Open Library of Humanities

Universalism and Locality in Sally Rooney's Digital Ireland

Michael McAteer, Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Budapest, HU, michael.mcateer@btk.ppke.hu

Text messages and emails permeate the novels of contemporary Irish author Sally Rooney, shaping the ways in which characters relate to one another while also reflecting the globalization of Irish society through the medium of digitalization. In light of the socialist political positions that some of her principal characters adopt, this article examines digital communication in *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* with reference to certain concepts of Marx. I address online modes of communication in both novels in terms of Marx's understanding of relations between workers and machines in the industrial era, Christian Fuchs' re-articulation of his ideas for the age of digital capitalism, and the critique of empty universalism that Marx directs against the modern liberal-democratic political state. I examine Rooney's narration of tensions between rural/small-town and urban life in Ireland as part of the online environment through which she addresses these issues. Observing the significance of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* (1960) to her first two novels, I stress how important local Irish attachments are to Rooney's fiction, both as a means of resisting empty universalism and as testimony to human exploitation in the present age of digital capitalism.

Introduction

Sally Rooney's fiction illustrates the extent to which digital communication, social media and online information sourcing has penetrated everyday life in contemporary Ireland. She succeeds in showing how digital technology inaugurates new means of communication in Irish life, or modifies those preceding the digital era. This article addresses the function of digital communication in Rooney's first two novels, *Conversations with Friends* (2017) and *Normal People* (2018). I propose that these novels narrate the cultural economy of localised Irish experiences within the context of what Naomi Klein (2007: 18–20) terms *corporatism*, a word that Klein uses for the integration of multinational corporations into nation-state institutions as shown in the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 and its aftermath (354–59; 397–405). Klein understands corporatism in the following way:

> A more accurate term for a system that erases the boundaries between Big Government and Big Business is not liberal, conservative or capitalist but corporatist. Its main characteristics are huge transfers of public wealth to private hands, often accompanied by exploding debt, an ever-widening chasm between the dazzling rich and the disposable poor and an aggressive nationalism that justifies bottomless spending on security (2007: 15).

A critical part of Rooney's narration concerns the tensions around locality in the world of information technology, tensions that are strikingly apparent in two features of Irish life pre-dating the digital era but persist in her novels: the struggle to communicate and the contrasts between small-town rural Irish life and Dublin metropolitan life. I address instances in which Rooney's characters exchange text-messages and emails, source information online and interact through social media platforms. The purpose is to determine whether digital technology in Rooney's first two novels adapts to or weakens the social norms of communication characteristic of Ireland in times past. Christian Fuchs' rereading of Marx in the digital age inflects this reading, in particular the role that he accords to communication in the production of those social relations that a capitalist economy needs for its system of material production to function. Fuchs describes communication as 'the process in which structures, social systems, institutions and social practices are lived and thereby reproduced by humans in a concrete manner in everyday life' (2019: 21).

Rooney's Digital Subjects

A critical player in multinational corporate-driven globalization since the 1990s, the World Wide Web has given technological impetus to the transcendence of local

circumstances and interests. Coinciding with the collapse of the Soviet Union during the 1989−1991 period, the arrival of the internet opened 'a new and boundless space where physical barriers […] would no longer be perceived as communicative constraints' (Bory, 2020: 40). Rooney's first novels depict digital technology expanding Irish horizons beyond local preoccupations and concerns. *Conversations with Friends* introduces Melissa as a Dublin-based contributor to several large international literary websites, a woman who the University student couple and performance poetry duo, Frances and Bobbi, meet at a poetry event in the city. Digital technology shapes the initial encounter between Melissa and the couple when she photographs them for images to upload to a literary website. Melissa inhabits what Simon Murray identifies as 'the digital literary sphere' (2018: 53−80). She 'writes for several big literary websites, and her work circulated widely online' (Rooney, 2017: 9). Bobbi plays with the idea of using the images as Facebook profile pictures (Rooney, 2017: 8−10, 19−20). When learning that his long-term friend Marianne will be leaving Dublin to study in Sweden for an academic year in *Normal People*, Connell Waldron's first reaction is one of positive expectation at the prospect of intense email correspondence between them while she is away (Rooney, 2018: 162). These expanded horizons of social communication support Fuchs' interpretation of Marx's understanding of communication in general. Fuchs detects in Marx's idea of material intercourse an understanding of how human beings generate socio-politico-economic totality through the sharing of thoughts, information and emotions in language. The online mode of communication pronounces the material character of this process as a contrast to the dialectical idealism of Hegel that granted Marx his original framework of historical analysis. By virtue of their material nature as technology, mobile phones, laptops and computers lend credence to the Marxist view 'that information and communication are not unreal or immaterial, but part of humans' production and reproduction processes in everyday life' (Fuchs, 2019: 56).

Online communication does not deliver human emancipation, however, in what Fuch's describes as the age of 'digital capitalism or communicative capitalism' (Fuchs, 2019: 3). On the contrary, the contradictions within economic processes of the age are symptomatic of a contemporary crisis of the human subject. The medium of email provides one of the most striking examples in *Normal People*. Connell Waldron exchanges emails with his close friend from his adolescent years, Marianne Sheridan, while he is travelling with University student friends in Central Europe and Northern Italy as Marianne spends time with her family at their holiday home in Trieste. These messages include internet links to news reports of the Edward Snowden affair, referring to the former American National Security Agency (NSA) intelligence contractor who leaked classified documents, revealing global surveillance programmes run by the

NSA in agreement with telecommunications companies and various governments.[1] Connell is alert to the irony that he and Marianne can only exchange their reactions to Snowden's revelations through email, thereby engaging a digital instrument that they believe to be under the same government surveillance about which they talk. This paradox makes it feel 'like their relationship has been captured in a complex network of state power, that the network is a form of intelligence in itself, containing them both, and containing their feelings for one another' (Rooney, 2018: 157).

Marianne's speculation presents the digital environment as one in which multinational corporate power and state institutions have merged in the manner that Klein identifies as corporatism, producing a new form of alienated subjectivity, incorporated into a cybernetic structure of power according to Louis Althusser's famous formulation of interpellation (1971: 170−83). However, local experience is a powerful mode of resisting this empty universalism. Marianne speculates in one message that whoever might be processing their email content in the NSA has a misleading impression of their meaning since they 'probably don't know about the time you didn't invite me to the Debs' (Rooney, 2018: 157). She is referring to the final-year school celebration dance in the small town of Carricklea in the west of Ireland, where she and Connell grew up. Her comment is as much a jibe at Connell as it is a mockery of NSA surveillance. As such, Marianne draws upon shared local experience to subvert absorption into the state-corporation nexus as a form of universal power.

