

## Excavating Ireland's Contemporary Heritage in Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's *The Bray House*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract.** Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's first novel, *The Bray House* (1990), is a futuristic, dystopian fantasy that envisions Ireland, Great Britain and most of Western Europe – except for the northern territories – as already laid waste by nuclear disaster in an unspecified near future. In this paper, my intention is to consider how the narrative, like other futuristic and science-fiction stories, displaces the present onto an apocalyptic future so as to bring out and criticise present-day social, cultural and political trends, particularly, the institutional tendency in Ireland to package and market History as Heritage. Some of the issues raised by the novel which will be addressed here are: For what purposes and from what perspective and attitude is the past interpreted and translated? What happens when it is precisely our treasured lifestyles that we see dissected, interpreted and analysed as if they already formed part of an arcane past? How can we feel the sense of nostalgia that heritage-based analyses imply if we are asked to mourn what we have not yet lost?

**Key words.** Ireland, heritage, history, ethnography, Ní Dhuibhne, *The Bray House*.

**Resumen.** *The Bray House* (1990), la primera novela de Eilís Ní Dhuibhne, es una obra distópica de ciencia ficción situada en un futuro cercano pero indeterminado, en la que una catástrofe nuclear en cadena ha devastado Irlanda, Gran Bretaña y casi toda Europa Occidental – excepto los países del norte. La intención de este artículo es considerar la manera en la que, tal y como sucede en otras historias futuristas y de ciencia-ficción, esta novela desplaza el presente hacia un futuro apocalíptico con la idea de criticar tendencias sociales, culturales y políticas contemporáneas. Más concretamente, la tendencia institucional en Irlanda de comercializar la Historia como Patrimonio. Algunas de las cuestiones que la novela propone y que se analizarán aquí son: ¿Con qué propósito y desde qué perspectiva y actitud se interpreta y traduce el pasado?, ¿Qué sucede cuando vemos que son nuestra cultura y formas de vida, tan apreciadas, las que son objeto de disección, interpretación y análisis como si ya formaran parte de un pasado lejano?, ¿Cómo podemos sentir la nostalgia implícita en los estudios etnográficos y de Patrimonio si se nos pide que hagamos duelo por algo que todavía no hemos perdido?

**Palabras clave.** Irlanda, patrimonio, historia, etnografía, Ní Dhuibhne, *The Bray House*.

Eilís Ní Dhuibhne's first novel, *The Bray House* (1990), is a futuristic, dystopian fantasy

that envisages Ireland, Great Britain and most of Western Europe as laid waste by nuclear

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disaster sometime in the first decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>2</sup> Drawing on the traditionally male genre of the adventure story centred on a voyage of exploration and discovery, this novel reverses gender roles and makes a woman, the Swedish archaeologist Robin Lagerlof, both leader of the expedition and internal narrator. In the form of a log, the novel relates Robin and her team's trip over to Ireland across the North Sea on board *The Saint Patrick*: a trip they undertake two years after a massive explosion at a nuclear plant in Ballylumford, Northern Ireland, had provoked a speedy chain reaction that wiped out half of Western Europe. The group's objective is to carry out a rough survey and "estimate the extent of the damage from an archaeological point of view" (Ní Dhuibhne 1990: 117).<sup>3</sup> While expecting to dig up little more than "the debris of the Irish way of life" (70), under a mound Robin uncovers a Victorian terraced house, its façade intact and its interior miraculously free from dust and rubble, the Bray House of the title. Convinced as she is that her thorough investigation of this dwelling will provide invaluable materials for a micro-study of the, by now extinct, Irish way of life, and that her planned "Ireland Exhibition", to be held upon return, will afford

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2. The novel's evident concerns with contemporary environmental abuses and with the risks implied in the pressure placed upon non-renewable natural and energetic resources have favoured critical approaches from the perspective of eco-criticism. On the other hand, its reversal of gender roles and generic conventions of popular narratives – the adventure novel, science fiction, utopian fantasies – have led other critics to consider it an example of feminist fiction. Carol Morris (1996) has analysed the novel's indebtedness to the critical utopian novel and has seen it as belonging "to that innovative region of contemporary international fiction called feminist genre fiction" (128). Christine St. Peter (2000) refers to *The Bray House* as "one of the most imaginative explorations in Irish fiction of the artificiality of gender construction" (156). For St. Peter, the protagonist of the novel "exhibits a hyper-masculinized gender within a female body, a complicated layering that reveals how unnatural and damaging hierarchical gender is, and how necessary to the maintenance of unequal power relations between, and within, the sexes" (156).

