

# Critical Inquiries Into Irish Studies

---

Volume 5  
Issue 1 *Emigration, Immigration,  
Hybridity*

---

Article 1

January 2023

## Hereafter: The Telling Life of Ellen O'Hara: An Interview with Vona Groarke

Elizabeth Brewer Redwine  
*Seton Hall University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarship.shu.edu/ciiis>



Part of the [Celtic Studies Commons](#), [English Language and Literature Commons](#), [History Commons](#), [Race, Ethnicity and Post-Colonial Studies Commons](#), and the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Brewer Redwine, Elizabeth. "Hereafter: The Telling Life of Ellen O'Hara: An Interview with Vona Groarke," *Critical Inquiries Into Irish Studies*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2023, <https://scholarship.shu.edu/ciiis/vol5/iss1/1>. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70531/2576-6414.1016>

## *Hereafter: The Telling Life of Ellen O'Hara: An Interview with Vona Groarke*

Elizabeth Brewer Redwine, Seton Hall University

---

Vona Groarke's thirteenth book, *Hereafter: The Telling Life of Ellen O'Hara* – a poetic account of Irish women domestic servants in 1890s New York, which arose out of her time as a Cullman Fellow at the New York Public Library 2018-19 – was published in November 2022 by New York University Press. Of her eight poetry collections, the most recent is *Link: Poet and World* (Gallery Press, 2021). Her *Selected Poems* won the 2017 Pigott Prize for Best Irish Poetry Collection. Poet, essayist, reviewer and editor, her work has recently appeared in *New York Review of Books*, *L.A. Review of Books*, *P.N. Review* and *Poetry Review*. She is the current Writer-in-Residence at St John's College, Cambridge in the U.K.

**CHHS:** One of the joys of this book is the meta-writing, your honest and thoughtful reflections on this project as you create. What went into your construction of the narrative voice or persona of the writer as an autobiographical and/or fictional technique? My co-editor and I have been discussing whether we should refer to the voice in the text in this interview as “you” (Vona Groarke) or “the narrator” and I want to address that question: is the voice your own as you see it or the voice of a narrator, or a melding of both?

**Groarke:** I doubt any writer would say the voice they write in is “their own” exactly. It might be close (or it might *seem* close), but there's always a gap that's crucial to the text, into which you might slip a passage that is speculative or projected, to shape or inflect texture, style, or tone. “Does this sound like me?” is not a question I would ask of anything I write: it would never occur to me that this would matter. Every voice in fiction, non-fiction, or poetry is a thrown voice: what's ultimately published is what's deemed good writing – whether it's true or not to the facts of my own life is neither here nor there. I've never written autobiography, but I'd also have to say everything I write has an autobiographical element to it because it derives from my sensibility, literary values, and writing style. I suppose I'd argue that style tends to be autobiographical; content, not so much. The narrator of *Hereafter* is a version of me, sure, in that the lyrical tone she deploys is one that you might recognize if you already knew my poetry. Also, the self-reflexive strategies of writing. So, the narrator's voice is somewhat consistent with the narrative voice of much of my previous writing. Is that me, my own voice? Only to a limited extent. The narrative voice here is also determined by other factors particular to this book, such as the need for tonal difference from Ellen's voice, and the need for writing to bridge the various contrasting elements of the book – the sonnets, history, and few fictional passages. I was much more interested in having the narrator's voice be hard-working and relevant within the context of the book than within the context of my life. As with any piece of writing, my life shouldn't matter to it in the least beyond being, perhaps, a useful starting point. But if it turns out to be also an end point, we're in trouble!

**CHHS:** The book is a conversation with a ghost. I loved the moments when Ellen joins the narrator at the New York Public Library. The place is thick with spirits; I have had some

visitations there myself when researching Abbey Theatre actresses in the Berg Collection, perhaps conjured by scholars trying to find and follow lost links to the past. Even my own grandmother peered over my shoulder a few times as I was reading. How did the character Ellen, or the multiple “Ellens,” come to you, and how much of those conversations come from imagination and/or from actual historical or familial documents? Ellen also brings humor to the ghostly scenes. Cousin Kath appears and disappears when Ellen says, “like she’s enjoying herself, ‘Back to the drawing board with you. I didn’t have any Kath.’” Can you speak about Ellen’s wry and funny tone and her appearances in your life and in the text?