The tensions in this email correspondence between Irish locality, European context and global corporate state surveillance are symptomatic of the new types of human subjectivity that first emerge from the republican state formations of the late eighteenth century, as Marx understood them. Concerning the discourse of human rights upon which these formations rested their constitutional legitimacy, Marx observes in an early essay, 'On the Jewish Question' (1843), a discrepancy between citizenship and civil society. He regards the universality of inalienable human rights as a form of conceiving human liberty in terms of private interest rather than common humanity, because the institution of human rights in the American and French constitutions deny in practice the universality they espoused in principle. Marx argues that the state formations to emerge from the French and American revolutions split the subjectivity of human agents between the citizen − equal before the law, regardless of social position − and persons in their real social environment: divided economically, politically, ethnically and sexually. Marx thus regards the equality and liberty legally accorded to the citizen

---

[1] For an in-depth discussion of the case, see Gellman (2020).

as empty universalism, since these principles stand at odds with actual social conditions (Marx, 1977a: 48–54).

Rooney's depiction of digitalized culture in the contemporary Ireland of *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People* conveys that this contradiction has not been resolved, but reconfigured. Especially in its pre-modern form of village/small-town living, locality is no longer simply the debased relic of a past to be discarded – what Marx and Engels famously and somewhat phlegmatically denigrate as 'the idiocy of rural life' in *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 (Marx, 1977b: 225). Locality is rather an obstinate barrier to complete absorption into an empty universalism and the networks of real power inscribed therein. Fuchs identifies the most recent and possibly the most terrifying manifestation of this power in what is termed Industry 4.0: the idea of combining 'big data, social media, cloud computing, sensors, artificial intelligence, robotics' for the generation, distribution and consumption of material products (2019: 77). Fuchs describes Industry 4.0 as an ideological phantom, formed in the elite capitalist mind, 'advancing new forms of accumulation, control and class struggle from above' (2019: 98).

Online Communication in *Conversations with Friends*

Does *Conversations with Friends* indicate the assimilation of digital communication practices into local Irish habits rather than the erasure of pre-digital Irish culture in a general movement towards Industry 4.0? Rooney's treatment of communication is central to answering this question. The novel form serves her as a medium for investigating problems in human communication, her focus directed towards contemporary Irish society, particularly the sphere of human intimacies therein. Text message conversations between characters in *Conversations with Friends* configure these problems in the failure of new digital media to resolve misunderstanding and disagreement between those who engage them.

Boyd Davis and Jeutonne Brewer describe digital discourse as writing that is composed as if it is being spoken: as if 'the sender were writing talking' (Davis, 1997: 2). David Crystal contests this judgment, wondering whether it is ever possible to 'write speech' because of the restrictions governing typed communication, such as the keyboard one uses (2001: 25). Crystal's reservations are well founded, and he examines at length the concept of 'Netspeak' as a form of electronic written communication that closely resembles the pattern of speaking, though it remains written text (2001: 24–61). Examples of Netspeak arise on several occasions in *Conversations with Friends*. Bobbi's text message exchanges with Frances read like verbal conversation in the brevity of the statements and the speed with which conversation topics change. The

short text-message discussion between the couple over whether or not to use Melissa's photographs of them as Facebook profile pictures is a case in point (Rooney, 2017: 20). The messages sent are 'time-governed, demanding or expecting an immediate response' (Crystal, 2001: 29). So although Short Message Service (SMS) communication may appear to replicate human speech patterns, it equally forces those patterns to conform to protocols of online messaging. In this regard, Marx's observations on human relationships with machines in the industrial era still holds for relations between humans and digital technology in the contemporary age. Just as Marx perceives worker activity in the nineteenth century to be 'determined on all sides by the movement of the machinery, and not the opposite', so human communication submits itself to the regulations imposed by computer software programming and hardware devices in the digital epoch (Marx, 1973: 614).

During the love affair that develops between Frances and Melissa's husband, Nick, the online exchanges also read more like speech than written text. The email exchanges between the two, following their private kiss at a house party early in the novel, is one example (Rooney 2017: 61). Typing in a state of panic, using short-lined messages in lower-case, Nick's emails to Frances the following evening not only typify Netspeak, but also 'metacommunicative minimalism', which is William Millard's term for electronic conversation (1996: 147). As if to prove this point, Frances describes her correspondence with Nick as 'like a game of table tennis', the messages exchanged between the two characters taking the form of competition (Rooney, 2017: 43). This image demonstrates how SMS and email shape the type of communication that develops between the pair, in keeping with Marx's observations on the automatizing effect of machinery on industrial workers in manufacturing environments, still widespread in mass production assembly-lines across the world.

The element of play in Frances's characterization of her online communications with Nick also raises the possibility of imagining forms of digital communication beyond the ultimate capitalist hell of 'the automatic system of machinery' in which 'workers themselves are cast merely as its conscious linkages' (Marx, 1973: 614). Fuchs points out that Marx 'anticipates a computerised society' (2019: 86). Marx writes of general social knowledge as a force of production; information as both an integral part of the commodity-production process and also a commodity in itself (Marx, 1973: 626). Marx recognized that capitalism generates a level of disposable time within general populations in its need for surplus labour (the time spent producing surplus value). Technological advancement in capitalism opens the opportunity for the general mass of human society to eventually own its surplus labour (Marx, 1973: 627–28). All characters in Rooney's fiction live in a society governed by computer

technology, and the relationship between Nick and Frances develops within it. As a game of table tennis, Frances's online communication with Nick is not just automatism: it is also non-productive social activity, or idleness. The online game of text-message and email exchanges that Frances plays with Nick hovers between the dystopia of a fully-automatized humanity and the utopia of human society entering a post-capitalist world, free to express itself openly and creatively. Or, as Fuchs, drawing on André Gorz's theory of post-industrial socialism, puts it, 'a world without work' (2019: 81).

Crucial to Marx's notion of what a post-capitalist age might look like is the notion of disposable time. Rooney's first novels explore the possibilities of experiencing human communication differently through online media to that of direct verbal interaction, and, as a consequence, alternative experiences of time. Thus, the uneven length of pauses in communication between Frances and Nick is as significant as the instantaneity between them that digital technology simulates. These variations in time-pattern are possible because Nick and Frances do not conduct their conversation with physical immediacy. The length of the pauses is part of the communication. Crystal points out that oftentimes 'the rhythm of Internet interactions is very much slower that that found in a speech situation'; in email and other forms of online communication, 'a response to stimulus may take anything from seconds to months' (2001: 31).

The structures controlling the forms of digital communication technology exercise a regulative effect over the opportunities that it presents for human intimacy, even as they provide new ways for human beings to communicate. This hazardous state of affairs is already present in the early years of the internet, through the medium of dating sites. Eva Illouz draws attention to the standardization of selfhood that dating websites impose because of the demand to process and collate a wide variety of information: '[w]hen presenting themselves in a disembodied way to others, people use established conventions of the desirable person and apply them to themselves' (Illouz, 2007: 94). Appearing at a moment during which multinational corporations and state formations merge under the aspect of Naomi Klein's corporatism, the online dating website serves an important function in the economic management of human desire. Illouz's observation of the formalization of the human personality through typological distribution is not only a matter of rendering desire financially profitable. It is also a process of generating and sustaining forms of desire compatible with corporate regulation of human agency. In effect, Illouz's discussion of early internet-era dating sites presents a localized example of a new technology of power, digitally advancing beyond those general historical technologies of power that Michel Foucault (1991) has addressed in depth.