3. Further references to the novel will be to the 1990 Attic Press edition

her universal acclaim and recognition from her peers, Robin decides to carry out a full-scale excavation of the building.

Four chapters of the novel are devoted to Robin's meticulous report on the excavation and analysis of her findings. As Derek Hand contends, "Robin's report takes up the central position in the novel, acting as the fulcrum round which the rest of the narrative turns" (2000: 105). Written under the pretence of scientific neutrality, this report is meant to embody Robin's undisputable mastery of her object of study. Her log, in contrast, betrays her as a self-conscious, extremely subjective and manipulative narrator. Her colloquial style and conniving asides are uttered with an eye on her potential reader, whom she wants to seduce and win to her side, as in the following passage:

The arrangement was, then, that Jenny and Karen should always work together, and that Karl and I would share the alternative stint. And this order would have continued for the duration of the voyage, had not Jenny, who occasionally gave proof of being less innocent than was customarily apparent, manipulated a change at a certain stage in the journey, and rescued Karl from my dangerous clutches (as she no doubt would have put it herself) (15-16).

As can be seen, Robin's log centres mostly on her constant skirmishes with her three subordinates – Karen, Jenny and Karl –, who all challenge her authority and resist her scheming and abusive tactics. Interspersed with her account of these incidents, comes information – always filtered through Robin's prejudiced mind – about the other characters' pasts, and, most importantly, Robin's memories of her own life: a life originally marked by abandonment and betrayal on the part of those adults she loved and trusted most, and then dedicated to the pursuit of her own interests and ambitions – at the cost, it should be added, of those who loved and trusted her.

Like most futuristic and science fiction stories, the narrative does not so much address the future as its contemporary times: that is, it displaces the present onto an apocalyptic future so as to bring out and criticise present-day social, cultural and political trends. In Derek Hand's words: "Ní Dhuibhne uses the elaborate device of a future expedition to Ireland as a means of contrasting an imagined future with the realities of the present moment,

allowing the present to be considered as if it were the past: beyond the demands of being faithful to immediate lived experience in order that it may be observed with more objectivity” (2000: 106). In fact, the early 21<sup>st</sup>-century-Ireland of the novel can easily be recognised as the Ireland of the 1980s, a decade when the country underwent a backlash against the modernising policies started in the 1960s (Gibbons 1996: 83; Ferriter 2005: 623-759). Hence the references in the novel to an economically depressed country, still drained by emigration, where unemployment, juvenile delinquency and political corruption are rampant and the Northern conflict is at its height: “a country of poverty, violence and ignorance” (167), in Robin’s opinion. Some of the documents Robin finds in the Bray House are newspaper pieces illustrating the disastrous economic, social and environmental situation of Ireland just before the catastrophe. There are references to widespread poverty and to the Combat Poverty Association; the failure of the Welfare system; continuing emigration; environmental pollution, food contamination, high radiation levels and animal plagues. Historically, unemployment and poverty became serious concerns in the 80s, when the Combat Poverty Agency, established in 1986, estimated that one third of the population were living in poverty (Ferriter 2005: 670). On the other hand, there were in this decade several pollution scandals in Ireland, particularly in rural areas – pig slurry and agricultural waste and illegal dumping –, together with popular protest and outrage at the Sellafield nuclear reprocessing plant pumping radioactive waste into the Irish Sea (731-732).<sup>4</sup>

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4. Retrospectively and with the benefit of historical hindsight, one of the documents found in the house that may call the reader’s attention is a news-piece from *The Irish Eagle* informing of a recruiting campaign launched by the army of the Republic of Iran in order to attract Irish immigrants. This is accompanied by institutional commentaries on the fruitful and long business relationships with Iran – beef exportation – and the categorical (and ironic) statement that “Arabic is now taught in most schools, having almost completely ousted Irish as a Leaving Certificate subject” (150). In this respect, historian Diarmaid Ferriter refers to the Goodman beef companies scandal and their corrupt beef trade with Iraq along the 80s (2005: 678-679). The two