**Groarke:** From very early on in the writing project, it seemed desirable that Ellen would be a spiky, resistant, and occasionally caustic presence in the book. Why? Because it would have been a pretty dull book if it hinged around me asking questions of this character, only for her to answer them quickly and obligingly. There had to be some push-back in order to create tension and drama. The relationship between the narrator and the character of Ellen seemed the richest possible source of this drama: it really wouldn’t have worked for the narrator to be spiky or resistant as the book needs her to be relatively consistent and transparent, so that she can hold the various narrative threads together. So, the drama had to belong to Ellen and, since there’s so much about her life that remains unknown, it seemed like good sense to have her use this in her negotiations with the narrator. But I need to be clear: she didn’t appear to me “in my life”: she’s a character of a ghost I devised for narrative ends – I’m not claiming more than that for her. I certainly don’t want to suggest any supernatural visitations to the Cullman Center! I made her up, based on my research into the lives of women such as her, of which there is, happily, a great amount by eminent and elegant historians. That’s all I had to work with, that and my imagination. There are no familial documents, only limited historical documents such as Census Records, Shipping Passenger Manifests, Church Records and Civil Registers (for Ellen’s marriage and death details). Out of these I had to fashion a credible speaking voice and to populate it with specifics of lives such as Ellen would have lived. She is “an” Ellen, one of many such young women of general experience, whose voice (if one is to write it interestingly or “authentically”) still need to be distinct.

**CIIIS:** This issue of *Critical Inquiries into Irish Studies* is about emigration and immigration, and one cannot discuss the Irish diaspora without bringing in the Famine. The National Archive estimates that 1.5 million Irish immigrants arrived in America during the Famine years of 1845-1855, and your book shows how later immigration was fueled by issues rooted in the Famine period. How does the Famine shadow the beginning of the book and the characters’ lives?

**Groarke:** Section 2 of *Hereafter*, “The Long Shadow,” is about exactly this. Ellen’s parents were children during the Great Famine and, although the famines in subsequent decades in the West of Ireland (including one in 1882, the year Ellen left for America) were not on the same scale, they must, nonetheless, have been very frightening for them, bringing back memories of that hugely traumatic childhood experience. I imagine that these memories might have prompted Austin and Anne to encourage Ellen to leave for the New World, to get out from under the threat of such a catastrophe. We know now that trauma such as that of the Great Famine doesn’t end

with the event itself but can be inherited, genetically, by subsequent generations. Famine must have seemed a clear and present threat to Ellen and her siblings, to which emigration must have seemed a relatively convenient corrective. In the book, I try to probe the nature of that threat, and to think about how present the legacy and memory of the Great Famine must have been to a small community such as Ellen's, and how any possible revival of it must have seemed both terrifying and terrifyingly possible.

**CHHS:** This book addresses loss. In my own work, the burnt letters from Molly Allgood to J. M. Synge create a hole in the history of her contributions to his plays. I found your navigation of such lost letters to be particularly poignant and beautiful. As you say, there is so much material about "the idea of" the domestic servants, and so little about who they actually were. Was there such a loss in your own life that inspired you to address this here? Who or what is missing from the pasts we learn about in society and school? What is lost and what remains? I am referring here not just to the many pieces of Ellen's life that we will never know or see, but also how objects can signify loss, such as the correspondence between Ellen and her granddaughter that Ellen's daughter burned, as well as the watch that stays with the family.

**Groarke:** *Hereafter* is, in its own way, a small act of recovery. Obviously, there's an imbalance in what's recorded of women's and of men's lives, historically. My book tries to write into that imbalance, as does the work of many other writers delving into underrepresented "minorities." Saidiya Hartman, for example, was an important early influence on my project, and her book *Lose Your Mother*, a style model for what I hoped to achieve with *Hereafter*. Henri Matisse wrote of his art: "I don't paint things; I only paint the difference between things," and this way of thinking about difference, gaps, absences, and relationships is crucial to the book. But as you rightly imply, the book also attempts to "paint" not only the differences between them, but the things themselves. Objects are powerful and resonant suggestive tools: there's no writer worth their salt who'd ignore the telling detail. They're signifiers, of course, but they're also end-stopped conveyances of their own historical potential. Because humans love to construct story, you can set a narrative ticking with a well-placed object: readers won't resist the temptation to project a *before* and *after* onto it, and suddenly you have a timeline, a set of relationships, and plot potential. It's a trick learned, perhaps, from Still Life paintings where objects are, first and foremost, their own reality, and then are perceptible as part of a set of referential relationships. I tried to use things in *Hereafter* in something of the same way, as imaginable, material objects that also have the capacity to contribute to the bigger story, and to suggest ways in which that bigger story might be colored in and made more accessible and real.