Conversations with Friends indicates that formal idealizations of selfhood inevitably fail to realize human intimacy in the current age of digital communication technology. The medium of SMS is the most striking example of this shortcoming. At face value, it reduces the significance of location for the parties in correspondence, by providing immediate mobile communication through satellite technology located outside the planet. This facility makes possible a new form of human communication, liberated from traditional social and cultural constraints. Yet miscommunication and misunderstanding are characteristic features of text message exchanges between Frances and Nick. At one point, Frances expresses her disbelief that Nick is 'breaking up with me over instant messenger', with Nick texting back that 'I never have any idea what you feel about anything' (Rooney, 2017: 89). Their relationship is conducted through digital capitalism as identified in Fuchs' reading of Marx, meaning that the contradictions between the forces and the relations of production inscribed in digital products frustrate the realization of sexual or emotional fulfilment (Fuchs, 2019: 3). The failure of Frances's and Nick's relationship distantly registers the injuries, illnesses and premature deaths suffered by people working long-term in underground mines, mainly in the Global South and East Asia, to extract the minerals required in the production of the mobile phones and laptops through which Frances and Nick conduct their affair online.

One important aspect of the stress that Frances and Nick experience in their affair derives from the fact that neither subject themselves fully to the protocols of digital communication. As a 21-year old in the mid-2010s, Frances belongs to the late millennial/ early generation Z category born in the mid-1990s. Being of the first generation to use SMS as an everyday mode of social communication, Frances retains a degree of caution about its influence. Coming from the mid-millennial generation who were born in the 1980s, Nick's character would have known a time in childhood when conversation was conducted either face-to-face or on telephone. The generational difference between Nick and Frances frustrates the ambitions of Big Tech to create advanced structures of communication that absorb and transcend location, history and culture.

In *Conversations with Friends*, Frances and Nick try to adapt to the types of subjectivity that digital technological frames impose. Frances 'looked him up online' after they first met, gaining an impression of Nick that is not only a false idealization, but also measures the distance in technological influences separating the two characters. She discovers 'a whole selection of shirtless photographs' of a younger Nick from a TV show from several years' previously that had long been cancelled (Rooney, 2017: 12). The internet grants Frances images of Nick that display corporatist capitalist typologies of youth, beauty and desire generated for the consumption of mass-produced goods in

the fashion industry (Nick's body is itself a fashion statement). Yet the same images are out of date, enduring in an online afterlife that splits Frances's first encounter with Nick between the older man she meets in person and the younger man she encounters online.

Hubert Dreyfus's notion of the 'disembodied telepresence' of the internet world points to a contemporary form of dualism in the digital era, in the separation of the online world from that of physical interaction (Dreyfus, 2009: 49–71). The disjunction between Frances's online communications with Nick and her physical intimacy with him reflects this dualism. Like Marx's early reading of universalism in the founding principles of the American and French constitutions, Dreyfus's 'disembodied telepresence' of the internet papers over the vicissitudes of diverse local conditions and physical experiences. This evasion is evident in Frances's engagement with digital technology. In her teenage years, she began using internet message boards, through which she formed an online friendship with a twenty-six-year-old American graduate student. When Frances opened up to him about her emotional life, he responded by sending her a flash-photograph of his genitals. Frances, feeling 'guilty and terrified', as if she had 'committed a sick internet crime which other people could discover at any moment', deleted her account and abandoned her email address (Rooney, 2017: 35). An instance of online sexual harassment, the experience underlines how the dispersal of human subjects in the contemporary era of corporatism subverts pretensions to universal communication that digital technology simulates through platforms like X, Facebook or TikTok. Frances's attempt to transcend the loneliness of her local circumstances as a Dublin teenager through an exclusively online friendship ends in failure and embarrassment. For all she knows, the figure responding to her communication may have been a sexual predator with a fake online identity. This experience depicts the emancipation offered through the universality of online communication in the contemporary era of digital capitalism as chimerical.

Frances also bases her disinterest in holding down a job on information provided by Wikipedia, a source often questioned for its reliability. She sees no reason to earn more than $16,100 annually because Wikipedia gives this figure as the average yearly income in a world where the gross world product was divided equally (Rooney, 2017: 23). This universal formula underplays the material fact of money as a relative measure of value that different local conditions modify. In Frances's indifference to career, there is some sense of post-industrial socialist hope of a world without work, but the more immediate impression is a degradation of labour as Harry Braverman described it in the 1970s, consequent upon automatization of work environments. Braverman predicted that automatization would not only remove skill and knowledge of production process from

many types of work in an age of machine and computer technology, but also produce increased levels of unemployment. In contrast to the craftsmanship required in pre-industrial capitalist eras, the very notion of 'skill' is degraded in the age of machine and computer capitalism, with workers often requiring no more than a few days or a few weeks training in pushing buttons, scanning barcodes, stamping forms or stacking shelves (Braverman, 1974: 444).

The psychological effect of automatization upon human relationships and work environments in *Conversations with Friends*, amplified by digital media, contributes to the illness that Frances contracts. After her medical diagnosis, she finds information on the internet about her condition, containing 'a lot of stock photographs of white women looking out windows with concerned expressions, sometimes with a hand on their abdomen to indicate pain' (Rooney, 2017: 272). This manner of presenting medical information amounts to a formal typology of the Sick Woman, one that perpetuates Western gender stereotypes of womanhood but also Western racial hegemony in the fact it excludes non-white women from the images supplied. Ultimately, the website proves inadequate for Frances in coming to terms with her own bodily turmoil. Digital technology does not realize the promise it holds out, in theory at least, to Frances in *Conversations*: liberation from personal circumstances by transcending the restrictions and the limitations of locality.

Social Class and Rural/Urban Division in *Conversations with Friends*

Given the possibility of immediate communication across regions, nations and continents, digital media formats facilitate global awareness stretching far beyond local or national territories. The political issues that arise in Rooney's fiction reflect this awareness. They include concerns about radically uneven wealth distribution; breakdowns in ecological systems; male social, political and economic aggressions; British and European Union-supported American military-industrial violence on the territories of West Asia. In *Conversations with Friends*, Bobbi argues that all refugees have a right to asylum, regardless of educational background (Rooney, 2017: 112); she rejects monogamy for serving 'the needs of men in patrilineal societies by allowing them to pass property to their genetic offspring, traditionally facilitated by sexual entitlement to a wife' (Rooney, 2017: 252). Articulating these views, Bobbi creates the impression that her horizons are global rather than local, and the bastion of Irish tradition holds no relevance for her, particularly its oppressive mistreatment of Irish women. Bobbi is a forceful critic of the brutal exercise of corporate state power, sometimes in ways that impinge upon her intimacy with Frances, even if it is also a source of fascination and solidarity between the two.

