

OUT OF TIME AND INTO HISTORY: REPRESENTATIONS OF CHANGING
IDENTITY IN TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY IRISH LITERATURE

by

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For Caitlin and Joseph

‘...bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves.’

Colum McCann,

Let the Great World Spin

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Abstract

This study explores notions of changing identity in contemporary Ireland. It examines the changing nature of Irish identity as represented in works of contemporary literature produced by Irish writers at the start of the twenty-first century, spanning a twelve year period from 1999 to 2011. Drawing upon literary works of contemporary Irish literature published during this period of prolific change in Ireland, the focus of this study is to explore various aspects of Ireland's social, economic, political, cultural and religious life during this time. Close analysis of a range of contemporary novels by celebrated award-winning popular writers will consider the ways in which each of these writers respond to the interconnected themes of history, memory and belonging to present their perspective on the experience of the contemporary in Ireland. The notion of how contemporary Irish literature reflects the development of Irish national identity in this particular time phase is explored through three key genre studies: contemporary fiction about historical events; contemporary Irish crime fiction; and twenty-first century Irish diasporic fiction. Each of these genre studies is set against concepts of the nation - both backward and forward looking - in the sense that Ireland is seeking both a return to the certainties of Catholic Ireland, whilst also seeking to create a new cultural nation-code extending beyond existing frameworks. Through the frame of these two strands of Irish identity, this study considers how Irish writers are defining possibilities of the future – through perceptions of different moments of the past and present – with boundaries that are continually being redefined.

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Introduction

Trying to define the twenty-first-century novel is problematic. Identifying a set of cultural practices or thematic characteristics in an effort to ‘capture the contemporary’¹, is hindered by the problematic nature of the contemporary itself and the speed at which the present becomes the past. Commenting on the difficulties of bringing the present into focus, Peter Boxall refers to the ‘illegibility of the present’,² suggesting that the present ‘only becomes legible in retrospect’³, thus framing the present by its ‘estrangement’ to the immediate past, and its movement towards the unknown future. In this sense, he maintains that the present moment will always remain elusive to us: ‘because we are living through it, because the experience of the contemporary itself involves [...] a certain estrangement from the present moment.’⁴ In essence, it is the shifting relationship between time, space and distance which fashions our position to any given moment in the present, conditioning our perspective through blurring the boundaries of the past, present and future. Boxall refers to the rate at which this occurs as a ‘specifically twenty-first century speed.’⁵ The varying ways in which Irish writers have represented Ireland’s shifting relationship to the past, encompassing the blurred boundaries of time and space to capture the shifting nature of the present with such lightning speed is the primary focus of this study.

In drawing upon literary works of contemporary Irish literature, published during a period of prolific change in Ireland from the cusp of the new millennium in 1999 to 2011, the focus of this study is to explore various aspects of Ireland’s social, economic, political, cultural and religious life during this time. Close analysis of a range of contemporary

novels will consider the ways in which each of these writers respond to the interconnected themes of history, memory and belonging to present their perspective on the experience of the contemporary in Ireland. The works of fiction chosen for analysis encompass popular critically acclaimed writers celebrated for their fiction during this period. In his study of the contemporary Irish novel from 1987 to 2007, Liam Harte has examined the way in which contemporary Irish fiction: ‘strategically collapses the boundaries between the personal and the national in an attempt to capture the fractured, conflictual nature of contemporary Irish experience and to explore the gap between lived realities and inherited narratives of origin, identity, and place.’⁶ By referencing Colm Tóibín’s observation that, “The Irish novel is intensely related to the body politic.”⁷ Harte has outlined how each of the novelists he has selected have effectively contributed to an interrogative ‘narration of the nation’⁸ which has accompanied Ireland’s reinvention of itself throughout the two-decade period which his study covers. In essence, this study builds upon Harte’s premise, and in its more current scope, explores how contemporary Irish literature reflects what Patrick O’Mahony and Gerard Delanty refer to as an ‘international return to explicit themes of the nation.’⁹ Outlining the development of Irish national identity they suggest that in its current phase this return to the nation is both backward and forward looking in the sense that Ireland is seeking both a return to the certainties of Catholic Ireland, whilst also ‘accommodating itself if somewhat uneasily to social change while seeking to create a new cultural nation-code extending beyond existing institutional frameworks.’¹⁰ Through the frame of these two strands of Irish identity, this study considers how Irish writers are defining possibilities of the future – through perceptions of different moments of the past – with boundaries that are continually being redefined.

David James comments on the ‘temporally elastic’¹¹ nature of the parameters of the past, suggesting that a given moment: ‘may also have a replenished moment, a phase of re-emergence – in another time, for another culture – through which its promise obtains renewed pertinence.’¹² As such, Part One of this study explores the way in which key events in Irish history are revisited, examining how writers have engaged with different moments in Ireland’s past as a means to comment on the present. In Chapter One, Roddy Doyle’s presentation of the 1916 Easter Rising in *A Star Called Henry*, Joseph O’Connor’s focus on the impact of The Famine in *Star of the Sea* in Chapter Two and Sebastian Barry’s portrayal of the effects of the Irish Civil war in *The Secret Scripture* in Chapter Three are all important historical moments which have been revisited in works of fiction by critically acclaimed contemporary writers and which have become what Oona Frawley refers to in a different context as: ‘markers in the cultural memory the time.’¹³ These key developments in Irish history will therefore be analysed through the spectrum of historical genre fiction; a largely thematic and characterological focus will be utilised as a means to review their relevance in contemporary society and consider the way the past can be reviewed as useful in the present in considering notions of changing identity.

The manner in which the past is recycled in the present with such conflicting perceptions is mirrored in the debate about revisionism. Controversy surrounding interpretations of Irish history and their application in everyday consciousness is, as Patrick O’Mahoney and Gerard Delanty state, ‘much more than an intellectual movement.’¹⁴ They suggest that Irish historical revisionism is:

Associated with those in the Irish Republic who wish to see a new nation code that would build on elements that reflect better what they perceive as the real unfolding of Irish history.¹⁵

D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day assert that the nature and responses to 'revisionism' vary over time and between communities, utilising the term 'present-mindedness' as a 'coded phrase for history with a purpose, a political purpose meant to change, not uphold, current existing ideologies or institutions.'¹⁶ Essentially, in *A Star Called Henry*, Roddy Doyle re-presents events in accordance with the reinvention of his protagonist. Just as the legacy of the Easter Rising may be seen as a 'defining moment which transformed what had gone before',¹⁷ *A Star Called Henry* is offering up a process of transformation through the reinvention of its rebels alongside the reinvention of Ireland. In adopting a satirical perspective to his narrative Doyle is therefore critically challenging the accepted view of Irish history through exposing the illusions perpetuated by long sanctioned accounts of Irish historical events.

The notion of 'renewed pertinence'¹⁸ of key moments in the past is enriching in the opportunities it allows for considering the impact of key historical moments such as the Famine upon Irish identity in Chapter Two. Oona Frawley has identified the importance of historical events that are deemed retrospectively important in the cultural experience and cultural memory of a group as 'memory cruxes'.¹⁹ She suggests that particular historical events associated with a period of intense change, or particular individuals emblematic of momentous events 'mark out spaces that are not yet agreed upon, not yet "final"'.²⁰ Essentially, it is their connection to perceived trauma which perpetuates a sense

of ongoing differing interpretations of the event, and ‘offer conflicting, oppositional, and sometimes intensely problematic answers about the way that a culture considers its past, and that are crucial in the shaping of social identities.’²¹ Frawley recognises an increasing shift in trauma studies towards a collective experience of the trauma of a culture and considers the effect which the ongoing and conflicting nature of the impact of trauma on the individual mind can also have on a cultural grouping and the potential to significantly disrupt a progressive narrative of a nation, through altering the ‘linearity of historical, narrativized time, time which has beginnings and ends.’²² Drawing upon the work of Jenny Edkins, Frawley suggests that the effect of this is manifested in the need to try to ‘*account for what has happened – through the production of a narrative*’²³ to allocate meaning to an experience which had previously failed to be assigned. It is the contextual experiences through which these accounts are interpreted which therefore determines the meaning they are ascribed and which ensures they remain ongoing. These ideas offer a platform from which to explore Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea*.

Chapter Three develops concepts surrounding the revisionist debate, focusing on the binary opposition between history and myth. Guy Beiner comments on the blurring of the boundaries between history and memory, and the way in which ‘personal recollections are influenced by the contexts in which they were recorded.’²⁴

Declan Kiberd offers negative critical evaluations of novelists’ effectiveness to address cultural shifts in Ireland, suggesting that the world is moving too fast for writers to keep up with; Part Two challenges this idea with the notion that crime fiction evolves and moves more quickly. This section of the thesis provides a close examination of the

evolving genre of contemporary Irish crime writing explores three varying perspectives on this genre; Contemporary Irish Noir in Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor novels in Chapter Four; Tana French's Metaphysical Detective Fiction in Chapter Five, and Brian McGilloway's Police Procedural series based on Inspector Devlin in Chapter Six. Reinforcing Harte's emphasis on the sense of fragmentation associated with the modern Irish identity, these writer's corroborate the notion that the pervasiveness of a sense of flux and uncertainty is nothing new in considering the nature of Irish cultural identity, stating that 'Flux rather than fixity has been the historical norm'.²⁵

Part Three contests Joe Cleary's suggestion that Irish writers are completely unable to represent the contemporary world. However the transatlantic visions of Colm Tóibín and Colm McCann challenge this perception. In Chapter Seven *Brooklyn* and *Let the Great World Spin*, in Chapter Eight, both Colm Tóibín and Colum McCann respectively are clearly representing the contemporary world, albeit in very different cultural moments. The ethos of their writing reflect Harte's comment that: 'These novels are as much about being alive as they are about the state of the nation.' Their diasporic novels offer positive assertions of the ways in which the past can be used by contemporary novelists to communicate the fluid and dynamic nature of the contemporary upon the Irish diaspora, suggesting the value of individualised moments of experience based in the present, as opposed to clinging onto fixed notions of belonging to the past.

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- ¹² James, p. 1.
- ¹³ Oona Frawley, *Memory Ireland: The Famine and the Troubles*, (Syracuse University Press, 2014), p. 13.
- ¹⁴ O'Mahoney and Delanty, p. 10.
- ¹⁵ O'Mahoney and Delanty, p. 10
- ¹⁶ D. George Boyce and Alan O'Day, *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy*, (London: Routledge,1996), p.2.
- ¹⁷ Brannigan, p. 118.
- ¹⁸ James, p. 1.
- ¹⁹ Oona Frawley, p. 1.
- ²⁰ Frawley, p. 2.
- ²¹ Frawley, p. 2.
- ²² Frawley, p. 7.
- ²³ Frawley, p. 7.
- ²⁴ Guy Beiner, 'Making sense of memory: coming to terms with conceptualisations of historical remembrance', <https://cambridge.org/core> [accessed 7 January 2019] (para 2)
- ²⁵ Harte, p.9.