**CHHS:** The last lines of your Acknowledgments are: "Lastly, to Ellen and all the other Ellens who worked so hard and made such a difference, in the United States and at home." Your book emphasizes the importance of history-changing research into hidden lives and portrays your "modest proposal" that the Irish Free State was made possible by the Ellens, the Bridgets, all the young women who left Ireland, worked in American cities, and sent money back to their families. You argue, convincingly, that the money sent home gave rise to the Free State and the Irish economy. Can you discuss that revelation and the complicated feelings their unseen

contributions evoke? The section of many Ellens, “Not My Ellen,” addresses this issue. Do you see this as a way of challenging definitions of heroic and “unheroic,” as you put it in the *Note on the Poems*? Does the book redress the imbalance in the “public” histories of men and the hidden histories of women, specifically working-class Irish women?

**Groarke:** Without paraphrasing what I hope is a quite nuanced argument, I can say that *Hereafter* is deeply interested in money earned, saved, spent, or sent home by women such as Ellen. Letters sent home without a money order were known as “empty letters” back in Ireland – that’s heartbreaking, that no amount of their news or communication would matter as much as the money they sent back. I think now, with distance between our now and their then, that we’re more inclined to frame emigration sentimentally than financially, but emigration was always fundamentally about money – the lack of it, the excitement of it, and the cost of it. Women such as Ellen had almost no work prospects in Ireland – there was farm work and work as servants, both of which paid next to nothing. In the U.S., their meagre servants’ wages must have seemed a fortune, at least initially. Their male emigrant counterparts were also expected to send money home but as their jobs rarely involved “living in,” they had considerable overheads and less disposable income to remit back home. I’m also convinced that young women would have been well-trained at home in the ways of obedience and self-sacrifice, thus ensuring their continued financial compliance with the practice of remitting, once they were away. The problem is, there are no statistics that differentiate between what women sent home, and what men did. There’s some recorded anecdotal evidence from bank clerks about the majority of money being paid in by young Irish women (which I gratefully include in the book), but there are no hard facts, unfortunately. There may be other ways to get at the financial truth with some certainty (through a gender analysis of bank accounts, perhaps), but as I’m not an historian, I’ll have to leave that to others better qualified than I.

**CIIS:** The written word, the idea of the “scholar,” the Irish language, and the feeling and place of “home” join in your work and is a central theme in much late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Irish literature, reflecting the imposition of English on the Irish people and later attempts to restore Irish as a living language. For instance, Brien Friel’s play *Translations* springs to mind as an expression of this struggle and its history. How do home and language fracture and connect in your book, and do you see this theme as you develop it participating in, and perhaps breaking away from, that tradition?

**Groarke:** Ellen’s family in Co. Sligo would have spoken Irish at home but would have learned English in school. I imagine her relationship with the Irish language was fundamentally nostalgic. As a domestic servant, keeping up her Irish would have been nigh impossible unless there was another Irish-speaking servant in the house. Irish conversation classes or get-togethers would have been inaccessible to servants who routinely worked fifteen-hour days, six and a half days a week (the other half day was for going to Mass). The concept of “leisure” would have been alien to Ellen and her ilk. Given how practical I make Ellen, I can’t imagine that she would have shed many tears over the loss of her Irish language in the U.S. but, as I can’t be sure of this, I also write a scene in which she and her younger emigrant sisters meet and talk in Irish. I

suspect the language may have been a kind of secret family code, a place of protected privacy in which they could, for once, speak as they chose, and I like to think the language could have offered them at least that measure of freedom of expression, but who knows. *Translations* is about Irish in Ireland, and that's significantly different, I imagine, from thinking about Irish in a context where it was not a language for functional or commercial transactions (in fact, lack of English would severely hamper an emigrant's prospects). The pity of it is that so many of these Irish children were destined for emigration from an early age that the preferencing of English over Irish made unfortunate but practical sense. And we're talking about people who'd learned the hard way that practicality was their surest survival mechanism, however depleted or lonely that survival might turn out to be. The idea of "home" must have been complex for Ellen and all the Ellens: on the one hand, everyone she loved was back there but, on the other, it was a place impossible to live in, except on the most pinched and precarious terms. A bittersweet relationship, for sure. Ellen went back there when she had a pointed and poignant reason to, but only then. Her life in New York must have exposed her to hard-nosed facts about her value and status: I really have a hard time imagining her being very invested in nostalgia: I suspect she would have been much more focused on the practical challenges of saving money and working towards the end-goal of being able to have her children re-join her in New York, however difficult that may have been for them. We're talking about a context, as you can see, where allegiance to place was of limited value and where hope was rarely a question of return or recovery, but of winning some sort of secure foothold in a new context, a new life.