A major difference between both women is their social class position. Bobbi comes from a solidly wealthy Dublin family background; Frances, from a lower middle-class family with a rural background. Readers might easily regard Frances's occasional scepticism towards Bobbi's political radicalism as a contrast between political value and personal desire; Frances's affair with a wealthier, older man, a travesty of her socialist politics. Yet it is equally plausible to consider this scepticism as coming from Frances's sensitivity to the contradiction between Bobbi's political pronunciations and the relatively privileged position from which she enunciates them:

> Bobbi had a way of belonging everywhere. Though she said she hated the rich, her family was rich, and other wealthy people recognised her as one of their own. They took her radical politics as a kind of bourgeois self-deprecation, nothing very serious, and talked to her about restaurants or where to stay in Rome. I felt out of place in these situations, ignorant and bitter, but also fearful of being discovered as a moderately poor person and a communist (Rooney, 2017: 95).

This context modifies the politics of the relationship between Bobbi and Frances significantly, as well as the relationship that forms between them and Melissa and Nick. Bobbi's 'way of belonging everywhere' speaks to the empty universalism with which Marx identified middle class political liberalism in the early nineteenth century. Frances's awkwardness challenges the liberal presumption of universal equality, since Frances cannot fit in to social contexts in which Bobbi moves effortlessly. Frances's fear and anger exposes the limitations of a universalism articulated by one powerful social stratum – the affluent liberal class – as the foundational political discourse of the human subject in the modern era.

Frances's affair with Nick accentuates the class tension in her relationship with Bobbi because it violates an unspoken understanding between the two women: Bobbi belongs to a much higher stratum of the Dublin class system than Frances. Bobbi presents her disapproval of the relationship on gender grounds: namely, bisexual Frances has fallen for the ultimate cliché figure in heterosexual romance capitalism: the wealthier, older, handsome guy (twenty-one year old Frances 'knew from the internet' that Nick was thirty-two') (Rooney, 2017: 40). Bobbi makes her feelings clear on the matter in an email to Frances: 'Do you really rank our relationship below your passing sexual interest in some middle aged married guy? (Rooney, 2017: 81). Within this class and sexual disruption, which Frances's affair with Nick inaugurates, lies an issue strongly characteristic of Irish cultural discourse long before the advent of digitalization: the tensions between rural and urban Irish society. Although she has grown up in Dublin,

Frances's parents came from the town of Ballina in the west of Ireland county of Mayo. Following their divorce, her parents moved back to Ballina, intimating social isolation in Dublin, due in part to their rural background, in part to the economic pressures of living in one of the most expensive cities in Europe (Rooney, 2017: 17). When Nick learns of this family background, he sends an unavoidably condescending text to Frances: 'we used to have a holiday home in Achill (like every other wealthy South Dublin family I'm sure)'. Frances texts back: 'I'm glad my ancestral homeland could help nourish your class identity. P.S. It should be illegal to have a holiday home anywhere' (Rooney, 2017: 43).

Playful as it may be, this exchange is revealing as regards locality within the class and sexual dynamics of *Conversations with Friends*. Nick claims affinity to the region through his family's holiday home on Achill Island off the County Mayo coast, a connection that consolidates his Irish identity with upper class social status. Frances's response is intriguing. In one sense, its sarcasm is defiantly local: Mayo is her ancestral homeland, with Nick a 'blow-in' from Dublin city in the Far East. Yet almost immediately, she becomes a classical Marxist: nobody anywhere on earth should own a holiday home, so long as anyone is homeless. This form of universalism is not as susceptible to falsification as that of Bobbi, since Frances speaks from an economic position in which a holiday home is genuinely unaffordable. It is a universalism with a very local twist in that the man who led the Irish land agitation against the tyranny of rent in the 1870s, Michael Davitt, was a native of County Mayo. Davitt may not have been a Marxist, but the rebel anti-imperialist, Wilfred Scawen Blunt, claimed that Davitt described himself as a Christian socialist, prompting Carla King to place him somewhere between radical liberalism and socialism, a positioning that may well apply to Rooney also (King, 1999: 80–81).

One of the most comical moments in *Conversations with Friends* occurs when Nick tells Frances that 'he was 'basically' a Marxist, and he didn't want me to judge him for owning a house' (Rooney, 2017: 75). This is Marxism at its most vapid, almost as devoid of substance as the middle class universalism that Marx criticised in his early writing. Indeed, it is plausible to regard Marx's concept of the urban proletariat – 'the universal class' – as a capitulation to an abstract universalism that would eventually degenerate into the dogmatism and democide of the Stalinist police-state in the twentieth century (1977: 73).[2] Rooney's deployment of Nick's word 'basically' within ironical inverted commas perfectly captures a blend of self-deprecation and condescension in the

---

[2] This objection is put forward most influentially in C. Wright Mills' (1962: 126–27) notion of Marxism as 'a labor meta-physic' according to the fundamental position it grants to the wage-worker in its analysis of capitalism (1962: 126–27). For a recent defence of Marx's concept of the universal class, see Llorente (2013: 536–60).

broadly rugby-school milieu of Dublin 4 society that Nick embodies. In this instance, however, it is not really Nick who is the target of Frances's acerbic judgment, but Bobbi, her anarchist social warrior partner who comes from the same affluent background.

Digital technology in *Conversations with Friends* fails to erase the geographical division on the island between west and east or, concomitantly, between small town and metropolitan city. In spite of the multi-ethnic character of Irish society as it has evolved during the 2000s and 2010s, the division between Dublin and rural Ireland is still notable in the novel. Upon learning that her parents come from the west of Ireland, a guest sneeringly calls Frances 'a culchie' (Irish slang for a country bumpkin), before testing her to see if she felt more kinship with County Mayo, her parents' home place, or Dublin, where she grew up (Rooney, 2017: 56–57). In 2016 and 2017, the year in which *Conversations with Friends* was published, Dublin played Mayo in the All-Ireland Gaelic Football Final. This context sharpens the significance of the guest's question, in effect asking Frances if she supported the Dublin or the Mayo football team. Frances replies wittingly by paraphrasing Virginia Woolf, altering 'country' as 'county': 'As a woman I have no county' (Rooney, 2017: 57).[3] Her response is another instance of the complex relation between locality and universality in Frances's communications. She quotes Woolf to illustrate the redundancy of the smug question from the perspective of universal womanhood, while also, as a woman with a small-town west of Ireland family background, putting one over an irksome affluent Dubliner.

This rural-urban divide in *Conversations with Friends* signals its affinity with Irish literature that predates the era of digital communications technology. The features that Rooney's first novel shares with Edna O'Brien's first novel indicate the persistence of the local as an obstacle to the formal universalism towards which digitalization gravitates. Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* was published in 1960, a time when much of rural Ireland still did not have access to electricity, when televisions were a novelty and when the telephone system relied on telephonist operators. It emerges from a traditional Irish Catholic rural world that, in many ways, could not be further from the technologically advanced Ireland that Rooney's characters inhabit.