PART ONE

CONTEMPORARY FICTION ABOUT HISTORICAL EVENTS

CHAPTER ONE

A Star Called Henry by Roddy Doyle

Introduction

A Star Called Henry has been described as Roddy Doyle's most ambitious, extravagant and wide-ranging work yet, even praised by some critics as dangerous as it exposes, then demolishes, 'each of the ideological underpinnings on which the state rests.'¹ Through an array of bizarre characters - rebel leaders, gangsters, brothel madam and one-legged-hit-man - Doyle presents a range of 'multiple disguises and concealed identities'² which abound within the novel and which reflect a range of existences from the banality of deprivation to an elitist vision of the Catholic bourgeoisie. As the novel's protagonist Henry Smart embarks on an unrelentingly extravagant journey through events surrounding the Irish struggle for independence between 1916 and 1921, Doyle dramatically presents the complexities of his service as a soldier in the Irish Citizen Army and later under Michael Collins as improvised and ruthless. This is in sharp contrast to Henry's own journey of discovery which transforms him 'from grit-sharp, fiery-tongued picaresque into a mythic Everyman hero'.³ Roy Foster has hailed Doyle's recreation of such a bold world as the novel's greatest triumph, as he 'avoids creaky verismo by using a carefully gauged admixture of magic-realist techniques.'⁴ Incorporating fantastic elements into the gritty realism of a 1916 Dublin landscape through paralleling ruthlessness with innocence, capitalism with socialism, and history with myth is essentially part of the novel's double mission in exploring the idea of struggle, in terms of both twentieth century

Irish nationalism and the internal psychological conflict of Henry Smart. As sites of resistance and renewal, both of these issues concerning the transformation of Irish politics and the struggle for self-realization are recounted through the distorted reality of Doyle's central character and contextualised within one of Ireland's key historical moments.

Present yet invisible, myth juxtaposed with history, and caught somewhere between displacement and renewal, Henry Smart exists as the construction of an aged narrator. A narrator who allows his younger self to imagine an alternative version of reality with the potential to free himself, and therefore us, from the 'strait-jacket' of our own notions of fixed identity. In doing so we reveal our own multiple and concealed identities and reflect upon the way in which we are all 'masters of disguise and invisibility'. As 'one of Collins' anointed, but actually...excluded from everything', and as 'one self-important little rebel' yet the 'inspiration for a generation', Henry's life of multiplicity offers psychological insights into notions of Irish identity and other possibilities of being. *A Star Called Henry* is therefore reflective of the ongoing transformative process in Ireland.

CHAPTER ONE

‘Masters of disguise and invisibility...’

*‘Oh wise men, riddle me this: what if the dream come true?
What if the dream come true? and if millions unborn shall dwell
In the house that I shaped in my heart, the noble house of my thought?
(Padraig Pearse, ‘The Fool’⁵)*

Ideology of the 1916 Rising

The historical and political context of 1916-1921 frames events in the novel. It is noteworthy that Doyle has chosen such an iconic moment in Irish history to contextualise his story, as it is one of the most significant events in Irish historiography. Homi Bhabha has remarked that: ‘Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind’s eye.’⁶ Thus, in *A Star Called Henry* Doyle attempts to expose such narratives and sanctioned accounts of these events which have not only been subsumed into myth through time and through purposeful myth-making of the state, but which have established the Rising itself as *the* romantic fixity associated with the birth of the Irish Republic.

The romantic haze through which the ideology of the 1916 Rising developed emerged through growing intellectual interest in the need to revive the dying Irish language and to restore the spiritual nation at the turn of the century. Doyle, however, presents a range of ideological positions regarding Irish nationalism at this historical juncture

in an attempt to deconstruct such notions of romantic nationalism. The author therefore leads us to question these varying views of nationalism, and in doing so, to consider the nature of the Irish identity that was struggling to emerge. Indeed, in presenting a vision of Ireland captured in historic transition, the very notion of a singular identity in contemporary Ireland is questioned; as the protagonist, Henry Smart, undergoes his own transition from reinvention to redemption to renewal, the re-imagining of Irish national identity in a twenty-first century global context becomes possible.

Re-imagining of Irish national identity

Significantly, the key concept of identity both opens and closes the novel; a question at the start: ‘Who was he and where did he come from’⁷, which is answered at the end: ‘A new man...I was Henry Smart.’ (p. 342.) This binary opposition may well reflect the transformation of Ireland itself over the last century: a nation fighting for its own identity at the beginning of the twentieth century, and one which is seeking to redefine itself after a turbulent period of transformation and renewal at the end.

Published in 1999, *A Star Called Henry* will have been in development at the same time as another of Ireland’s important historical moments: the Northern Ireland Peace Process and the resultant Good Friday Agreement. At this juncture, it is therefore timely that Roddy Doyle chose to diverge so drastically in the subject material of his fiction writing, choosing to parallel his narrative with such a significant historical and political event. In one of many interviews given around the time of publication, Doyle confirmed that he does see himself as a political writer: ‘I don’t actually force the

issue because I write about Irish, urban characters and they drag the politics behind them, not the other way around.’⁸ Furthermore, when questioned about combining these political issues with historical ones, Doyle queries whether it is indeed possible to separate the two in the case of Irish history, but views *A Star Called Henry* as: ‘more obviously political because we’re dealing with big history in the Irish context and [...] the parallels are so stark and so obvious that it’s not really historical at all because the exact same thing is happening, with a slightly different context...in the North of Ireland at the moment.’⁹ As such, *A Star Called Henry* may be seen as an attempt to link the violence associated with Ireland’s turbulent past with the transformations that are taking place in its present: ‘The War of Independence and its consequences, up until recently ... had kind of disappeared off the list of things to talk about. When one delves into Irish history, particularly in the twentieth century, you can’t help but have the feeling you’re actually reading current affairs.’¹⁰ Thus, fuelled by the historical turn of events in Northern Ireland at the time of writing, it is perhaps Doyle’s hope that, ‘People are now more open to looking at this.’¹¹ His comments reflect the potential that writers of contemporary fiction hold in breaking down the boundaries between the past and the present in parallel to those of the personal and the national, in an attempt to re-define configurations of contemporary identity.

Demythicalizing the prevailing perspective of the Rising

Essentially, Doyle is drawing on the ‘paradoxical currency of the Rising’,¹² to represent events in accordance with the reinvention of his protagonist Henry Smart. In

doing so he draws upon his own disillusionment of being indoctrinated by such events, and having to learn the Easter Proclamation by heart in school: ‘...Pearse was a god, a saint – we had to read those shitty sentimental stories and write these glowing reviews of them.’¹³ It is no wonder then that he chose to adopt such a double-voiced satirical stance to his narrative, and put ‘a magnifying glass over reality and [make] something bigger of it,’¹⁴ which is exactly what he did in his depiction of the rebel leader: ‘I’d seen Commandant Pearse arrive in full uniform, pistol, provisions, sword, the lot, all under his greatcoat ... struggling across the bridge and sweating like a bastard. And his little brother and faithful hound, Willie, pedalling away behind him’ (p. 91.). Indeed, Doyle revealed how he wanted to portray the key rebel leaders:

I tried to give them physical features, for example. So Padraig Pearse, the founder of the movement in many ways, the President elect, the Commander in Chief of the IRA in the 1916 Rising was fat...he was actually a bit fat and suddenly he became a human being. He cycled into the revolution and he was sweating profusely by the time he arrived – and the mere fact that he cycled made it human as well. This was a revolution a year before the Russian Revolution, this was pretty big, this was against the biggest empire in the world - and he cycled in.¹⁵

Doyle has stated that part of the challenge in writing a historical novel was to see if he could create his own picture.¹⁶ As such, where he had previously ‘been a slave to realism’ and tried to ensure some sense of accuracy with events that he was writing about, this time around he:

... wanted the freedom to take Henry's life as far as seems right and as far as seems creatively possible [...] I wanted to make reality wobble a bit this time, to see it through a distorting glass. I wanted impossible things to mix with possible, real and fictional people to shake hands. Not to trivialize it, but I wanted to have fun. I wanted to go over the top.'¹⁷

The magnifying glass Doyle uses to present Henry's character offers an extremely distorted view of reality as Henry is complimented by James Connolly:

-Is there anyone better than you, Henry?

-No, Mister Connolly.

-That's right. No one at all. Do you ever look into your eyes, Henry?

-No, Mister Connolly.

-You should, son. There's intelligence in there, I can see it sparkling. And creativity and anything else you want. They're all in there. And my daughter tells me you're a good-looking lad. Look into your eyes every morning, son. It'll do you good. (p. 127.)

This is antithetical to his representation of the rebel leaders: 'Pearse tried to hoist himself. He was fat and his arms had more muscle than his poetry.' (p. 124.)

Diminishing their importance in the presence of Henry is therefore significant of Doyle's attempts to demythicize the prevailing perspective of the Rising of heroic sons sacrificing themselves for the motherland. Inescapably connected with Pearse, the ideology of 1916 attempted to identify the struggle for nationhood in the projected

national community by drawing upon powerful ethnic memories of triumph and suffering to create a strong sense of distinctive historical identity. When invoked by revolutionary leaders, collective support in the war of independence against the British state would ensue. Thus, plans for an autonomous Ireland infused with rural Gaelic values became idealized by Pearse as achievable only through martyrdom and sacrificial violence: ‘Life springs from death, and from the graves of patriotic men and women spring living nations.’¹⁸ The somewhat messianic notion that ‘bloodshed is a cleansing and sanctifying thing;¹⁹ and the idea of a revolution in consciousness brought about by a symbolic and willed loss of life underpinned the nationalist rhetoric of the insurrection.

Henry becomes the vehicle through which Doyle critically challenges the leaders of the rebellion and reveals them to be fuelled by poetic ideologies and driven by fatalistic illusions in accordance with the recurrent theme of disguise and concealment. The decision to rebel in the certainty of defeat provided the nationalist revolutionaries with a gesture of moral revivalism that could only be run on blood-sacrifice lines, and based on what Foster has termed a ‘web of subterfuge and concealment’.²⁰ The rebel elite relied on emotional Anglo-phobia to mobilize support for the ‘Irish’ cause; what mattered most was the theology of the insurrection – the religious and poetic foundations of the nationalist rhetoric that justified the moral rectitude of the Rising: ‘We cannot win and winning is not our intention. What we have to do, all we can do, is keep at them until it becomes unbearable. To provoke them and make them mad. We need reprisals and innocent victims and outrages and we need them to give them to us.’ (p. 252.) Thus, in choosing to occupy Dublin’s

General Post Office because of its central location rather than a more significant military outpost such as Dublin Castle, the revolutionary leaders employed ‘diverse tools of deception’ to achieve the ‘bloody sacrifice’ on the grand scale that was required.²¹ In essence, symbolic attention took the place of realistic goals.

In the belief that Ireland would be redeemed by their sacrifice, Pearse and his fellow leaders reinvented themselves as ‘heroic exemplars’²² in embracing the romantic image of ‘The Triumph of Failure’.²³ In doing so, the Easter rebels staged the Rising as a performance in order to renovate Irish consciousness; a performance which Michael Collins remarked had ‘the air of a Greek Tragedy’,²⁴ a quality also reflected in Doyle’s satirical narrative:

And, behind me, my colleagues and comrades, my fellow revolutionaries, were on their knees – and they’d been on them and off them all day – with their eyes clamped shut, their heads bowed and their covering backs to the barricades. What sort of a country were we going to create? (p. 112.)

In her biography of Pearse, Ruth Dudley Edwards reinforces the theatricality of the preparations for the Rising:

For his last dramatic performance he had paid his usual attention to costume. While many comrades-in-arms were carelessly turned out, Pearse carried a repeating pistol, ammunition pouch and canteen, and wore his smart green Volunteer uniform with a matching slouch hat and sword.²⁵

Thus, in parodying the drama of the ensuing chaos and ‘carnavalesque disorder’²⁶ of the action inside the G.P.O:

I could see the ham curling, roasting in the heat. Pearse was up on the last chair delivering a speech [...]

-Henry, said Connolly. –Get out your father’s leg.

-Yes, sir, I said.

I took my daddy’s leg from its holster and lifted it into the air. [...]