According to Gerry Smyth (1997: 168), *The Bray House* addresses a 1990s readership, who is invited to evaluate its own perceptions of Ireland as against Robin’s descriptions. Although a plausible argument, the novel also articulates several theoretical and critical concerns that are still pertinent today: questions related to the discursive construction of gender and national identities, to the Foucauldian power/knowledge problematic and Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, to trauma studies and eco-criticism. In addition, the text also participates in the contemporary critical re-evaluation of space (Smyth 2001: 1-23; Ryan 2002: 16-31), and brings to the fore the legitimacy of certain Heritage practices based on the social sciences of anthropology and ethnology – interpretative centres, and ethnographic exhibitions and museums – which have become tremendously popular in the last decades, both as tourist attractions and as objects of academic study. It is this last aspect, the implications of ethnology and Heritage as encoded in the novel that I now propose to address in some detail.

In his work *Theatres of Memory* (1994), Raphael Samuel defines Heritage as “the practice of the art of memory” (vii), a practice that balances the shortcomings of conventional historiography by taking “as the object of its inquiry ‘ordinary’ people and ‘everyday’ life” (16). Samuel argues that Heritage democratises and expands historical culture, extending the work of investigation and retrieval into spheres and objects once thought unworthy of notice (25). For Samuel, heritage practices have greatly contributed to modernising and updating the idea of what constitutes the historical by broadening its social base (210) and providing a pluralist view of the national past (281). But Heritage has its detractors too, the main charges being its commodification of history and culture for tourist consumption, its spurious pursuit of authenticity (Smyth 2001: 31-40), its replacement of history by spectacle, hyperreality and simulation, its implication in power relations (Smyth 2001: 26) and, linked to this, its domestication of “otherness” and of

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Gulf Wars and S/11 no doubt have changed the reader’s decoding of such fictional and historical events.

the past (Hewison 1991: 175; Samuel 1994: 259).

The highly selective narratives offered by heritage practices, according to these critical voices, tend to stabilise the past (Kiberd 2005: 221), transforming it into a unified and closed story (Hewison 1991: 175; Samuel 1994: 243; Bell 1998: 229). But, maybe, this need not always be so.

For a start, it can be argued that conventional historiography can be as selective of and as biased in relation to the past as heritage practices. Next comes the question of the different uses and representations of tradition. As Robert Welch (1993: x-xi) has argued, although tradition can serve to fix the past and freeze it, so that its present impact blocks future progress, it can also become an element of renovation if translated and approached in complete openness. If, following Foucault, we believe that “History becomes ‘effective’ to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being” (in Kearney 1985: 31), the question at hand is: is there some way in which Heritage can remain true to the open-ended, contradictory and hybrid nature of a nation’s history and culture?

By way of speculation, exhibitions and museums may be conjectured as heterotopias, as spaces either of illusion or otherness where incommensurable objects belonging to different orders are jumbled together, making it impossible to unify them in a single narrative. In this way, their discontinuity and incoherence would undermine any pretence of a common sense of inheritance embodied by the exhibited objects. Likewise, attention would be called to the always-arbitrary selections and arrangements of history. From a different perspective, Declan Kiberd has imagined the “ideal museum” as one “which could make its exclusions, both deliberate and regretted, part of its own explanatory narrative and which could disrupt previous narrative accounts, asking people to take sides as a new order displaces older ones” (2005: 233). He also suggests the possibility of some kind of federal national museum which would include all possible histories, a project which in Ireland “would embrace children’s, labour and women’s museums, as well as those of a nationalist and unionist disposition” (234). Additionally, Desmond Bell (1998: 248-52), in his description and analysis of Luke Dodd’s

interpretative installation for the Irish Famine Museum at Strokestown House, has commented on the curators’ multivocal and multilayered representation of this tragic episode: as material event, historical memory and cultural trauma. Abandoning a positivist historical approach and juxtaposing diverse materials, past and contemporary, the curators have pointed up the constructed nature of historical evidence, the rhetorical character of visual representation and the imbrication of images in power relations. So, the poetics and politics of Heritage need not always fetishise culture, domesticate otherness and depoliticise history by repossessing it for present interests. Rather, the questions to ask are: Who interprets the past? For what purposes? And, how is the past represented? Let us now see what *The Bray House* has to say in this respect.