Yet there are significant traces of *The Country Girls* in *Conversations with Friends*. Frances's relationship with Bobbi in the latter recalls Caithleen's friendship with Baba in O'Brien's novel. Both Baba in *The Country Girls* and Bobbi in *Conversations with Friends* write illicit messages in convent school that get them into trouble. Baba leaves

---

[3] Frances is referring to the words that Woolf gives to 'the Outsider', the woman whom she imagines proposing a human society composed exclusively of women and run by women: '"For," the outsider will say, "in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world"' (Woolf, 1938: 109).

a sexually explicit note in the Church designed to have her and Caithleen expelled from the convent they both regard as a prison (O'Brien, 2007: 134–37). Likewise, Bobbi writes 'fuck the patriarchy' on the wall beside a plaster cast of the crucifixion, resulting in her temporary suspension (Rooney, 2017: 7). Like Baba with Caithleen, Bobbi is bossy in her partnership with Frances. In *The Country Girls*, Baba is jealous of the affection that an older married man in their west of Ireland village, Jacques du Maurier, lavishes on Caithleen. In *Conversations*, Bobbi feels threatened by the relationship that develops between Frances and Nick, eleven years older than Frances and also married.

Despite the enormous differences between the forms of Irish society in which Caithleen in *The Country Girls* and Frances in *Conversations* find themselves, they share much in common. Caithleen's father is an alcoholic who hits his wife and daughter (O'Brien, 2007: 30–31, 139). Frances's father is not so overtly violent, but his moods generate fear in Frances that he might turn so (Rooney, 2017: 49). Claire Kilroy observantly remarks that the 'great stalwart of Irish writing, the alcoholic father, is present' in *Conversations with Friends*, 'but he is a spent force, having been dispatched from the family home years ago'. This is one of the reasons for Kilroy regarding Rooney's first novel as 'almost post-Irish' (2017, n. p.). The judgment is sound, but the recourse to another drinking Daddy illustrates Rooney's sensitivity to the persistence of certain Irish social habits well into an age of the country's digitalization. At Valerie's French residence in Étables, Frances's father phones her, illustrating the difficulties in dispatching Irish family troubles in an age of global digital availability, no matter where one is. It is in Étables that Frances first speaks to Nick about her father's drink problem back in Ireland (Rooney, 2017: 122).

In addition to troubled relationships with aggressive fathers, O'Brien's Caithleen from *The Country Girls* shares with Rooney's Frances a sense of Dublin as a lonely city. At first, Caithleen feels exhilarated by the capital in *The Country Girls*, remarking that 'I knew now that this was the place I wanted to be. Forevermore I would be restless for crowds and lights and noise' (O'Brien, 2007: 170). Her teenage obsession with the older Du Maurier, however, dashes any prospect of happiness in Dublin. By the end of the *The Country Girls*, she finds herself solitary and sleepless, following his failure to show up at the airport for a secret rendezvous together in Vienna (O'Brien, 2007: 226). Frances's love situation in *Conversations with Friends* is not quite so melodramatic but she shares with Caithleen a feeling of being unanchored between the small-town west of Ireland region from which her parents came and the Dublin in which she grew up. Her regular visits to her father accentuate this feeling, after he returns to Ballina following the separation of her parents. As with Caithleen in *The Country Girls*, a west of Ireland background contributes to the development of Frances's sensitive artistic personality

in the metropolitan environment of the Irish capital city. The degree to which Frances replicates the artistic personality of Caithleen in O'Brien's 1960 novel measures the extent to which the contemporary world of digital communication fails to rectify the structurally uneven distribution of cultural economy in Ireland across rural and urban regions.

From Sligo to Dublin and Back: Connell's Digital Journey in *Normal People*

Normal People also illustrates how pervasive digital technology and social media have become in contemporary Irish society. Another Generation Z character in Rooney's fiction is normal person Connell Waldron. Social media and other visual technologies amplify his teenage sexual anxieties. Rumours that he has added his economics teacher to his list of Facebook friends make him feel nauseous when she then behaves flirtatiously towards him (Rooney, 2018: 4–5). He also suffers an anxiety attack from having told Marianne Sheridan that he loves her, picturing his declaration 'like watching himself commit a terrible crime on CCTV' (Rooney, 2018: 54).

The ways in which Connell comes to terms with digital communication in *Normal People* is a measure of his character development, apparent in the ease with which he can express intimacy to Helen Brophy in text messages, a Dublin student with whom he forms a relationship during his University years (Rooney, 2018: 121). By the time of his summer travels in 2013, Connell seems fully adapted to digital technology, temporarily taking up the lifestyle of a digital nomad. Upon arriving in each new city on the European continent that he visits, he calls Helen through Skype video, sends his mother Lorraine a text-message and writes an email to Marianne (Rooney, 2018: 154). Helen is spending the summer working in Chicago, Lorraine is living in Carricklea back in Sligo and Marianne is staying at her family's holiday home in Trieste.

If only temporarily, Connell's experience approximates to a form of universal experience. Digital technology allows him to communicate immediately with his girlfriend in the USA, his mother in Ireland and his closest friend in Italy. On Skype video-calls with Helen, he has overcome anxieties associated with online visual imagery from his teenage years in Carricklea: 'He loves seeing her face on-screen, especially when the connection is good and her movements are smooth and lifeline. She has a great smile, great teeth' (Rooney, 2018: 154). This kind of intimacy contrasts sharply with the adolescent male tomfoolery that made Connell uncomfortable in his teens, such as when school pal Rob Hegarty showed him naked photographs under the table of Rob's girlfriend, Lisa, on his mobile phone, at the school graduation party, while Lisa laid passed-out drunk at the other side of the table (Rooney, 2018: 76).

Connell's sense of digital freedom during his summer travels does not last, however. Soon after the Christmas holidays in January 2014, he learns that Rob drowned in the river Corrib in Galway. Connell slides into depression, availing of the University's student counselling service on the suggestion of his University room-mate, Niall. This experience illustrates the price of social isolation that digitalization and social media communication can generate, particularly for those who fall partly or wholly outside its net. At the same time, it illustrates the reach of the locality that digitalization enables, even if its gravitational pull is towards universal forms of communication and interaction across different regions of the world. One night in early January 2014, Connell receives a group message (probably WhatsApp) that went out to all his friends from his school days in Carricklea, asking if anyone had seen or heard of Rob's whereabouts, as he had fallen out of online contact completely for a few days (Rooney, 2018: 205). Facebook re-emerges as a source of emotional disturbance. Connell's last social media contact with Rob was on Facebook from almost two years previously: a cheeky message typical of Rob, to which Connell never replied. Connell finds Rob's funeral occasion in Carricklea overwhelmingly intense. After all the online text message, email and social media communications with other people in his life, the only word of consolation Connell can offer to Rob's father when face-to-face at the funeral is 'sorry' (Rooney, 2018: 210).