-Up the Republic! I shouted. (p. 132-3.)

Doyle’s novel not only exposes the fragmented quality of such an iconic moment in Irish history, but also seeks to deconstruct the ‘sacred text of the Rising’.²⁷ Central to this complex of ideas is the notion of Redemption. In offering themselves as martyrs in the belief that their death would restore new life, the 1916 rebels wove themselves into a wider narrative of the ‘myth of fall, death and glorious redemption’.²⁸ Pearse’s dramatic act of self-invention as he invoked Cuchulain for support and equated himself in unbroken continuity with Cuchulain, Christ and Wolfe Tone, parallel Henry’s actions as he narrates his own myth and provides justification in his own mind for his role of reinforcing a sense of glory to his cause. In doing so, it may be argued that Pearse was revealing himself, like Henry, to be a true ‘master of disguise’.

(p. 221.)

Such acts of self-invention and dramatic performance as revealed by the rebel leaders of 1916 confirm the ‘dialectical tension’²⁹ between the event and its representation in the plethora of literary texts which it influenced. The Rising itself, rather than its leaders, is therefore confirmed as an ‘instantaneous martyr to literature’³⁰ wherein it becomes difficult to separate the event from its endless textualisation. The poems of Padraig Pearse and William Butler Yeats, the speeches of James Connolly, alongside Sean O’Casey’s play *The Plough and the Stars* have rendered the Rising as the ‘foundational moment of Irish independence, the single, pure act of romantic heroism which compelled Irish nationalism from its dejected slumber into revolutionary consciousness,’³¹ must therefore be contextualised alongside the satirical and parodying accounts of Doyle’s unreliable and ambiguous protagonist.

Literature and myth

Thus, as literature and myth have become inseparable from the events of 1916, so too have Henry Smart and his quest for identity become reflective of Ireland’s; as Ireland has been shaped by memories and myths, so too has Henry. From the beginning, Doyle establishes Henry as ‘a spectacularly unreliable narrator’³² through his constant repetition of ‘I don’t know any of this’. (p. 2.) This suggests that he does not know how to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary, in parallel to the way in which Doyle questions and demythologizes romantic notions of Irish nationalism. His narration at the start of the novel establishes that being essentially nameless on any formal level has a negative effect on all other aspects of his life, leaving not only him, but the reader, uneasily suspended ‘between admiration and derision’, unable to

accept either his 'deluded and self-aggrandising swagger' on the one hand, or his debunking of the sanctioned version of the sacrificial myth of the motherland on the other.³³ From the start, Henry imagines his own version of reality in reaction to his role as 'The shadow. The impostor', (p. 33.) as a replacement for his dead brother. He continues in the creation of his own myth, in the search for his own identity which was stolen. In trying to achieve such a mythical status as the dead Henry possessed, the living legend Henry also imagines himself possessing an outrageously exaggerated legendary status: 'I was a broth of an infant ... a local legend within hours of landing on the newspapers', (p. 22.) thus marking the start of his process of reinvention.

Indeed, hints at the exuberance of his multiple attributes are energetically catalogued: 'Her hands that cupped my head tingled for the rest of her great, long life'; 'The women who'd seen me went through the rest of the day feeling special'; 'Unhappy women caught themselves smiling'. (p. 22-3.) Jose Lanters has remarked that, 'the line between marvellous make believe and foolishness is a thin one',³⁴ but in inventing himself out of nothing, the creativity of his 'legendary' persona can be admired. Like his father,

He made up his life as he went along... He invented himself, and reinvented...
He was a survivor; his stories kept him going. Stories were the only thing the poor owned. A poor man, he gave himself a life. He filled the whole with many lives. (p. 7.)

The life that Henry imagines for himself is based on continual attempts to gain purpose and identity in the ‘stagnant binarisms’³⁵ of his life: ‘bright but illiterate, strapping but always sick’ (p. 70). Charlotte Jacklein has commented that, ‘Even as Henry rewrites his childhood as an heroic one, his epic embellishments are placed side-by-side with the crippling reality of poverty, where Henry is nothing but a starving child ‘bursting out of...rags’ (p. 70.).³⁶ Thus, it is testament to Henry’s narrative invention that he is able to construct his own reality in such a harsh environment. Indeed, he imagines himself as a fully-fledged hero by the age of fourteen: ‘I was six foot, two inches tall and had the shoulders of a boy built to carry the weight of the world [...] I had nothing to fear and nothing to go home to.’ (p. 89.)

Henry’s own account of himself as heroic legend presents himself as something of a mythical hero like Cuchulain, as ‘... a symbol of Ireland – one man standing alone against terrible oppression.’³⁷ Janis Dawson has paralleled the ways in which Doyle draws on Celtic myth and folklore and how he uses the legend of Cuchulain to read *A Star Called Henry* as a fantasy re-telling of a traditional story. In paralleling Henry’s most prodigious birth announced by a ‘shooting star...scooting across the black sky over Dublin’, (p. 21.) and his heroic exploits with those of Cuchulain, Dawson suggests that through juxtaposing the absurd with the sublime, Doyle is undercutting the heroic tradition that inspired the events of 1916.³⁸ In doing so, he therefore sets the stage for his own process of challenging traditional notions of Irish identity.

The political and the individual

In this respect, the unravelling of Henry's search for a viable identity in trying to understand who he is becomes inseparable from Ireland's quest to renegotiate and more clearly define its own boundaries, potentially leading to a transformation in notions of identity for its citizens. The possibility of Henry being perceived as a national allegory therefore arises. Fredric Jameson's definition of national allegories may be applied to *A Star Called Henry* in the sense that: '*the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*'.³⁹ This theoretical model offers a useful platform from which to approach *A Star Called Henry*. While obviously problematic, if framed within Jameson's definition of such texts as 'Third-World' in an essentially *descriptive* sense to imply a notion of difference, and to refer to those texts possessing a narrative that encourages an acknowledgement of an unfamiliar existence and an unknown situation which evokes a feeling of resistance, then Henry Smart's resistance to the hegemony of nationalism in the Easter Rising may essentially be viewed as an example of the 'radical difference of other national situations'.⁴⁰ The use of the term 'Third World' and its application to contemporary literature has been further qualified by Declan Kiberd, who has drawn similar parallels to Doyle's work in *The Commitments*, praising him for being 'one of the first artists to register the ways in which the relationship between 'First' and 'Third' worlds was enacted daily in the streets of the capital city'.⁴¹ Thus, *A Star Called Henry* will be viewed through Jameson's process of allegorization noted above, whereby Henry's private search for identity, and ultimately renewal in the psychological dynamic is fused with the public/political dimension related to the historical narrative of the rise of the Irish Free State.

Furthermore, Jameson stresses the problematic sense which the term 'Third-World' may be designated to some countries to underscore certain differences to generally considered western literature, emphasising the 'transferable structure of allegorical reference',⁴² and its optional nature: '...we are also free to reverse its priorities and to read the political analogy as metaphorical decoration for the individual drama and as a mere figural intensification of this last.'⁴³ In attempting therefore, to separate the political and the individual, the allegorical structure reconfirms the split between public and private attributed to western literature, and therefore reinforces a 'Third-World' reading of *A Star Called Henry* that is at once social and individual, allowing an exploration of Henry and his journey in a 'global field of co-existence'.⁴⁴ As such, Henry may therefore be perceived as a representation of the fusion of what Jameson has referred to as the public-private split:

... between the poetic and the political, between what we have come to think of as the domain of sexuality and the unconscious and that of the public world of classes, of the economic, and of secular political power: in other words, Freud versus Marx.⁴⁵

Jameson offers this outline with particular reference to 'Third-World' texts by suggesting that their ratio of the political to the personal in the form of national allegory makes such texts alien and resistant to conventional reading habits. However it may be argued that Henry's 'transformative act of self-invention'⁴⁶ throughout the novel co-exists with the opposing forms of nationalism that are struggling to emerge, thus inextricably binding the public and the private, the social and the individual

spheres of his existence. Moreover, in an allegorical sense, a range of meanings or messages can be offered simultaneously; its ‘profoundly discontinuous’ mapping process within a narrative produces ‘breaks and heterogeneities’ representative of the ‘multiple polysemia of the dream rather than the homogenous representation of the symbol’,⁴⁷ which is also reflective of the multiple and concealed identities which abound in *A Star Called Henry*. The persona of Henry can be described as profoundly discontinuous as he is subject to constant change and transformation, as moments of harmony ‘work and drink and Annie’ (p. 159.) are interspersed and in conflict with explosive violence associated with his concealed identity as rebel gunman: ‘I was a gunman. I could hear Jack Dalton’s song in even the loudest storms – *He was the prince of the streets, no other lad came near*’; (p. 209.) His relationship with Piano Annie enables him to embrace the sense of identity and importance that being perceived as a rebel hero brings as in his own mind he repeatedly becomes a ‘living, breathing hero’ (p. 177.), but as an imaginative construction having the romance of a mythical legend projected as his identity also filters his perception of reality, increasingly forcing him to lead a ‘transient and secretive life of false identities’.⁴⁸

The notion of a distinct split in Henry’s persona is certainly valid and in keeping with the diametric oppositions reflected in the majority of characters and themes throughout the novel. Indeed, it is the nature of such divided personalities which offers validity to each character as a ‘master of disguise and invisibility’. However, it may also be argued that Henry Smart is unique in the sense that it is the very nature of this split in all aspects of his life: the political, social, family and individual level – that finally offers him a form of renewal through reconstruction. In a maze of concealed disguises and multiple identities, Henry finally finds reconstruction in the fusion of all the varying dimensions of his being, where the personal/political are

inextricably bound together, and given a heightened prominence in a novel which is essentially based on binary oppositions throughout. In representing the political rise of nationalism ‘out of the gutters of poverty into the streets of central Dublin’,⁴⁹ and setting it against Henry Smart’s personal search for identity, and thus renewal, is emblematic not only of the transformative process of self-invention reflective of the nationalist rebellion, but is inextricably bound up with his own private war against the state from which he feels excluded.

Jameson further suggests that psychological exploration, or more specifically what he terms ‘libidinal investment’, is to be ‘read in primarily political and social terms in third world culture’.⁵⁰ In framing an analysis of *A Star Called Henry* through Jameson’s definition, it may be argued that Doyle has indeed indulged in a ‘fascination with violence and its psychology’.⁵¹ Henry’s reinvention of himself as a dispassionate killer ultimately reveals his distinct persona as a true master of disguise: ‘I was probably the best-looking man in the G.P.O. but there was nothing beautiful about me. My eyes were astonishing, blue daggers that warned the world to keep its distance.’ (p. 89.) This fascination with the physical presence of his protagonist as set against his psychological dynamic is given rein throughout the novel and explored within the nationalist framework. In articulating resistance to the dominant narratives of nationalism it is most significant that it is in the G.P.O. in Dublin that Henry’s self-creation appears to develop more into self-delusion as his mythmaking becomes a ‘double-edged sword’.⁵² It is in the Post Office that he appears to undergo a kind of physical transformation as he begins to take on the appearance of a Celtic warrior hero in ‘a kind of apotheosis’:⁵³

Henry, the small filthy boy who'd been a whopper for his age was now a man, and big for any age. He was tall and broad with the skin and hair born of sound blood and clean living. (p. 108.)

Referring to himself in the third person is perhaps indicative of the transformative process from his self-created 'gobshite and hero' to the now deluded 'self-aggrandising swaggerer':⁵⁴

I was a sparkling young man; I fought every day for my cleanliness. My eyes were blue and fascinating whirlpools; they could suck women in while warning them to stay away, a fighting combination that had them running at me. (p. 108.)