**CHHS:** Ellen is part of the Irish diaspora; she is an exile, one who returns and then stays in the new world, first with, then without, then with, her children. Her children are born in America, raised in Ireland, and return to America, whereas she is the one who stays. Other novels/memoirs such as Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* and Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*, have addressed the impact on family relations and identities of this unique back-and-forth between Ireland and America. How does your portrayal of Ellen's life participate in, and uniquely develop, the complicated formation of Irish-American hybrid identity?

**Groarke:** It's a common belief that once people left Ireland to emigrate to the U.S., they never came back. The "American Wake," held the night before they travelled, was the last a community would see of them. While that may have been true of emigration during the Great Famine, once steamships became the usual method of crossing the Atlantic, shipping times were reduced by up to two thirds and there was a lot more back-and-forth. Ellen crossed the Atlantic three times (that I know of). My mother came back to Ireland with her family as a 12-year-old in 1936, and made two return journeys, in 1975 and 1985. Three generations down from Ellen, I've lost count of how many times I've made the same journey, but I'm guessing it's at least fifty. I'd always had a sense of there being an American side to my family story, and it always intrigued me. The luck of it is that I was given the chance to research and write it up, at the Cullman Center in the New York Public Library. Do I feel more American now that I've, in some sense, pinned it down? I do not. If I'd grown up in the U.S. I suspect I'd have written this book quite differently, but my sense of being an outsider (always a useful position for a poet) meant that I allowed myself certain liberties in the telling of the tale. But those liberties are only feasible if

you don't lose sight of the fact that you're not telling *every* story; you're selecting one, with the hope/ambition that it will be idiosyncratic but also true in a general sense in, perhaps, roughly equal measure. The second you convince yourself you're peddling objective truth, your powers of invention are necessarily hampered. Which is why Ellen has to be a strong character in the book, too blocky and resistant to be in any way transparent, so that readers might believe I'm not asking them to see clean through her. Which is a long way around saying that I'm not trying to portray the complicated formation of Irish-American hybrid identity, not at all. I'm simply telling a story and I choose to believe that the manner of its telling is its most interesting aspect. If that story has wider resonance, then I'm careful to suggest it, only, not to pin it down. It's for others to extrapolate. Any good book understands that it's in conversation with lives it can't possibly know a great deal about – the lives of its readers – and is rightfully reticent in view of this. You mustn't holler: I find people take to it in books about as much as they do in life. I think *Hereafter* knows full well that readers will recognize aspects of their own family stories there but it's both canny and respectful enough (I hope) not to claim them for its own or to brandish them as if it did.

**CIIS:** This book breaks open areas of feminist and immigrant history that have been hidden for so long. Do you have any plans to continue with this exploration in your next project, or are you taking off in a new direction?

**Groarke:** *Hereafter* is my thirteenth book: my fourteenth (to be published as *Woman of Winter* by The Gallery Press in August 2023) is a free “translation” of the ninth century Old Irish poem more commonly known as “The Hag of Beare.” My version picks up on the original's concern with what it is to grow older in a woman's body and develops this theme in a more deliberate way. As such, I suppose you could say its interest in feminizing contemporary poetry is not entirely distinct from the broadly similar interests of *Hereafter* but, being a book of poetry (albeit with illustrations by the brilliant contemporary Irish artist, Isabel Nolan), it doesn't commit to quite the same multi-genre experiment in form. I'm not an historian (although I did study history as an undergraduate, many years ago): I'm merely a poet with an abiding interest in formal invention. My current project is a book of highly individual prose essays about poems and why they matter (if they do). It's been a long time in the writing – essays are tricky! – but I do believe I begin to see a finish line in sight. My other current project, which is always ongoing and never complete, is the writing of brave new poems. Wish me luck!

**CIIS:** Thank you.

---