Despite the largely post-Christian outlooks and lifestyles of the characters in *Normal People*, the Roman Catholic Church in Carricklea provides the setting for one of the most emotionally gripping occasions in the novel, when old acquaintances from Connell and Marianne's teenage years meet again to mark the death of one who belonged to their circle. Although Veronica never took her son to Catholic religious services while Marianne endured 'the enforced Mass trip on Sundays' with resentment (Rooney, 2018: 32), the Church environment arouses intense feelings between Connell and Marianne. On the occasion of attending the anniversary mass of her father in July 2013, Connell sees Marianne as if she was 'a piece of religious art', making him feel like doing something drastic, such as setting himself on fire or driving his car into a tree (Rooney, 2018: 128). A few scattered memories of encounters with Rob come back to Connell after the funeral, puncturing the cosmopolitan digital environment to which Connell had adapted through the course of the previous year in Dublin. His renewed encounter with Marianne affects his relationship with Helen, the couple breaking up within a few weeks of the funeral.

Upon his return to studies at Trinity, Connell is subject to panic attacks and fits of crying. The behaviourist psychological questionnaire that the counselling service requires him to complete seems clinical and impersonal in addressing the most

intimate aspects of Connell's personality (Rooney, 2018, 200–202). Although this same professional psychological method is vital in helping him through this period of profound despair in his life, it still reflects the uniformity that Connell sees in the University: 'All Connell's classmates have identical accents and carry the same MacBook under their arms' (Rooney, 2018: 67). Part of what strengthens the connection between Marianne and Connell is their frustration with this educational uniformity. Back in Carricklea in her teenage years, Marianne has similar feelings to those of Connell at Trinity College:

> Marianne's classmates all seem to like school so much and find it normal. To dress in the same uniform every day, to comply at all times with arbitrary rules, to be scrutinised and monitored for misbehaviour, this is normal to them. They have no sense of the school as an oppressive environment (Rooney, 2018: 12).

Regarding this uniformity through the lens of Big Tech products and the new universalism that they generate, it becomes evident that the possibilities presented by online technology fail to redress the social conformity within Irish pre-digital era cultural practices. Digital communication may speed the decline of these practices: the drastic fall-off in regular Church attendance in Ireland, consequent upon the panoply of scandals visited upon the institution, coincides with the advent of the internet era. The price, however, is the cultivation of other norms of social behaviour, such as Connell's Trinity College classmates all wearing 'the same waxed hunting jackets and plum-coloured chinos' (Rooney, 2018: 70).[4]

Anti-Yeatsian Sligo and Deriding Dublin in *Normal People*

Normal People is the Rooney novel in which the distinction between rural and urban life in Ireland runs deepest. Connell and Marianne grow up in County Sligo, a region steeped in the antiquity and romance of Ireland's western seaboard. However, Rooney makes no concession to tropes of the County Sligo landscape upon which painter Jack B. Yeats and poet/playwright W. B. Yeats drew famously in the early twentieth century. Poems such as W. B. Yeats's 'The Stolen Child' and 'Red Hanrahan's Song About Ireland' abound in references to the Sligo landscape and coastline (Yeats, 2000: 18, 59). Some of Jack B. Yeats's most admired paintings also depict the Sligo coastline, including *Men of Destiny* (Yeats, 1946).

---

[4] The fact that Connell wears the same pair of Adidas trainers everywhere, 'even to the gym', undermines his complaint about bourgeois sartorial uniformity (Rooney, 2018: 70).

In stark contrast to this romanticism, Marianne feels little affinity for the Sligo town in which she grows up: in her teenage years, she knows little about Carricklea, nor anything about the neighbouring towns and villages (Rooney, 2018: 32). Rooney gives Yeats short shrift. At one point in *Conversations with Friends*, Frances meets a chap called Rossa through the popular online dating application, Tinder. When he tells her that he loves the poetry of Yeats, Frances replies sarcastically that the one good thing about fascism was that 'it had some good poets' (Rooney, 2017: 208). Frances's remark alludes to Yeats's association with Mussolini-supporter Ezra Pound in the 1910s and 1920s, along with his own support for the pro-Franco Blueshirt movement in 1930s Ireland.[5] Soon after, she tells Nick how awful the date was, almost having to stop the guy reciting Yeats's well-known poem, 'The Lake Isle of Innisfree', adding that '[n]o one who likes Yeats is capable of human intimacy' (Rooney, 2017: 213). In *Normal People*, Rooney throws a direct jibe at the Blueshirt movement with which Yeats was briefly associated near the end of his life. After voting in the general election, Connell sends a text message to Marianne: 'fg in government, fucks sake' (Rooney, 2018: 47). The message communicates that the Irish neoliberal party, Fine Gael, has won two of the three seats in the electoral constituency. Having voted for the local communist candidate, Connell is disgusted, particularly at a time when Ireland is in the midst of a major economic transition that followed the global financial crash of 2008. Marianne's text message reply about the local Fine Gael success is succinct: 'The party of Franco' (Rooney, 2018: 47). Early into the novel, Connell suggests that Marianne read *The Communist Manifesto* and learns that she already had. As the son of a single parent, Veronica, who works as a house-cleaner, Connell has strong grounds for embracing socialist politics. This is particularly so in an Ireland that has fully submitted itself to the boom-and-bust economics of neoliberal capitalism, as witnessed through the unprecedented affluence that the country enjoyed from the late-1990s to the mid-2000s, followed by the financial collapse and property crisis of the early 2010s.

Marianne's text message illustrates her sharp political and historical awareness, one of the aspects that attracts Connell to her. Her reference to Franco concerns the fact that one of the three branches to form the Fine Gael party in 1933 was the Army Comrades Association, or the Blueshirts, a contingent of which fought on the side of General Franco's nationalists, supported by Mussolini's fascists and Hitler's Nazis,

---

[5] For more discussion on this topic, see Cullingford (1981), Cruise O'Brien (1988) and McCormack (2005). C. Jon Delogu (2022: 295) considers Frances'ss remark 'a bit sophomoric and mean to both Rossa and Yeats since the poet's politics, especially in late life, defy easy labels'.

during the Spanish Civil War.[6] Connell knows nothing about this history of Fine Gael to which Marianne alludes, so he has to Google search what she means. The brief text message exchange between the two illustrates not only how local Irish political habits continue to hold sway in an age of text messages, emails and Google, but also how universal political categories of communism and fascism exert their influence on Irish political life well in advance of the digital era.