As his imaginative creation of himself now turns into self-delusion he is indeed beginning to fulfil the promise of his prodigious birth, to establish himself as the 'lad and a feckin'half' (p. 21.) who's 'every little movement...seemed to predict a bright future'. (p. 22.) Dawson emphasises how Henry's transformation in the G.P.O. is also reminiscent of Cuchulain's configuration just before he went into battle. In emphasising his 'apotheosis' alongside 'a couple of hundred cranky poets'⁵⁵ who were somewhat derogated in his presence, Doyle is again reinforcing the means by which he undercuts and exposes the notion of romantic nationalism: 'A fine body of men: Clarke was there, as old and frail as Ireland; MacDiarmada, left lopsided by polio...leaning on his stick; Plunkett had his neck wrapped in bandages and looked like death congealing'. (p. 93.) Doyle's juxtaposition of the ideology of 'blood

sacrifice' against the violence and mayhem that Henry subscribes to reveals another element of binary opposition surrounding the formation of an independent state. In opposing the real and the unrealistic the novel shows this state to have emerged in bloodshed, based on the reality of Henry's murderous acts and the falsity of the rebels' martyrdom. In emphasising Henry's transformation as he aligns himself with James Connolly and the 'workers army' - visibly representative of events on the political level as he wears the uniform of the Irish Citizens Army - and at the same time paralleling him with the attributes of Cuchulain on the personal plane, it is significant that this is the point at which Henry's self-delusion becomes most apparent: 'I was walking dynamite in that uniform.' (p. 90.) His political and private dimensions collide spectacularly and hereafter he becomes a representation of the fusion of Marx and Freud. From this point on, Henry's persona may be perceived in terms of the psychological exploration that is central to Jameson's premise of some 'Third-World' texts. In outlining this dynamic, Jameson refers to Freud's 'delusion-formation', which he describes as an attempt at recovery through a process of reconstruction.⁵⁶ In this sense, the reality and illusions of Henry's violent and manipulated existence in the world in which he reconstructs also have allegorical resonance with the reality of Ireland during the War of Independence; in its deconstruction of romantic nationalism surrounding the birth of the Irish Free State, what is exposed is: '...a stripping away of [...] conventional illusions or rationalizations about daily life and existence.'⁵⁷ For Henry, the world that is reconstructed as part of his delusion is filled with violence and murder; a destructive identity that he is unable to escape from, lying beneath the appearance of the real world: 'Another murder that would be made heroic by night-time, another verse added to my song'. (p. 247.)

Ideological self-deception

In his delusion as a representative fusion of the public/political, Henry occupies what Jameson has referred to as 'The Third Space'.⁵⁸ This is particularly significant for Henry as a spatial metaphor which may be applied to the 'everyday resistance' which he articulates on a psychological level. In essence, the third space is occupied as a 'split-space of enunciation',⁵⁹ an '*in-between* space' which allows 'the others of our selves' to emerge anew.⁶⁰ In *A Star Called Henry* it may be said that Henry is experiencing a form of 'therapeutic estrangement' wherein he is capable of effectively separating the facts of his own existence from the reality of those around him. In defusing information in this way, the various unrelated parts of his mind have the capacity to coexist in a form of synthesis. Jameson asserts that tied to such ideological self-deception that Henry is experiencing is a somewhat obsessive fear of anonymity, which his "fabulation... mythomania and tall tales,"⁶¹ act as a form of inward defence mechanism: 'Before I went back to my bed that night I'd been sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood, the secret society at the centre of all things...I was special, one of the few', (p. 184.) His reactive efforts to protect himself may therefore be viewed as, "...an attempt to recuperate what lies beyond the reach of [his] own senses and life experience, and drawing that back inside, to become [...] protectively self-contained."⁶² As a form of repression, Jameson suggests such self-deception can be called upon to explain political reactions, which in Henry's case, allow him to sink ever deeper into his own psychological 'Third Space' as a means to bridging the gulf between reality and self-deceit.

Re-imagining ‘the other of himself’: reconstruction and renewal

Furthermore, as part of his process of reconstruction and renewal, Henry’s multiple and fragmented personas attempt to move towards the individual, towards the achievement of “conscious synchronicity”.⁶³ Jameson refers to the concept of synchronicity as a ‘pseudoexperience’, a voluntary reactive process which arises as a result of failed attempts to achieve representation. Therefore, Henry’s failed attempts thus far to achieve any sense of personal (or political) identity are channelled into a ‘spatio-temporal experience’⁶⁴ wherein he can imagine the impossible as a means of pre-emptive self-protection. Henry therefore chooses to imagine himself as one of Michael Collins’ inner circle: ‘The bossman liked a mill, so I gave him one, enough to let him think he was winning. I slapped the back of his neck. And laughed.’ (p. 198.) Jameson has described such psychological fragmentation as experienced by Henry as a division of labour of the mind: a separation of the knowable from the imagined in spatial form resulting in the segmentation of the rational functions of the mind. The consequence of such compartmentalisation is the emergence of compartments of reality:

...a kind of reality pluralism – a coexistence not even of multiple and alternate worlds so much as of unrelated fuzzy sets and semiautonomous subsystems whose overlap is perceptually maintained like hallucinogenic depth planes in a space of many dimensions...⁶⁵

Such a 'spatial phenomenon'⁶⁶ recognises that different modes of perception can operate simultaneously. Thus, reality can be renegotiated as different moments are organised or spatially separated in different places, reinforcing the discontinuous nature of Henry's existence. The new reality is reproduced in the form of the world it models enabling him to effectively separate his truth from reality in the manner of "jumping back and forth across a game board",⁶⁷ thus allowing the various unrelated parts of his mind to coexist. 'Through wind, rain and bullets'(p. 151) he therefore juxtaposes the different dimensions of his existence, pedalling the 'line between stillness and speed' (p.210) as he shut his eyes and 'pedalled into the wind'. (p. 196.)

As a transformative force, 'offering a resistance as well as an alternative to official Ireland,'⁶⁸ Henry uses the third space in a subversive and somewhat uncontrollable manner on a political and personal level as he divides himself between his sexual episodes with Piano Annie (or Miss O'Shea) and as one of Michael Collins' Flying Columns. The unrelenting and impulsive nature of his actions is reflective of his attempts at revising a situation in which his life is controlled by values representative of the public or the private domain. His third space is a manifestation of his libidinal centre, where he seeks to take charge of his situation; his insistence on having a story to tell and experiences that should be taken seriously are but attempts to reclaim some of the psychological space that has been lost in the deprivation of his slum upbringing and lack of familial identity in the personal dynamic, and his acceptance or tolerance of dominant political values in the political sphere:

We were gone, out the door, back onto the street. The stuff of more

ballads. *The rebel and the rebellete cycled out of town.* The earlier machine-gun fire had drawn the peelers. *But not before they'd taken on the forces of the Crown.* (p. 249.)

Moreover, through Henry's unique fusion of the personal and the political a further 'compartment of reality' emerges which allows him to find a form of therapeutic reconstruction, not just in the psychological dynamic, but also in the physical locality which he inhabits. Henry can invent himself in many variations and as his character is in a state of constant fluidity, he becomes synonymous with the water that runs below Dublin. Harboured hidden secrets in their darkness, but at times also interspersed with light, the underground waterways act as a physical manifestation of Henry's Third Space, thus offering a source of hope, comfort and escape:

...just before I hit the water...I caught the sweet smell of my father's coat and I could feel my neck against my face as he held me to him [...] I fell into the water and let it take me away from the bullets that were churning the river.
(p. 140.)

Essentially, the secret rivers allow him a means of escape by infiltrating his psychological plane as an invisible force that pulls him in: 'I could feel it – water. Under me...And it was dragging me. Every bone I owned was bending towards it'. (p. 139.) In doing so, the water under the city provides Henry with a form of protection, an 'in-between space' where he can draw himself back and achieve some sense of the synthesis in the multiple dimensions of his existence.

The existence of both a psychological and physical third space where the individual aspects of Henry's persona can co-exist whilst offering an alternative site of resistance, also opens up its possibilities as a site of transformation and renewal. The notion of Henry narrating his own story, therefore, is 'partly a survival strategy, partly a strategy for empowerment',⁶⁹ as his resistance to the hegemonic forces of nationalism and to the slum deprivation of his past allow him to re-imagine himself as 'the other of himself'. The defining influence on Henry's subjectivity therefore is his imaginary dimension which intervenes at every moment of his existence in his attempts to imagine himself anew.

Brannigan reinforces the notion that whilst running parallel to the insurgent nationalism of his country, Henry's life 'articulates a subaltern resistance to the dominant narratives of nationalism'.⁷⁰ Lisa McGonicle suggests that the concept of the subaltern traditionally refers to groups excluded and disenfranchised from the official structures of the nation; in exploring the experience of those on the periphery of society it therefore offers a critique of Ireland as a homogenous entity.⁷¹ However, the extent to which Henry resists the hegemony of the post-independence state in his own re-imagination of Dublin as a site of resistance and renewal is more suggestive of a fusion of the political and the personal. His refusal of political authority and alienation from the dominant self-determined nationalism creates a newly-formed personal ideology, which alongside Henry's 'accidental convergence with the historical formation of the nation',⁷² allow him to draw upon what Benedict Anderson has termed 'contingencies of history'⁷³ in his own personal attempt to turn chance into

destiny. Indeed, Annie prophesies: 'There'll be no stopping you now...The country'll be needing new heroes now that the English are after shooting all the old ones'. (p. 147.) Thus, in the years following events in the G.P.O. an essential dimension to the vision of the new social order is promoted in *A Star Called Henry*. Essentially, this is signified by Henry acquiring yet another new name: 'Fergus Nash...my new name on the end of his list.' (p. 151.) The conservative post-independence state which emerged is depicted by Doyle as a site of resistance to the dominant order, represented by Henry as he refuses to participate in any nationalist activity: 'I knew that they were back in town but I saw no one and I didn't go looking.' (p.160.) That this is an essential dimension in the invention of Ireland, as it is in Doyle's and Henry's reinvention of Ireland and himself respectively is significant:

...in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth [...] through the mobilisation of social and cultural forces *against* the dominant social [...] order [...] a new nation was imagined and then created.⁷⁴

Anderson defines the nation as 'an imagined political community' partly to reflect the comradeship which is capable of generating huge moral sacrifices due to the 'attachment that peoples feel for the inventions of their imaginations.'⁷⁵ In accordance with Anderson's 'Imagined Communities', Doyle depicts Henry's life as linked to some pre-determined notion that events could only have turned out in a particular way. He forges the 'accidental' link between Henry and Michael Collins as he is being transported to imprisonment in England: 'I let go of Annie and ran after them [...] Will you feed the cat till I get home? he yelled'. (p. 147.) In converting chance

into destiny, Henry Smart then airbrushed out ‘the competing social visions which stood in the way of [his...] own ascent to power, to improve an all-embracing narrative of the nation on what were, in fact, highly contested episodes and events whose outcome was not at all pre-ordained at the time’.⁷⁶ In doing so the novel may be perceived as a reaction against Sinn Fein and state sanctioned nationalism through its representation of the state which emerges out of rebellion, into the state from which Henry eventually becomes excluded and must escape in an attempt to fulfil his historical and personal destiny.