In generic terms, the novel is a fictional example of European travel writing, traditionally linked to colonial and imperial expansion and, in the Irish case, mostly produced from Britain.<sup>5</sup> In many such narratives, the unequal encounter with the Irish other was a way of confirming the identity of both coloniser and colonised subjects; it was an event, structured around an ethics of sameness and not of alterity, which reinforced the privileged position of the colonial traveller, of the one who interpreted the experience by translating it into his/her own familiar terms. More particularly, *The Bray House* can be connected with the adventure novels that became so popular in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the novels of Stevenson, Conan Doyle, Rider Haggard and Conrad, among others. In fact, the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century features significantly in *The Bray House*, not only in its generic indebtedness to the adventure story, but also because of the rise of anthropology and ethnology during this same period – precisely the sciences that inform Robin’s project, and heritage practices in general. Not surprising, therefore, is the fact that the house Robin discovers is a Victorian house, nor the archaeologist’s clearly Darwinian mentality – she has boundless admiration for the instinct of survival, which she believes to be determined by a combination of accident and heredity (52).

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5. Morris (1996) and Hand (2000) have discussed the novel’s indebtedness to science fiction and utopian narratives.

Ethnographic museums specialise in collecting examples of the material culture of peoples considered the appropriate target for anthropological research. In the nineteenth century these peoples would have been labelled as exotic, primitive, pre-literate, savage or vanishing races, while in our contemporary times they are described as aboriginal, indigenous, first nations, or autochthonous (Lidchi 1997: 161). As Henrietta Lidchi argues (1997: 161-62), through a specific poetics of representation and distinct classificatory systems, ethnographic museums have not simply reflected natural distinctions but served to create cultural ones, and this because the sciences on which they are based – anthropology and ethnology – are not primarily sciences of discovery but sciences of invention. In Sara Ahmed's words, the work of the ethnographer is an act of cultural translation that "produces knowledge of the foreign through a radical *de-termining* of the foreign. Ethnographic knowledge would not be knowledge of the stranger, but knowledge of the familiar: knowledge which creates the stranger in the familiar in order then to destroy it" (2000: 58). Ethnographic museums do not replicate the essential nature of cultural difference, but classify and constitute this difference systematically and coherently, in accordance with a particular historical and political agenda, which, more often than not, has referred to the struggle for power between "the West and the Rest", to use Stuart Hall's phrase (in Lidchi 1997: 186). Yet, the historical complicity between anthropology and colonialism implies that, in the wake of decolonisation and in a new global context, the discipline has been forced to question its own aesthetics and ethics. Recent changes point towards a greater respect for the cultures represented and the incorporation of postmodernist strategies: self-reflexivity, dialogue or polyvocality, the inclusion of hybrid and syncretic objects, together with the right for those represented to have a say in the poetics of the exhibition or museum. Unfortunately, though, in *The Bray House*, Robin's approach to Ireland is more indebted to 19<sup>th</sup> century practices than to late 20<sup>th</sup> century ones.

Robin's outlook on Ireland and her Bray House project are nothing but an extension of

her personality. Her megalomania signals her pathological narcissism. Incapable of the slightest sign of empathy towards the others, she constantly treats people as types and dismisses them through sweeping generalisations, as in the following passage:

Although I have been managing personnel for years, I am nevertheless always taken aback when it is brought home to me how very manageable people are, in professional situations. Karen, Karl, Jenny: three human beings of strong and stubborn character, thorough individuals, contrary, unpredictable in every personal contingency, when dealt with like schoolchildren in a classroom responded as schoolchildren, Was this a reflection of their professional incompetence? Or merely of their need for an infallible omniscient guide? A god? (86)

She, inadvertently, functions as a refracting mirror of received discourses, prejudiced and stereotyped, from which she believes herself to be inexplicably free. Her extreme ego-centrism leads her to interpret other people's behaviour, feelings and emotions in her own terms, and her insatiable lust for power translates into her unscrupulousness, ruthlessness and hypocrisy in her interpersonal relationships.