Despite expanded access to information through online media, *Normal People* shows the failure of digital technology to dislodge geographical divisions within Ireland. Moving from Sligo to Dublin to study English Literature at Trinity College, Connell feels isolated and conscious of a prevailing attitude to his native region. He remarks that people in Dublin 'often mention the west of Ireland in this strange tone of voice, as if it's a foreign country, but one they consider themselves very knowledgeable about' (Rooney, 2018: 69). In a Dublin bar, he tells a girl that he is from Sligo: 'she made a funny face and said: Yeah, you look like it' (Rooney, 2018: 69). At one point during their relationship, while students at Trinity College, his girlfriend Helen tells Connell that he is 'such a culchie' with 'the thickest Sligo accent' (Rooney, 2018: 165). This contrast between metropolitan Dublin and the rural west of Ireland also runs the other way. During the gathering in a local pub after Rob Hegarty's funeral service in Carricklea, one of Connell's old schoolmates, Eric, refers to Connell's girlfriend, Helen, as 'a Dub, anyway' adding the jibe that she must be the reason that Connell 'never comes home anymore' (Rooney, 2018: 211). Although masked as light-hearted banter, the tension with Connell that Eric's remarks generates reflect the continuing division in Irish society between the metropolitan capital city and the rest of the country, particularly the most rural areas in the west of Ireland.

As with Frances in *Conversations with Friends*, Marianne in *Normal People* shares much in common with Edna O'Brien's Caithleen Brady from *The Country Girls*. Marianne is a bookish, solitary young woman from a small west of Ireland town who has suffered from a domestically violent father. Her move to Dublin is not just to complete a university education. In the aftermath of the failure of her relationship with Connell to materialize, it is also a quest to find like-minded people who are free from parochial attitudes. Ultimately, Dublin city life fails to assuage Marianne's loneliness. O'Brien's Caithleen is also a bookish, solitary young woman who has suffered under a violent, alcoholic father, and who gravitates to Dublin in part with an image of the place as a literary city. Soon after she arrives there with her friend, Baba scolds Caithleen for persistently asking young men if they had read James Joyce's *Dubliners* (O'Brien, 2007:

---

[6] For a detailed account of these historical events, see Fearghal McGarry's biography of the leader of the Blueshirts, Eoin O'Duffy, particularly Chapter 8, 'The Irish Mussolini' (McGarry, 2008: 200–33).

192). The trace of Joyce appears in *Normal People* in the location of the Sheridan's holiday home: Trieste, Northern Italy, where Joyce lived for sixteen years. Joyce's importance to O'Brien is well-known from her book on Joyce's relation to his life-long partner, Nora Barnacle, as well as her biography of Joyce himself (O'Brien, 2020; O'Brien, 2011). Rooney (2022) makes the importance of Joyce clear to her understanding of modern fiction.

Although Marianne experienced bullying, domestic violence and social isolation during her childhood and adolescence in Carricklea, her mind turns back to the place during one of the loneliest times in her university years. Taking a year abroad to study in Sweden, she loses contact with most of her friends back in Ireland and forms a relationship with Lukas, a Swedish photographer, becoming involved in erotic domination/humiliation games. In the cold and distant environment of Sweden, as Lukas takes erotic photographs of her in a studio session that ends with Marianne threatening to call the police, images of Carricklea at Christmas come to her:

> When she thinks of Christmastime now she thinks of Carricklea, lights strung up over Main Street, the glowing plastic Santa Claus in the window of Kelleher's with its animated arm waving a stiff, repetitive greeting. Tinfoil snowflakes hanging in the town pharmacy. The door of the butcher shop swinging open and shut, voices calling out on the corner. Breath rising as mist in the church car park at night. Foxfield in the evening, houses quiet as sleeping cats, windows bright. The Christmas tree in Connell's front room, tinsel bristling, furniture cramped to make space, and the high, delighted sound of laughter. He said he would be sorry not to see her. Won't be the same without you, he wrote. She felt stupid then and wanted to cry. Her life is so sterile now and has no beauty in it anymore (Rooney, 2018: 196).

This passage stands in marked contrast to the lack of empathy or connection that Marianne felt for her native town and its surroundings during her adolescence several years previously, Marianne discovering a connection to native locality while living abroad. In Sweden during the winter holiday season she feels its absence deeply: most significantly, the absence of Connell. The echo of Joyce is audible, particularly the snow-covered closing scene of 'The Dead' in *Dubliners* (2000, 224–25).

Conclusion

Rooney's first two novels illustrate the automatizing effect of digital technology on human communication in contemporary Irish society. The loneliness, frustration and misunderstanding that characters like Frances experience in *Conversations with*

Friends and Marianne in *Normal People* reflect the dehumanizing influence of digital instruments. However, as the influence of Edna O'Brien's *The Country Girls* shows, these feelings are not new in Irish fiction, and not attributable entirely to the effects of sustaining relationships online. Digital technology does not erase but reconfigures the ways in which various aspects of Irish life persist in Rooney's first works of fiction, including parochial attitudes, religious rituals and a divide between rural and urban society. In one sense, the failure of digital communication to move Irish society beyond these local constraints is something to lament. In another, it is a source of optimism, since it demonstrates that digitalization has not turned characters like Frances, Bobbi, Connell and Marianne into mere functions within global communications systems.

The dialectics of universality and locality hinges on the possibility of agents taking possession of digital communication opportunities in ways that transform local attachments and identities rather than erase them. In *Conversations with Friends*, this would entail the relationships between Bobbi and Frances, Frances and Nick, Bobbi and Melissa, developing beyond the stigmas of social status and the urban denigration of rurality. These stigmas betray the prejudices of an upper class and metropolitan sense of superiority over small-town/agricultural populations. They are part of an ideological practice within advanced capitalism that encourages concentrations of human populations in urban locations. As Klein illustrates in her discussion of the aftermath of the Sri Lanka tsunami in December 2004, erasing agricultural or maritime-based living is often an integral part of corporate capitalist development (2008: 385–405). Bobbi, Frances, Nick and Melissa conduct their lives through the political form of the modern liberal-democratic state (the radical Bobbi is the daughter of a senior Irish state official). In this context, each of them holds rights and freedoms as national (Irish) and supra-national (EU) citizens. At the same time, each of them experiences daily life individually in civil society, described by Marx (in outdated gender-biased language) as that in which the individual 'treats other men as means, degrades himself to a means, and becomes a plaything of alien powers' (1977a: 46). The fashion industry has exploited Nick's body for advertising and his parents exploited him by putting him into television at an early age. Bobbi exploits Frances as a means of protesting against her privileged background. Melissa uses Bobbi and Frances for her international literary management career. Ultra-wealthy Valerie controls Nick at Etables through her financial hold over Melissa. All of them are exploited by the online digital instruments on which they depend, socially and psychologically.

The closest readers come to a universal form of digital communication that is liberating rather than exploitative occurs in *Normal People*, during Connell's travel with friends on the European continent in 2013. Communicating through text messages,

Skype video calls and emails, Connell is able to maintain regular contact with his mother Lorraine in Sligo, his girlfriend Helen in Chicago and his closest friend Marianne in Trieste, as he travels from one city to another. He is neither working nor studying during this summer travel, meaning that he is enjoying disposable time, free from producing goods, offering services or acquiring instrumental knowledge. In the early 1980s, André Gorz already saw this type of life-experience in overdeveloped societies gain precedence over working activity, whereby 'work itself has become a means towards the extension of the sphere of non-work' (1982: 81). Connell's digital communications during summer travel transforms relations between locality and universality in his life, as he enjoys new experiences in new environments while maintaining connections to his homeplace of Carricklea through regular text messages to his mother and emails to Marianne, his most intimate attachment from his schooldays in the west of Ireland town.