The question arises as to whether the resultant vision of the nation that framed Henry’s destiny and actions was illusory, or even delusory, or just an unrealistic alternative act of revisionism on Doyle’s part. Brian Donnelly has stated that such a revisionist historical commentary on Irish history:

...sees the outcome of the revolutionary period as a Catholic, bourgeois takeover [and] is consistent with the political outlook that informed [Doyle’s] early writings. The iconoclastic dismissal of official Ireland in those works is of a part with the perspective that views 1916 as a failed revolution.⁷⁷

Donnelly also critiques Henry’s ensuing reinvention of Ireland as a contrived failure, most tellingly reflected in his narrative voice: in failing to investigate either the historical process or the ways in which such historical narratives have been created, *A Star Called Henry* ‘employs historical settings as little more than exotic props for a sexy adventurer who is also an efficient and dispassionate killer’.⁷⁸

Indeed, Brannigan has suggested that *A Star Called Henry* is an anti-Volunteer novel, which privileges the socialist politics of James Connolly and the Citizen Army.⁷⁹ The portrait of Henry and his proletarian life may therefore reflect the divergence in the type of Ireland that Connolly and the ICA were fighting for compared to the Volunteers and Pearse: the reality of ‘toy soldiers’ and ‘mammies boys’ (p. 93.), rather than those who engaged in ‘the working men’s war’. (p. 94.) Indeed, Henry becomes caught in the conflicts between the opposing ideologies of Connolly’s class war and the elite manipulation of Irish ‘bourgeois’ revolutionaries such as Pearse, Plunkett and MacDonagh who are fighting for Home Rule based on Catholicism. In occupying his individualist stance through his rejection of the nationalist-political dimension of the ‘new’ nation-state as well as his socialist principles, Henry is formulating his own ‘bottom-up resistance to strong top-down forces’,⁸⁰ as a reaction against nationalism and his past deprivation: ‘I shot and killed all that I had been denied, all the commerce and snobbery that had been mocking me and other hundreds of thousands behind glass and locks, all the injustice, unfairness and shoes.’ (p. 105.)

Masters of Disguise and Invisibility

However, the revolutionary ideas of the Catholic elite ironically perpetuated the oppression which the country was attempting to free itself from. Doyle reflects this in the novel through the embodiment of these ideals by businessmen such as Alfie Gandon; ‘A Shinner and a Minister, no less, talking about important things in the Mansion House. Changing his name to O’Ganduin.’ (p. 239.) Moreover, in presenting the falsity of Gandon’s identity as ‘...another of his creations, the Dolly Oblong that

was also Alfie Gandon, a woman that never existed'. (p. 165.) Doyle is yet again drawing upon the propensity for characters throughout the novel to be 'masters of disguise'. In depicting 'businessmen' like Gandon as criminals, Doyle is adopting a revisionist stance through the way in which he fiercely 'question[s] the legitimacy of nationalism in Irish history'.⁸¹

Doyle confirms this further in his representation of Ivan: 'Ivan voices what actually happened, to an extent...there were men on the make, men who sniffed the air, realised that there was a change coming and decided that now was the time to put on the uniform.'⁸² As such, Henry's interaction with these groups provides the route by which Doyle criticises nationalist ideologies, through highlighting the illusion of the validity of workable alternatives to the dominant political order.

Furthermore, the representation of Republican heroes such as Michael Collins also reveals the illusory qualities of nationalist principles. At the height of his self-deception, Henry believes he is undoubtedly 'the best of men' in Connolly's eyes: 'I was special, one of the few.' (p.184.) In failing to realise that he is nothing but an unwitting instrument disguised in a new grey suit, Henry revels in yet another fake identity, encapsulated as he jokingly attempts to project his own identity as that of Michael Collins to a police patrol: 'He laughed. We laughed. They laughed'. (p. 192.) However, as Henry later finds his own name on the list of those soon to be eliminated, his own illusion of himself is therefore shattered as he realises his pawn-like status:

And, all the time, we were their puppet masters, the men and women running across the field and a few hundred other men and women hiding in ditches and under other fields, and our own puppet masters in Dublin, in Shanahan's and their shifting H.Q.'s and hideouts. (p. 264.)

In this sense Doyle depicts Connolly as another master of disguise and invisibility: 'a plastic man' that everybody knew but nobody could describe. (p. 191.) In representing the 'puppet master' himself as possessing a range of concealed identities and setting them against the constantly changing personas of Henry: 'Henry Smart aka Fergus Nash aka Brian O'Linn aka Michael Collins', (p. 209) Doyle emphasises the illusion of political trust and inflated personal status. In doing so it may be suggested that he is perhaps, 'condemning nationalistic discourse as a force which splits rather than unifies,'⁸³ as both Henry and Collins embody the potential of nationalism's divisive forces.

As questions arise as to what Henry is fighting for, the sharp divisions and oppositions in his life may be paralleled with the sharp divisions in Ireland. In framing the representation of identity through the complexities of his varying personas, the 'multiple disguises and concealed identities' which have to be deconstructed in order to achieve an understanding of himself, must also reveal a greater understanding of the tensions in Ireland. In renegotiating the binary oppositions which exist in the collective consciousness of the Republic and the internal conflict in Henry's psyche, James Connolly's warning to his men as he led them into the G.P.O. in the Easter Rising provides a poignant reminder of the complexities of such issues of national (and personal) independence: 'If we should

win, hold onto your rifles, because the volunteers may have a different goal.’⁸⁴ Thus in acknowledging the fractures within Irish society Doyle is also significantly highlighting the central themes of duplicity, disguise and concealed identities which abound in the novel.

Most importantly, it is Henry’s own disguise and concealed identity that is given narrative weight throughout the novel; his own account is heightened and his self-delusions form the stories of his subsequent re-invention as part of his strategy for empowerment. He re-imagines himself as a legend, ‘I was a walking saint’. (p. 172) Soon, he has his own ballad, and revels in hearing his name in a song that doesn’t exist,⁸⁵ and in talk of his name becoming folklore, ‘I’d hear their talk and whispers, the boys and girls, before I entered the room, and I quickly loved the silence and adoration that were coming my way.’ (p. 172.) As his legend grows, Henry fights on: ‘Ready to fall dead for a version of Ireland that had little or nothing to do with the Ireland I’d gone out to die for the last time.’ (p. 171.) In travelling around the countryside training other young men in the art of dying for Ireland, it is almost as if Henry is fulfilling some pre-ordained requisite reinforcing his own delusions of ‘heroism’, rather than fulfilling an act of necessity: ‘It was natural to them ... They were people who had had to move furtively through their own place for hundreds of years ... They were all masters of disguise and invisibility.’ (p. 221.) By presenting Henry’s deluded image of himself as ‘Captain for these lads’, in binary opposition to Collins’ statement to Henry: ‘You don’t exist’, (p. 215) it may be suggested that Doyle is drawing together the scattered and multiple events that Henry’s re-imagined life is based on. In trying to make himself seem important for these

boys, yet another name is added to his list, marking another phase in his transformative process as part of his reconstructive journey. In this way, Doyle encapsulates Henry's story as an allegory of the story of the nation.

It is at this point that Henry's delusion of 'herohood' reaches its pinnacle, not just about his own aggrandised rebel identity, but the identity of his enemies and what he is fighting for becomes clear. Floyd Skloot has commented that Henry is 'reared on myths that he must shatter in order to survive.'⁸⁶ Thus, Henry soon realises that 'the Henry Smart of song and legend' is nothing but a myth, that he is in reality 'excluded from everything' and 'never one of the boys'. The realisation that the Ireland he has been fighting for is simply another form of domination thus shatters the myths of his veiled reality: 'We were nameless and expendable, every bit as dead as the squaddies in France. We carried guns and messages. We were decoys and patsies. We followed orders and murdered.' (p. 208.)

In awakening to the grisly and terrifying objective real world lying beneath his own illusory existence, Henry finally realises that in the 'new' Ireland, it is only the privileged elite of the Catholic-capitalists that have won, as Henry realises: '...everything had been done for Ivan and the other Ivans, the boys whose time had come. That was Irish freedom, since Connolly had been shot – and if the British hadn't shot him one of the Ivans would have.' (p. 318.) Doyle has confirmed that his conclusions matched Henry's that, 'there had to be a reason for the killing in the late nights and it wasn't Ireland':

...that the Free State of Ireland that was formed after the treaty, which eventually became the Republic...was basically a transition from one accent to another. The British accent went, and a middle class Irish accent took over, and very little else changed for quite a while. I think a lot of men died hoping for something a bit better than that, and a lot of men lived, like Henry Smart, a lot of disillusioned people. An awful lot of them left Ireland...'⁸⁷

In Henry's enlightenment, some sense of equilibrium is restored as both his own process of reconstruction on the personal level and Doyle's deconstruction of romantic nationalism via Henry is complete. What has been reconstructed, however, is as Jameson has suggested, 'an unveiling or deconcealment of the nightmarish reality of things'.⁸⁸ This finally forces Henry to acknowledge that his war is over, but also to concede to the notion that he will always be running in the shadow of all his former selves.

The most painful realisation comes, however, as Henry realises that not only has he been betrayed, but that he has also betrayed himself: 'There was no pretending now: I was a complete and utter fool, the biggest in the world. It had been niggling away at me for years but now I knew.' (p.137.) In finally accepting that there never really was a song about 'The Bold Henry Smart', he understands that he had written the words himself as part of his own wishful thinking. In a novel riddled with characters who are 'masters of disguise and invisibility', he finally realises that those who are nameless are expendable. And in a final moment of epiphany, Henry at last awakens to the only reality there is, and that there ever has been, as his personal quest for identity is finally redeemed as he states, '... I was still alive. I was twenty. I was Henry Smart.'(p.342.)

His hard-won self-awareness has evolved into a means of survival that finally allows him the possibility of escape and finally some sense of redemption in the birth and naming of his daughter, Saoirse (Freedom). In choosing to leave Ireland for renewal in a new country, the rejection of nationalism and its legitimacy is clear, perhaps significant of 'the nation's self-destructive insularity and ostracising policy.'⁸⁹ Thus, from reinvention, to reconstruction, to renewal – Henry's story has turned full circle as he decides to flee the country in exile, where perhaps once again, he can imagine himself anew.

From reinvention, to reconstruction, to renewal

In offering a story that is as much a rebirth as a recovery, Doyle has attempted to, 'revisit the past in a psychoanalytical sense, penetrate the repressed cultural traumas, and refashion history into a form that fits a new symbolic order.'⁹⁰ It is perhaps faith in the possibility of such a new order that lay at the heart of Doyle's rewriting of the Rising, in the possibility of a 'newer' Ireland. In exposing the flaws in the ideologies surrounding the 1916 Rising, Doyle has confirmed, 'What I was keen to try and establish was that the definition of Irishness in 1914 was hugely different to the definition of Irishness four years later by the time the First war ended...that men who went off as heroes in 1914 returned to an entirely different country.'⁹¹ What may now be required is a paradigm shift in our political imagination, to remind ourselves of Benedict Anderson's 'Imagined Communities' and that nations and states 'are of our own making' and as such can be remade. In abandoning the obsession with an exclusive identity, it is possible for alternative models of contemporary Irish identity

to be re-imagined by reminding us, ‘that the navigation towards the other presents the best possibility of coming home’.⁹² Thus, rather than fictively presenting Ireland as a homogeneous entity, the position from which Doyle is writing insightfully acknowledges the plurality of Irish cultural conditions. By giving voice to those that traditionally remain voiceless, *A Star Called Henry* renegotiates the parameters of ‘Irishness’ by undermining the concept of the ideologically homogeneous nation and ‘addresses the problems created by the very concept of ‘Ireland’ for those excluded from it.’⁹³

Brannigan has further suggested that Doyle has reinvented Henry as a rebel with contemporary significance. Through revising the legacy of the 1916 Rising, Doyle is illuminating contemporary social and cultural conflicts such as class, gender and ethnicity, but is also articulating ‘dissidence from the bankrupt ideologies of nationalism at the end of the twentieth century.’⁹⁴ Indeed, Skloot has remarked that in allowing his readers to witness the forces that drove rebellion against Britain, Doyle has ‘scattered the mists of Celtic Twilight’.⁹⁵ Through the prism of such an invention of Ireland a century ago, we are reminded that resistance requires imagination. *A Star Called Henry* not only reminds us of the way that the people of Ireland attempted to fashion an entirely new sense of their future, and outlines its significance in the contemporary context, but that it is through an engagement with this past that it becomes possible to rediscover its many muted voices and aspirations contrary to those that dominate the social order of the Celtic Tiger.⁹⁶

As a fusion of the real and the symbolic, the private and the political, the imaginary construction of Henry Smart’s life is reflective of the transformation of Irish identity.