When Robin's psychological features are brought together with her scientific venture the result is an imperialist, utterly ethnocentric project. Her excavation combines archaeology, anthropology and ethnology. Yet, its interdisciplinary nature, so fashionable nowadays, does not secure its ethical foundation. Robin embarks on her "journey into the unknown" (5) with previous colonisations in mind – the Saxons, the Romans, the Vikings (36) – and at one point she even likens her voyage to Christopher Columbus' (172).<sup>6</sup> Her commentaries on Irish culture and society are always measured against Sweden, which at all times fares better. She claims to have followed a foolproof methodology for her report and

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6. In her analysis of various intertextual references in *The Bray House*, Morris comments on Robin's praise of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* concluding that "[Robin] is in fact another coloniser, yet another invader of Ireland, taking and not giving back, no better than the oppressors who have preceded her through the centuries" (1996: 138).

analysis of the Bray House findings: positivistic, holistic, empirical and logical (248). In fact, this is far from the truth.

To begin with, she has selected for the exhibition those objects and documents which she considers most representative and significant (132). But, representative of what and significant for what or whom? As Derek Hand observes, what is going on in *The Bray House* is a conflict over interpretation: Robin “perceives her act of interpretation in terms of power and control. It is basically for her an issue of authority and authorship” (2000: 111). In her supposed intention of preserving the Irish way of life, she has converted an upper middle-class family, the MacHughs, into a microcosmic example of the country. Not even the appearance, later on in the novel, of Maggie Byrne, the only Irish survivor of the catastrophe – a “living exhibit” we could say – who is working class and of rural stock, can make Robin change her story. Although appearing almost at the end of the novel, Maggie Byrne is a character with wide resonance. When Robin first sights her, she compares her to a survivor of Belsen or Auschwitz (216) and describes her in the following terms: “emaciated, apparently bald, with wide crazed eyes staring from greenish skin” (216). The link established here with the survivors of the most excruciating twentieth-century trauma, coupled with Maggie’s description and the features of the Irish landscape after the nuclear catastrophe – naked, silent, ashy, a “ghost country” (72) – serve as a reminder of the Irish nineteenth-century collective trauma: The Great Irish Famine. On the other hand, Jenny states that she first believed Maggie to be a fairy. In fact, Jenny’s account of her rebellious and solitary adventure with Karl and their encounter with Maggie comes in the guise of a fairy tale, a narrative discourse which Robin utterly dislikes, as she dislikes any kind of popular fictional genre – romance, melodrama, detective fiction. For Hand, Jenny’s choice of style “is a sign of her and Karl’s assertion of themselves in this power struggle with Robin” (2000: 113), as well as evidence that “truth can be found in different narrative forms: that the scientific language of the Report is not the only means of gaining and presenting knowledge” (114).<sup>7</sup> Yet, Robin is not willing to renounce

her claims to absolute mastery of anything Irish. At one moment, in dialogue with Jenny, Robin declares:

‘Because my story is true. It doesn’t need a MacHugh to prove it. It’s true because my methodology is foolproof: positivistic and holistic. It has to work. Solid empirical research, rigid logical analysis, coupled with a vast knowledge of all circumstantial data. The story I’ll write is the true story of the MacHughs. Even if a MacHugh came along and suggested otherwise, I would believe that. The MacHugh would be wrong’ (248).

Besides, Robin herself acknowledges that the MacHughs, although having some specifically Irish traits, were on the whole part of the global society and “their lifestyles, ideas and customs, were not essentially different from those of anyone in Sweden, France, Germany or any other developed European country” (165). Where is their representative Irishness, then? Moreover, in her report Robin has completely ignored any evidence of Irish history and culture as palimpsests, such as the old runes found in the cave where Maggie survived for two years or the Victorian traces in the town of Bray and in the Bray House. She has chosen to excavate the Bray House and analyse the MacHughs, not just to dig up and collect the materials, but because they are significant for her: the scientific observation of the objects found in the house, together with her interpretation of the public and private life of its inhabitants, are the perfect excuse to try to exorcise her own ghosts and heal her own traumas through the strategy of projection. It could be said that Robin has modelled her approach to the Bray House on “a coercive realism in which places can supposedly ‘speak’ for themselves and in which each place has a meaning amenable to analysis” (Smyth 2001: 2). What she has ignored is that “the house in fact embodies the most primal resonances of the human experience – sanctuary, love, reason – while

