her to fully pursue happiness in America. She can have neither a man who will love her, nor a job that she loves. But she can have money, which becomes a substitute for the happy emotional life that she is barred from in America.

In "Agnes," the story that takes place chronologically between "Delia" and "Eileen," Nora witnesses another immigrant love affair. But while Delia and John Taylor's relationship reflects (albeit briefly) the American immigrant's dream, the one between Agnes and Nora's Uncle Des is a tale of insecurity and exploitation, the American immigrant nightmare. Des thinks he is taking advantage of American freedom. In rebellion against the Catholic church (a rebellion hardly imaginable in Ireland), he refuses to marry Agnes, saying he has "no patience for the priests" and won't be "tied down" (84). Agnes, although she is hungry for respectability, agrees to be his mistress and remains so for ten years, supporting him while he lives the fast and uncertain life of a bootlegger.

However, like many immigrants, Des is only dominant within his own ethnic group. He charms and exploits Agnes and members of his own family, but when he gets the daughter of one of his rich WASP clients pregnant, he marries her immediately and moves to California. Even though his young wife's family throws her out for "marrying a greenhorn" (88), she has the power to make Des do whatever she wants, whether it be to marry her, to get a respectable job, or to stop writing to Agnes. As a member of the dominant culture, she can cow Des as much as the Yankees at the Upstate Normal School cowed Nora and the nuns. Des's behavior is not unusual: immigrants feeling exploited by established Americans will bully those whom they can, and that often means the members of their own communities and their own families. Nora is the only one of her family to recognize the source of her uncle's manipulativeness; she notes that "Something in his look gave him away, some insecurity" (87).

Nora saves herself from the snares of Des's exploitive Irish charm, but she cannot save herself from the humiliations embodied in Agnes's behavior and her fate. Despite Agnes's plain

appearance and apologetic manner, Nora desperately looks to her as a source of hope and a role model: [108]

> Sometimes, though, the difference between Ag's fate and her appearance raised in Nora a wild hope. Ag looked as damaged as Nora with her one short leg knew herself to be. But Ag provided a suggestion that it could be possible to live a life of passion nonetheless. How could this be anything to Nora but a solace? (83)

Having seen Delia's American idyll fail, Nora tries to believe in Agnes's glamorless affair. Its everydayness and lack of romance make it seem more possible for someone like herself to achieve. But even as she wants to believe, she sees Agnes as someone without pride and without

identity--a person who keeps putting her hands to her face "as if she were afraid that if she didn't keep checking, she'd find [it] had fallen off" (83). In the end, Agnes is not a role model or a heroine to Nora, but a doubly exploited victim. She is used not only by the Yankee families for whom she works as a nanny, but also by Des.

Even after he is married, Des continues to manipulate Agnes, writing to her for advice and support, treating her as if she were both his baby's and his own long-distance nanny. Agnes commits suicide when Des's wife discovers the correspondence and forbids it to continue on the grounds of propriety--the very propriety that Agnes so deeply desired. Agnes has tried to please everyone by acting unobtrusive and helpful, indeed, she would seem a model immigrant because she causes so little trouble. But she ends being rudely dismissed by the dominant group for her lack of respectability and despised by her own people for her lack of pride. Nora in particular feels betrayed by Ag's inability to thrive in America: "The truth was that Ag was right to hang

herself, except she should have done it earlier" (95). Ag's affair would seem a cruel parody of Delia's happiness, if both women's lives did not end in early death. Gordon's message is a depressing one: whether one lives the dream or the nightmare, softness and agreeableness invite disaster for the immigrant in America.

Nora, who Americanizes and becomes hard, independent, and a creature of the commercial world, survives. Ironically, however, she is no better off emotionally than her family who remain holed up in their Irish ethnicity. When we last see her, Nora resembles no one so much as her cold and critical Aunt Bridgit, the fiercely Irish family judge and naysayer. One might say that Nora has "doubled" and become a "composite" American, but instead of partaking of the best of the two cultures that have shaped her, she has taken on the worst. She has become the obverse of Chametzky's optimistic projection.

I interject Gordon's stories into the so-called ethnicity/mainstream culture wars to suggest that the polarization of the two sides is more [109] a fear of mainstream culture advocates than a reality. The theorists may think they are fighting a war, but the immigrants who live here continue to experience America in a number of different ways on a broad and complex continuum. Becoming an attractive composite American like the hypothetical young woman of Japanese ancestry whom I mentioned at the beginning of this essay is only one of many immigrant outcomes. To us in academia it seems like the most appealing, but it is often neither the option nor the wish of immigrants themselves.

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