Kearney has stressed the importance of such narratives of self-identity; he suggests our notions of identity must be renewed and challenged if they are to survive. Thus allowing 'each one of us the freedom to re-invent our past' and to empower ourselves in the knowledge that, like Henry, 'we will go on telling stories, inventing and re-inventing myths, until we have brought history home to itself.'⁹⁷

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CHAPTER TWO

Star of the Sea by Joseph O'Connor

Introduction

In her speech to the Oireachtas in 1995, President Mary Robinson spoke of the importance of the need to draw upon the sufferings of the past to help alleviate some of the suffering in the present. Indeed, this is the central message which runs through Joseph O'Connor's novel, *Star of the Sea*. O'Connor deconstructs one of the most defining moments of Irish history to encourage a consideration of the nature of the silence that has enveloped the Great Famine of 1845 to 1852 and its consequences. The Famine has commanded such a shifting and elusive presence over the development of Ireland and as such the significance of its representation in historical memory is one of O'Connor's central concerns throughout the novel.

Star of the Sea is essentially concerned with an attempt to articulate events leading up to and on board the famine ship of the same name on its final voyage from Cork to New York in 1847, carrying hundreds of Irish emigrants in steerage class escaping the horrors of the Famine in Ireland, and a handful of characters in first class. These include David Merridith, a bankrupt Irish landlord with his wife and their maidservant Mary; Grantley Dixon, an American journalist and Pius Mulvey, a con-man and murderer are also central characters whose intertwined narratives, along with those of Captain Lockwood, recount events of their past lives that lead them towards their journey on the *Star of the Sea*. In a constant shift of genre from murder mystery to gothic thriller, to a pastiche of Victorian style fiction and reportage, their narratives

reflect the scope of the social strata on board the ship and reveal a ‘moral, though never moralizing reflection on national memory and responsibility.’¹ Through each of the main characters O’Connor conveys his own interpretation of the complex issues surrounding the Famine in a subtly veiled manner by allowing the political issues at the heart of the catastrophe to seep through via a process of osmosis. In the *New York Times Review*, James Kincaid has commented that, ‘This is a brave and artful novel disguised to appear safe and conventional.’² In attempting to reveal what is beneath the surface of these events O’Connor reveals that, ‘Outside the frame, beyond the border, is often the space where the subject is standing. A shifting and elusive presence, certainly, but a palpable one for its camouflages.’³

In blurring the line between fiction and history his representation of the events surrounding the Famine thus allow a negotiation through the binarisms of representation; in presenting the median between anaesthetising and trivialising, the author manages to represent an event which truly ‘strains at the limits of the articulable’.⁴ Joseph O’Connor’s imaginative re-interpretation of the past, draws upon the link between history and memory to emphasise the importance of transformative remembering. Indeed, *Star of the Sea* may be analysed as exposing a process of symbolic transition enabling a shift from a history of silence firmly based in the suffering of the past to moving towards forming a ‘sympathetic connection’⁵ with the present, which will help to understand and alleviate ‘present tragedies of hunger in the world.’⁶ Luke Gibbons echoes this in stating that new solidarities can be generated in the present by reclaiming ‘those lost narratives of the past,’ opening up possibilities to identify with asylum-seekers and refugees.⁷ The intertwined narratives of *Star of the Sea* may therefore be giving voice to Mary Robinson’s belief that:

we must look at our history [...] with a clear insight which exchanges the view that we were inevitable victims in it, for an active involvement in the present application of its meaning. We can examine in detail humanitarian relief then and relate it to humanitarian relief now and assess the inadequacies of both.⁸

The weight of the past then, as Mary Robinson continues to comment, points towards a single reality: that through sharing an imaginative re-interpretation of the past it will be possible to help others who now suffer in a similar way.⁹

CHAPTER TWO

On the Other Side of Silence

*'We cannot undo the silence of our own past, but we can
lend our voice to those who now suffer.'*¹⁰

The issue of blame

The Famine is commonly conceived as the defining event of nineteenth-century Irish history. It left its mark on Ireland by being responsible for the deaths of over one million people, and prompted a million more to emigrate.¹¹ Indeed, the ramifications of this unprecedented tragedy are so deep that it adjusted the processes of political, social and spiritual life in Ireland irrevocably and has scarred Anglo-Irish relations for over a century. One hundred and fifty years later, the former British Prime Minister, Tony Blair, expressed the first apology from British authorities for their failings in the disaster and for the scars that have been left:

That one million people should have died in what was then part of the richest and most powerful nation in the world is something that still causes pain as we reflect on it today. Those who governed in London at the time failed their people.¹²

Blair's comments substantiate the long standing notion that the history of the Irish Famine is synonymous with British political history and as such prompted a range of political opinions concerning public relief for the Irish.¹³ However, the issue of blame remains controversial. The historiographic debate regarding the Famine is essentially based on two opposing theories of Ireland's experience during the 1840s. These range from Treasury Under-Secretary Charles Trevelyan's complacent views towards the Irish political economy that 'the Famine was the design of a benign Malthusian God who sought to relieve overpopulation by natural disaster,'¹⁴ to nationalist genocide theories which claim that while nobody would directly suggest that the administration caused the Famine, 'impelled by their contempt for Ireland and their interest in land reform, the administration caused many people to die.'¹⁵ The opposition evident between the British government's view at the time to the historiographic comments which followed therefore serves to emphasise the importance of the Famine in the Irish psyche:

Like so many other matters of vital importance to our condition, [the Famine] has been divided up into a set of false opposites, on the one hand those who say that it was never as bad as we had been led to believe, and on the other, those who see the issue as a handy stick to beat the tribal drum. In between these polarised positions is the truth of our situation, a consciousness filled with grief and pain which has no way of expressing itself except through anger and escapism.¹⁶

Cormac O'Grada, however, suggests an alternative view which is situated between these polar extremes: that in bearing the effects of such an unpredictable ecological

disaster, the Irish were just desperately unlucky.¹⁷ It is perhaps an unwillingness to accept the truth of this that has resulted in the fact that any academic research of the Famine years has tended to be detached and clinical, in stark contrast to the more populist understanding of the tragedy that remains in Irish folk memory. Often permeated with a nationalist twist, ‘Half-truths about shiploads of grain leaving the country, about a callous and indolent landlordisms, and about Queen Victoria subscribing a £5 note to Famine relief,’¹⁸ stories of famine graves and mass evictions are the Famine’s most enduring legacy in national memory.

Famine commemoration and trauma

However, while some aspects of ‘Black ’47’ have become familiar terms: ‘mass mortality, the potato, emigration, clearances, fever, official neglect,’¹⁹ until recently academic research on the Irish Famine was not only detached and clinical, but very sparse. In addition, Terry Eagleton emphasises the ‘wary silence’ around the Famine in Irish literary culture: ‘Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival? Where is it in Joyce?’²⁰ Furthermore, Joseph O’Connor has commented on the silence of the Famine’s ‘elusive presence’, suggesting that events surrounding the Famine have been primarily read through a prism of nationalism; the Famine has been viewed ‘as one of the sacred cows of nationalism’ and has ‘hidden some of the terrible realities of what took place.’²¹ He states that some attempts have been made to frame it through a narrative of local tragedy, whilst others have simply refused to read it at all, reflecting Eagleton’s words that ‘If the Famine stirred some to angry rhetoric, it would seem to have traumatized others into muteness.’²²

The sesquicentennial famine commemoration in Ireland in 1995 to 1997 prompted a heightened interest in famine history. Indeed, O'Grada has commented that the Irish Famine is only considered the defining event in Irish history 'to people not from Ireland',²³ thus implying a 'will to forget' on the part of the Irish the suffering associated with the catastrophe. A key theme of the 150th anniversary of the famine was therefore mainly based on the need to recover a collective memory of what had been forgotten or repressed due to the trauma of the 1840s. Anne Whitehead suggests that such an 'era of commemoration'²⁴ is characterised by an unprecedented degree of forgetfulness and 'In the face of mounting amnesia, there is an urgent need to consciously establish meaningful connections with the past.'²⁵ The notion of a collective famine memory of shared suffering amongst Irish people was reinforced by the then Minister of State Avril Doyle: 'We are a First World country with a Third World memory of famine, dislocation and exile...Our own famine echoes are constantly with us.'²⁶ Much of the multifaceted rhetoric of the sesquicentennial commemorations echoes this notion of a sensitised people repressing collective memories of a communal trauma that took place long ago.

O'Grada, however, questions how a truly collective memory informed by a simplistic understanding of the past can be formed 'of such an uneven and divisive disaster...How could such a range of experiences have spawned a common memory?'²⁷ He points out that the concept of communal trauma echoed by the sesquicentennial commemorations is an inaccurate articulation of the experience of the horrors in the Irish Famine and as such cannot be remembered by everybody in

essentially the same way, suggesting that much filtering out of the complex and multifaceted history of the famine informs the ‘all-inclusive’ rhetoric of famine memory.²⁸ David Lloyd argues that the function of a public period of commemoration such as that which marked the 150th Anniversary of the Famine represents an inward focus on separation from those who died and what has been lost, rather than representing a retrieval of the past in the present. When such a deep gulf separates the mourners from the dead, such historical mourning functions as a means to overcome the fixations of the past, to let the dead and their suffering slip away to enable the burden of the past to finally be overcome: ‘What was to be mourned was not so much the Famine dead as the meaning of the event itself, as the effect of a fixation of the past that was seen to inhibit the advent of modernity in Ireland.’²⁹ Lloyd asserts that commemoration of the Famine as a means of social healing only serves to reproduce the attitudes of colonialism in the present.

Such confusions and evasions about the function of public commemoration therefore reflect the difficulty in representing the implied communal trauma of the Famine in literature: how do you write about it; what tone do you use and who do you blame?³⁰ Roy Foster also refers to the way in which knowledge about the horrors of starvation and mass mortality during the Famine is based on speculations of the events that took place. He outlines the notion made by a senior economic historian that we take for granted that we know what happened during the Famine, when in truth, ‘we don’t’.³¹ Such uncertainty regarding what happened combined with debates about when the Famine actually started and ended makes it an event which ‘eludes definition’.³²

The difficulty involved in negotiating such representations is echoed as Eagleton outlines the paradox in writing about such a terrible event, stating that there is ‘something trivialising or dangerously familiarizing about the very act of representation itself’;³³ the paradox lies in either trivializing the experience in a way that turns it into historical background or of over-familiarising it and anaesthetizing readers to the images of suffering. Christopher Morash’s warning that ‘there can be no innocent narrative of the famine,’³⁴ affirms the difficulty in representing the truth of what actually happened. Indeed, in considering the difficulties in representing such an unimaginable, indefinable event, Morash has suggested that:

Like all past events the Famine is primarily a retrospective, textual creation. The starvation, the emigration, and the disease epidemics of the late 1840s have become ‘the Famine’ because it was possible to inscribe those disparate, but interrelated events in a relatively cohesive narrative...the representation has become the reality.³⁵

Many contemporary novelists who became concerned with the transient link between history and memory, particularly in the last decade, have innovatively drawn on the discourse of trauma to articulate public forms of memory. In effect, the rise of ‘trauma fiction’ conveying ideas of profound loss or intense fear on individual or collective level is linked to historical concerns of ‘the effect of trauma on the collective construction of the past and the ways in which the past is remembered in the present.’³⁶ Anne Whitehead suggests that the rise of trauma theory in literary studies has shifted to focus on how and why ‘specific historical instances of trauma’ are remembered.