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7. Ní Dhuibhne graduated in English Literature and wrote her Ph.D. in folklore. Her fictional work frequently combines intertextual elements from Irish myth and folklore with contemporary narratives. For a compelling defence of the value of folklore and folk memory as subaltern history see the work of Angela Bourke (1999; 2003).

also providing spatial form for that which resists empirical analysis” (5). The “soul” of the house and its inhabitants is absent from Robin’s report. In Morris’s words, Robin’s account “omits that vital factor, the ‘human’ dimension, and observes the people and the country with too cold an eye. Hers is an ‘exploitative’ analysis, a sort of scientific rape, in a sense” (1996: 131).

Robin’s alleged duties to science and scholarship in the accomplishment of her project are actually a cover-up, a fetish that masks her unconscious anxieties and desires, mostly related to her feelings of loss, guilt and nostalgia for her Irish husband Michael, whose death she indirectly provoked; for her mother, who Robin feels never loved her; and for her father, who betrayed her. The Ireland excavation offers her the opportunity to disavow the unconscious contents of her nostalgia and allows her to maintain her position of supremacy. Essentially, discovering and conquering Ireland is an alibi for her acute longing for home and the maternal. In a rare emotional outburst, Robin exclaims: “Home, which I have never had. Mother, mother! I cried, as I watched the specks. Mother, take me home! Mother, say it, Mother, just once. Say, say you love me!” (216). Significantly, at another point in the novel Robin figures the Irish landscape in unmistakably, yet sinister, feminine terms which connote her ambivalent feelings: “Bray Head, the Little Sugar Loaf, The Big Sugar Loaf [...] I picked them out, darker now, more solid, rising from a milky sea, the rounded haunches, the pointed breasts. The humps. Lumps. Tumours” (54). To sum up, Robin’s endeavour fits the imperialist practice of exhibiting other cultures from an ethnocentric perspective, frequently involving strategies of projection, fetishisation and disavowal, and rarely respectful or disinterested. To conclude this essay, I would like now to examine, if only briefly, the novel’s legacy for the contemporary reader.

A first point is the unsettling effect of seeing our own customs, habits and lifestyles dissected by a hostile gaze. In the novel, Robin may assert

that the nuclear disaster has so altered life that the pre-Ballylumford world, though only two years distant, is now more archaic than the Middle Ages (108). However, the problem is that this is never evident for the reader. There is not enough distance for us to feel confident and reassured in our positions.

The exercise of considering that our lifestyles are now the object of ethnographic study may have the salutary consequence of undermining our sense of progress and superiority in relation to past historical periods or to other cultures. Still, the experience of figuring the extinction of life as we know it, of mourning what we have not yet lost, evokes the nostalgia for the present that Fredric Jameson saw as pervading postmodern culture. While we try to hold on to the familiar, we simultaneously become aware that it is rapidly vanishing, just in the same way as the forces of globalisation are tenaciously eroding any distinctive sense of national identity.

At the same time, the novel echoes a colonial Irish history of repeated acts of dispossession, subjugation and appropriation of the nation’s culture. By bringing to the fore the unethical spirit and spurious motivations behind such acts, *The Bray House* cautions the reader not to reproduce the same pattern, not to fall into the trap of representing other cultures or other historical periods without respect for their utter otherness. Then, when read in the twenty-first century, *The Bray House* raises the issue of whether the country of poverty, violence and ignorance Robin describes is actually past matter.

I would like to end with a personal reflection. To imagine that the contents of my house – my family photographs, my clothes, jewellery, even the microwave in my kitchen – may one day be exhibited is a disturbing thought. I feel it now as an unwelcome invasion of my privacy. And, I wonder, will the person in charge of interpreting me capture the ineffable dimension of my being, or, will I be reduced to the condition of representative example of contemporary culture? Am I really that typical?

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