Ultimately, local attachment punctures the digital utopianism of this experience. Rob Hegarty's death operates in Connell's psyche as a return of the repressed, forcing him to confront the disjunction between Connell's life as it evolved in his Trinity College student years and the lives of those former school friends from his time as a teenager in Carricklea. Driven partly by the effects of the global financial crash of 2008, partly by a long history of emigration from the west of Ireland dating back to the years of the Great Famine, and partly by a desire for people like Marianne to escape suffocating restrictions imposed by small-town attitudes and constraints, the friends have dispersed, maintaining online contact only through an instant messaging group. An instance of falling (or jumping) drunk into the river Corrib after the Christmas holidays, Rob's death encapsulates the contradiction between liberation and enslavement to which digital communication is subject in the worlds of Rooney's first novels. The reconfigurations of local attachments through social media manifest themselves creepily in Rob's online afterlife as the dead but undeleted friend on Connell's Facebook page.

In the end, the heartbreak that Connell and Marianne experience in their years of miscommunication and missed opportunity in *Normal People* is a localised symptom of the general violence inflicted on *de facto* slave-workers in the production of digital technology hardware products through which Connell and Marianne maintain contact. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is recorded as proclaiming: 'For where two or three meet in my name, I am there among them' (*Holy Bible*, Matthew 18.20). Nietzsche's parody of this verse in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* encapsulates the failure of Connell and Marianne to fulfil the desire of each for the other: 'It is the distant man who pays for your love of your neighbour; and when there are five of you together, a sixth always

has to die' (Nietzsche, 2003: 87). This sixth might be Rob Hegarty in Rooney's novel (a man who has grown distant from Connell), but Nietzsche has in mind the one who is furthest in spirit from 'normal people'. Set against relations between locality and universality that digital communication configures in *Normal People*, Zarathustra's 'distant man' acquires a significance alternative to Nietzsche's intended meaning. The price of Connell and Marianne's unfulfilled love for one another is the death in some distant place of someone unknown to them, from mining accidents or from poisoning by toxicants released from the minerals mined to manufacture their mobile phones and laptops. In Bolivia alone, the average mine worker lives to 35–40 years of age and 300,000 children as young as 5 years work in mining (*The World Counts*, 2024: n. p.). Such exploitation is part of the material conditions that sustain digital communication in *Conversations with Friends* and *Normal People*.

Competing Interests

The author of this article is also the editor of the special collection and has been kept entirely separate from the peer review process for their article.

References

Althusser, L 1971 Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In: Ben Brewster (trans.) *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press. pp. 127–242.

Bory, P 2020 *The Internet Myth: From the Internet Imaginary to Network Ideologies* [ebook]. London: University of Westminster Press. https://doi.org/10.16997/book48.c [Last Accessed December 12 2024].

Braverman, H 1974 *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Cruise O'Brien, C 1988 *Passion and Cunning and Other Essays*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Crystal, D 2001 *Language and the Internet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cullingford, E 1981 *Yeats, Ireland and Fascism*. London: Macmillan.

Davis, B H and **Brewer, J P** 1997 *Electronic Discourse: Linguistic Individuals in Virtual Space*. Albany NY: State University of New York Press.

Delogu, C J 2022 *Fascism, Vulnerability, and the Escape from Freedom: Readings to Repair Democracy*. [ebook]. Earth, Milky Way: punctum books. DOI: 10.53288/0392.1.00 [Last Accessed December 12, 2024].

Dreyfuss, H L 2009 *On the Internet*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M 1991 *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975). Sheridan A (trans.). London: Penguin.

Fuchs, C 2019 *Rereading Marx in the Age of Digital Capitalism*. London: Pluto Press.

Gellman, B 2020 *Dark Mirror: Edward Snowden and the American Surveillance State*. London: Penguin.

Gorz, A 1982 *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism*. Sonenscher M (trans.). London: Pluto Press.

Holy Bible [*The New Jerusalem Bible*] 1985. London: Darton, Longman & Todd.

Illouz, E 2007 *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Joyce, J 2000 *Dubliners* (1914). London: Penguin.

Kilroy, C 2017 Conversations with Friends by Sally Rooney review – young, gifted and self-destructive. *The Guardian*, June 1. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/jun/01/conversations-with-friends-by-sally-rooney-review [Last Accessed December 17 2024].

King, Carla 1999 *Michael Davitt*. Dundalk, Ireland: Dundealgan Press.

Klein, N 2008 *The Shock Doctrine: the Rise of Disaster Capitalism*. London: Penguin.

Llorente, R 2013 Marx's Concept of "Universal Class": A Rehabilitation. *Science & Society* 77(4): 536–60.

Marx, Karl 1973 *Grundrisse*. M Nicolaus (trans.) B Fowkes (notes). London: Penguin, in association with New Left Books.

Marx, Karl 1977a On the Jewish Question (1843). In: McLellan, D (ed.) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 39–62.

Marx, Karl 1977b The Communist Manifesto (1848). In: McLellan, D (ed.) *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. pp. 221–247.

McCormack, W J 2005 *Blood Kindred: W. B. Yeats: the Life, the Death, the Politics*. London: Pimlico.

McGarry, F 2008 *Eoin O'Duffy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Millard W B 1996 I Flamed Freud: A Case Study in Teletextual Incendiarism. In: Porter, D (ed.) *Internet Culture*. New York: Routledge. pp.145–160.

Murray, S 2018 *The Digital Literary Sphere: Reading, Writing, and Selling Books in the Internet Era*. Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Nietzsche, F 2003 *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Hollingdale, R. J. (trans.). London: Penguin Classics.

O'Brien, E 2007 *The Country Girls* (1960). London: Phoenix.

O'Brien, E 2011 *James Joyce: A Life* (1999). London: Penguin.

O'Brien, E 2020 *James and Nora: A Portrait of a Marriage* (1981). London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson.

Rooney, S 2017 *Conversations with Friends*. London: Faber.

Rooney, S 2018 *Normal People*. London: Faber.

Rooney, S 2022 Misreading Joyce. *The Paris Review*. https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2022/12/07/misreading-ulysses/ [Last Accessed December 12 2024].

The World Counts: Impact through Awareness https://www.theworldcounts.com/challenges/planet-earth/mining/health-effects-of-mining [Last Accessed December 12 2024].

Woolf, Virginia 1938 *Three Guineas*. London: Hogarth Press.

Wright Mills, C 1962 *The Marxists*. London: Penguin.

Yeats, J B 1946 *Men of Destiny*. National Gallery of Ireland. http://onlinecollection.nationalgallery.ie/objects/1559 [Last Accessed December 12 2024].

Yeats, W B 2000 *Selected Poems*. Timothy Webb (ed). London: Penguin.