The paradox of trauma fiction is central to this: how can an event which resists language or representation be narrativised in fiction? How can the unspeakable be articulated? Whitehead argues that the only adequate way to represent the impact of such experiences is to mimic the ‘forms and symptoms’ of trauma. In doing so the resultant representations of the ‘shocking facts of history’ must effectively articulate the impact of trauma without neutralizing its ‘violence’.³⁷

The difficulties of representing the Famine

Furthermore, in seeking to represent the ‘hiatuses and dislocations which necessarily inhabit trauma’, trauma fiction becomes inextricable from postcolonial and postmodern fiction in its deployment of stylistic devices in the sense that ‘temporality and chronology collapse’.³⁸ In *Star of the Sea*, O’Connor overcomes the dangers associated with installing then subverting such fragmented narratives by placing his novel in the realms of historiographic metafiction. In reminding us that these events did occur ‘in the real empirical past’³⁹ but in determining his own narrative positioning of them he negotiates a path in the ‘in-between space’ of the two:

I would stress at the outset that ‘Star of the Sea’ is a novel about a collection of characters and not primarily a meditation on that period of Irish history as such. Its rules, nuances, tones, and preoccupations are those of fiction and not historiography [...] In a way, I tried to make the Famine a character almost.⁴⁰

This emphasis on historical temporality and the disruption of time is resonant of Eagleton's comments regarding the difficulties of representing the Famine. He asserts that the historical narrative of Ireland has a somewhat surreal quality: 'the modern period in Ireland flows from an origin which is also an end, an abyss into which one quarter of the population disappears.'⁴¹ Such 'unsettling temporal structures' reflect the haunting nature of trauma, which in its inability to be grasped at the time of its occurrence, returns intrusively to be disturbingly 'experienced for the first time only in its belated repetition.'⁴² As Eagleton suggests, the 'real' at the core of the Famine which refuses to be articulated 'will return to haunt a history now in the process of regathering its stalled momentum and moving onwards and upwards.'⁴³ Therefore, in allowing formerly silenced voices to surface and articulate their own story of what has been forgotten or marginalised, trauma fiction contributes to new modes of historical representation wherein contemporary novelists can 'narrate the unnarratable.'⁴⁴

Eagleton's comments regarding the paradox of representation at the heart of the Famine in literature obviously posed an implicit challenge to Joseph O'Connor. The inability to symbolise the 'real' in these events has been addressed as he attempts to articulate the unspeakable and to offer some suggestions as to how recovery from this trauma is taking place through the transformations that occur in the representations of his characters. In trying to re-dress the relationship between 'catastrophe and analytic narrative',⁴⁵ and to overcome the dislocations and temporal disruptions associated with trauma, O'Connor locates the centre point of his narrative in its own transitory space on board a famine ship, the *Star of the Sea*. As a medium for anchoring the

intertwining narratives in the novel, the ship can be perceived as ‘a pluridimensional space of open reinvention.’⁴⁶ As a shifting space connecting fixed places within the Atlantic world, the ships that continually criss-crossed the Atlantic can be considered as cultural and political units that ‘engaged in various struggles towards emancipation, autonomy, and citizenship.’⁴⁷ His deployment of the famine ship as a stylistic device therefore enables time and chronology to be re-organised, and thus mirrors the surreal quality of Ireland’s historical narrative. In moving to and fro across the spaces between Ireland, Britain and America, the transitory notion of ships in motion can be applied to the re-imagination of place and time in Ireland as experienced in the novel. Bakhtin’s notion of the ‘chronotope’,⁴⁸ of imagined time across imagined space, can be used to explore ideas of transformation in the process of re-gathering a form of ‘stalled momentum and moving onwards and upwards’⁴⁹ in the historical and literary narratives of Ireland.

An oppositional space of multiple cultural forms

Furthermore, the ship provides a chance to explore and re-examine ‘the problems of nationality, location, identity, and historical memory’,⁵⁰ alongside an exploration of hidden expressions and relationships with ‘outsiders’. In transition between the local and the global, the image of the ship can be perceived as, ‘a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion.’⁵¹ The famine ship, *Star of the Sea*, therefore operates as a ‘betwixt and between’⁵² location within the context of the novel, as an oppositional space where it becomes possible to open up multiple cultural forms. Kevin Whelan reinforces the notion of the ship as a radical space into which a ‘stark

Ireland/America opposition... [has] come into play in the dissenting imagination.⁵³

The evocative space of the ship represented a 'mobile, fluid, dispersed social field, held together by dense rituals of sociability and bonding...a world of rumour, superstition, the song, [and] the yarn', all of which are symbolic in the novel as representations of what was 'real' on board the *Star of the Sea*.⁵⁴

Moreover, the narrative cohesion that Eagleton claims the Famine strikes out of Irish history is paralleled in the 'scrambled' narrative framework of *Star of the Sea*.

Constructed to reflect the disruption of time and history the novel opens at the middle point of the plot as the ship begins its journey, so that the narrative 'fixates your development at one level even as you continue to unfold at another, so that time in Irish history [...] would seem to move backwards and forward simultaneously.'⁵⁵ In his allegorical reading of *Wuthering Heights*, Eagleton equates the retrospective structure of the novel with the retrospective teleology which the Famine installed in Ireland's historical narrative. He explores the relations between Nature and Culture, as symbolic of Heathcliff's relationship with Catherine Earnshaw; Heathcliff is representative of Nature in all its unrefinement whereas Catherine stands for Culture, 'cultivated and thus concealed.'⁵⁶ Eagleton determines further parallels in equating Ireland with Nature and England with Culture. Heathcliff, like the history of Ireland, maintains an ambivalent quality, destructive yet pleasurable, which threatened to 'unmask' the supposed 'civility' concealed by the Earnshaw's and England alike.

‘Varieties of disguise’

In this sense, in his own manner of disguise, David represents the ‘site of ambivalence’ associated with Ireland as Nature to England’s Cultural civility: ‘A landlord and an Englishman; therefore an enemy of the people. A landlord without land; an Englishman born in Ireland’ (p. 28). Born in Ireland, yet not allowed to be Irish, the opposition created between the English aristocracy in Ireland and the spirituality that the Irish feel towards their land pivots on O’Connor’s representation of David, as in his ‘varieties of disguise’ (p. xxi) throughout the novel he fluctuates from being a vision of benevolent colonialism to a man tortured by his own conscience and unsure of his own role as husband, father and landlord. David is presented as an ambivalent character: ‘A boy in disguise nobody believed in, an actor playing a part he didn’t understand’ (p. 63). Throughout the novel there is a strong sense of discontent with who he is and what he stands for as: ‘He moved like a man in another man’s house’ (p. 46). Here O’Connor may be drawing on Eagleton’s comments on the way in which nineteenth-century Ireland functioned as Britain’s unconscious, threatening to expose the disguises masking their supposed civility and forcing them ‘to betray their own principles, in a kind of negation or inversion of their conscious beliefs.’⁵⁷ Therefore, as an inversion of these beliefs, his character deconstructs more traditional conceptions of tyrannical English landlords in Ireland.

At the beginning of the novel, O’Connor establishes David through his own self-perception of benevolent landlord: ‘No tenant of mine has been put off the land without compensation’ (p. 14). As the novel progresses, David maintains this stance

which is presented at its most extreme when thousands of evicted tenants set up an encampment at Kingscourt, and he refuses to clear them off the land: ‘Three thousand people were camping on the demesne, every last one of them a Liable sympathiser. He told the constables to leave and not return. He could not put starving families on the roadside’ (p. 259). His attitudes may be perceived at this point as an embodiment of British tolerance, but clearly become the actions of a man desperately trying to aspire to something he can never be. In order to achieve this he has enshrouded himself in a form of masquerade: ‘his clothes and his art a kind of disguise,’ (p. 47) whereby the perceptions he has of his relationships, his life and his role can be drawn exactly as he wishes: ‘It was as though he was drawing them as he wanted them to be: not quite as they were, or ever had been. Perhaps not even as they would have wanted to be themselves’ (p. 64). This is reinforced as he talks to Mulvey on board the *Star of the Sea* about the relationship he and his family maintained with his tenants: ‘No airs and graces. Everyone used to trot along and muck in together. None of this bloody absurdity of master and servant. All Galwegians together, you see’ (p. 303). In increasing the levels with which David’s perceptions of himself become further removed from reality as the novel progresses and the extent to which he conceals this fact beneath a mask of civility, O’Connor presents his character as the essence of the ‘biological time-bomb’ that Eagleton refers to as waiting to expose the ‘murky’ roots of English civility.⁵⁸

Furthermore, the ambivalent nature of David’s character also extends to the presentation of his fluctuating relationship with Mary. This ambivalence is marked in the changing parameters of their relationship which is confined within its own

opposition as he is at once her oppressor as well as her friend at the other extreme. As their relationship transforms throughout the novel the only constant is Mary, symbolic of all that he can never truly attain. In a number of ways the complex interweaving of the relationship between David and Mary can be examined to some degree as an inverted representation of Catherine and Heathcliff's relationship in *Wuthering Heights* which Eagleton examines in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*. As time moves backwards and forwards in *Star of the Sea*, the reader observes David and Mary moving backwards towards each other and forwards in their separation in their own process of 'moving onwards and upwards'.⁵⁹ Their developing friendship is charted in the early stages of the novel from the narrative perspective of Mary. As in *Wuthering Heights*, Mary tells her story in retrospective fashion, recalling the past from the position that situates her on board the *Star of the Sea* as David Merridith's maidservant: 'She knew her role and he knew his' (p. 48). As she remembers the first time they met she intrinsically outlines the boundaries which will separate them: her mother as David's nursemaid; being taken up to the 'big house'; the grand piano in the drawing room. The details of how she remembers the Merridith family motto grounds the binary opposition of their existence: '*Fides et Robur*' was the Merridith family motto. "Faith and Strength" in the Latin language. The family of Duane possessed no motto' (p. 51). As they grew up together playing in the fields around Kingscourt, Mary observes the way in which he attempted to cling to 'Arland' where he was born and where and his refusal to be 'English' in the way he would trudge around his father's estate, 'speaking the Irish he had learned off the servants' (p. 63). The transition in his identity seemed obvious to everyone around him, except David himself: ' "He wants to be something he's not," [her father would] say. "He's fish, that gossoon, and he wants to be fowl" ' (p. 63). In outlining the disguises that David

adopted from since she first knew him, Mary establishes the ‘thing not said’ (p. 69) which lies beneath the surface of his masquerade that will divide them. It is the voice of colonialism which determines the end of their ‘friendship’: ‘if I don’t agree, he’ll send you and your family away’ (p. 76). An inverse shade of Catherine and Heathcliff’s relationship is evident here as:

young Catherine must assume her allotted place in the symbolic order, leaving her anguished companion historically arrested in the imaginary register.

Catherine and Heathcliff – an oppressed woman and an exploited farm labourer – have a chance, so it would seem, to inaugurate a form of relationship at odds with the instrumental economy of the Heights; but Catherine’s renegacy prevents that relationship from entering upon material existence.⁶⁰

If David may be perceived as symbolic of Catherine, and Mary echoes an inverted representation of Heathcliff, this is the ‘transgressive moment’ after which they become distanced and begin to move forwards in their separation. However, David remains somewhat fixated with Mary throughout the transitions and varying roles in his life, reluctant to let go of what remains of her in his inward sphere: ‘In later years he was often to think of that time as having a carapace around it; the happiest period in a less than happy life. Certainly the happiest if you shaded Mary Duane from the picture’ (p. 161). His connection with Mary is representative of his connection with Ireland, and during his time in England, the more removed David’s relationship with his wife and with his own conscience becomes, the more his memories of Mary take on an almost spiritual quality as he associates her with the land he is physically distanced from: ‘And often as he stood at that muddy, peaceful river, he would find

himself remembering a girl he had once known. The sound of flowing water seemed to raise her like a spirit' (p. 232). Thus, as Eagleton has commented, in Ireland Nature becomes history, and the links that tie Mary to Nature to the 'shattered landscape'⁶¹ are a reminder of her status as a 'torn victim'⁶² which try as he might, no amount of camouflage can mask. In essence, Mary, like Heathcliff, and as Eagleton points out, like the Irish revolution itself, is:

a mournful remembrance of past wrongs which then unleashes a frenetically transformative drive to the future [...] behind it lurks the memory of a bungled utopian moment, a subjunctive mood which still haunts the hills and refuses to lie quiet.⁶³

Establishing a political framework

From the outset, the novel clearly establishes its political framework by grounding events through a settled history of Irish Nationalism. References are made in the first chapter to the nationalist icon, Daniel O'Connell, as the boat which is said to have carried his body from Genoa to Ireland is sighted from aboard the *Star of the Sea*, "the Liberator" to Ireland's Catholic poor' (p. xv). The novel also closes on the eve of the 1916 Easter Rising, therefore clearly framing the events in between within a nationalist political context. In addition to this, racist cartoons appear on the title page depicting racial stereotypes of the Irish-Iberian, Anglo-Teutonic and Negro as if linked in grades of separation in a transitional fashion. O'Connor may have included these in such a manner not only to establish the racist British attitude towards the Irish

at this time, but also to emphasise the underlying message of ‘How we draw the enemy, what we fear about the self’ (p. 390); many believe it is possible to mask our fears by fashioning stereotypical images of those things which we fear. This notion of fear may be linked to the veritable silence that has loudly descended around explorations of the Famine as many historians have been wary of laying particular blame for its causes, possibly for fear of being identified with evidence of British misrule or indeed the fear of accepting that the Irish also behaved in an undignified manner.

As a means of representing a nation still coming to terms with this catastrophe and one in the process of transformation, *Star of the Sea* may be positioned in the space between these polarised opposites to reveal both an element of truth, combined with the truth of the fears that lie under the surface of national memory:

any nation, will bind itself together not by what it shares but ultimately by what it fears, which is often so much greater. Perhaps it abhors the outsider as camouflage for its own alarms; dreading what it would do to itself were the binding to fall asunder. (p. xix)

Thus in attempting to de-mythologise long sanctioned accounts of national memory and as a means of addressing some of the details of that which the nation has hidden through fear, O’Connor illuminates these details to give voices and names to those whose voices and names are now missing and who have vanished as people, but remain hidden in under the camouflage of historical documentary evidence, de-humanised in national memory.

In dismantling conventional accounts of such a veiled national history it has become clear that there were ‘things you were not supposed to say about the Famine’.⁶⁴ One of the most controversial issues ‘lost’ in the silence is that an entire class of Irish Catholic traders and farmers speculated and improved their prospects from the profits. Colm Toibin has suggested that the legacy of this ‘may be more difficult for us deal with in Ireland now than the legacy of those who died or emigrated.’⁶⁵ He confirms that two significant things happened in the aftermath of the Famine: firstly that the Irish generally blamed the English and the Ascendancy; secondly, that a great silence about class division in Catholic Ireland began. However, as it became increasingly important for Ireland to be presented as an undivided nation inspired by nationalist fervour: ‘The Famine, then, had to be blamed on the Great Other, the enemy across the water, and the victims of the Famine had to be this entire Irish nation, rather than a vulnerable section of the population.’⁶⁶

In highlighting how some of the more wealthy Irish mistreated their own and did absolutely nothing to alleviate the plight of the starving, O’Connor attempts to voice what has traditionally remained hidden under the veil of the British government’s dismally ineffective relief efforts and again voices the unspeakable:

The bright windows of the stores had Christmas fare in great abundance, geese and fowl and all such; but just as in Clifden the traders have greatly multiplied the prices. How they can do it to their own people at this awful time I cannot understand. (p. 38-9)

Here the gulf between the wealthy Irish and the poor is striking, as are the ‘unspeakable sights’ of the suffering Irish: ‘a multitude half dead and weeping as they walked through the streets ... sitting down on the icy ground to bow their heads and die’(p. 39). From the perspective of this narrator, who is himself one of the starving, the blame for such dreadful suffering is articulated as the fault of the ‘Judas Irish merchant with his greedy eye to whatever mite he can screw out of his wretched countrymen and they so down’ (p. 39). In recovering the memory of voices that have been lost or repressed, the novel thus contributes to the ethical dimension of historical representation.

Furthermore, in giving voice to the silenced stories of the Famine, O’Connor brings his main characters to public consciousness in ‘varieties of disguise’ (p. xxi) by interweaving each of their narratives throughout the novel. Framed by Dixon’s fictional memoir, the identities of each of the central characters are transformed in some way as their stories progress and the moral issues surrounding each of their lives is contextualised in the social, political and historical period leading up to and during the Irish Famine. In doing so O’Connor reveals an alternative interpretation of the four main characters whose identities become altered by the end of the novel, thereby allowing them to move forward in some way. Pius Mulvey and Mary Duane are presented in binary opposition in their representation of two different sides of the Irish suffering in the Famine: amoral survivor and noble victim. David Merridith is representative of the English nobility and its presence in Ireland, reflected in the tortured relationships he holds with his tenants, his family and his own conscience.

The extent to which David's character develops from, 'A boy in a disguise nobody believed in, an actor playing a part he didn't understand', (p. 63) to the man who finally has '...no colours with which to enshroud him' (p. 378) as the removal of his body from the ship is jeered, questions the masquerades that are used to disguise that which is often left lying below the surface. Furthermore it is through his antagonistic relationship with the American journalist Grantley Dixon that O'Connor unravels another of his central themes: the dehumanizing effects of colonialism and class oppression. In essence, through scratching beneath the surface of the intertwining narratives of these characters: their histories, their secrets and their guilt, and in deconstructing the manner in which they may be 'wearing the masks of goblins or angels' (p.41) at different stages throughout the novel, *Star of the Sea* gives a face and a voice to the masquerades involved in the enmeshed histories of England, Ireland and America at this time:

Beware, their appearance seemed to say. One day we might take your clothes and put them on. One day the emperor will have no clothes. We will be you. And you will be us. And if you were us, could you last five minutes? (p. 188)

As 'noble victim', O'Connor's representation of Mary essentially contributes to the theme of disguise throughout the novel. From the outset Mary is closely associated with the land; the first fleeting reference to her in the novel ties her clearly to her roots: '...a native from Carna in County Galway...usually she's hale as a Connemara pony' (p. 7). The importance of this can be drawn from Eagleton's comments that, 'in a largely pre-industrial society, the land is the prime determinant of human life ... in

the Famine history appears with all the brute, aleatory power of a seismic upheaval, thus writing large the course of much Irish History.⁶⁷ Mary is clearly linked to this ‘brute’, ‘seismic upheaval’ and its effects upon her native Connemara as O’Connor references her as the recipient of a letter in which her husband relates the effects the Famine has wrought: ‘All is lost, my sweetest Mary, and can never return’ (p. 38). Nature and the land become synonymous with Mary, thus allegorizing her character as a ‘gendering of the land and homeland’.⁶⁸ At the beginning of the novel, Mary is presented as relatively happy and peaceful; her friendship with David is framed with natural imagery as she is presented in harmony with her surroundings: ‘dark with the incense of meadowsweet and pine’ (p. 65). Her relationship with David develops amidst the sprucewoods of Glendollagh Lake to the sound of the chirrup of a starling, as ‘the air smelt loamy, of turfsmoke and rain’ (p. 67). However, the images of nature and the land become progressively darker and more foreboding just before Pius Mulvey’s rejection of her and as Ireland’s own ‘apocalypse’⁶⁹ approaches: ‘Wind screeched across the boglands. Sleet beat the windows like the clatter of drums’ (p. 107). This draws many parallels between the trajectory of Mary’s life and the manner in which ‘in Ireland Nature becomes history.’⁷⁰

Feminization of the nation: an alternative expression of national suffering

As Mary attempts to deal with the loss of her daughter – murdered by her own husband – her intense suffering becomes conjoined with the suffering of the nation. Such ‘feminization’ of the nation is reflective of a form of collective consciousness, an element of national binding which seeks to articulate an alternative expression of

national suffering. Through such recourse to female figuration, O'Connor is again allowing, 'the (politically and psychologically) repressed to surface to consciousness',⁷¹ thus allowing formerly silenced voices to tell their own story of that 'which is forgotten or overlooked in the grand narrative of History.'⁷²

Moreover, Mary's downward spiral from carefree to abandoned woman, to bereft mother who is then forced to 'beg in the street for nigh on a year and do what no woman should ever have to', (p. 275) is the pinnacle of O'Connor's representation of her as an archetype of feminine suffering. Immediately after she is presented at her lowest point in Dublin, O'Connor parallels her loss of hope with that of the passengers on board the *Star of the Sea* as they hear news about the possibility that the authorities in New York might turn back all the ships from Ireland for fear of cholera and typhus epidemics: 'Presently they commenced to pray aloud, in that fervently incantatory manner they have, the many strange names they give to unto the Mother of Jesus' (p. 268). Following this, Chapter XXVII is comprised of a sketch of the 'Queen of High Heaven' (p. 268) after which the outline of a ship is filled with a catalogue of names for the Virgin Mary: 'Hope of the Exiles... Mary Immaculate Star of the Sea', followed by Mary Duane's 'Denunciation' of Pius Mulvey (p. 270). O'Connor is therefore consciously evoking a parallel between the suffering of Mary Duane and the suffering of the passengers on board the ship as representative of the Irish nation. Mary's plight frames the references to the Virgin Mary, thus framing a representation of her as the idealised stereotype of the Irish woman as a figure of sublime innocence. The spiritual constancy evident in the presentation of Mary's character is further reinforced by Surgeon Mangan just before she leaves the *Star of*

the Sea: 'Words quite failed me for several moments ... I felt I had been in the presence of a very exceptional person' (p. 346-7).

As a symbol of the mythic motherland, Mary's suffering is attributed to the colonial oppression of the Irish as 'Ireland became more frequently identified with a vulnerable virgin ravished by the aggressive masculine invader.'⁷³ Kearney suggests that the more spiritual equation of Ireland with a virginal motherland implied the need to safeguard the 'faith and morals' of the nation against the threat of alien culture; in this case the violation stems from a similar sufferer of the Famine. Traditionally, the masculine invader would be from England, yet as the representative of the English aristocracy in Ireland, David Merridith retains the enduring memory of Mary as 'turf-dark, stonish, strong with self-possession and strong with the possession of all she had survived' (p. 234). Yet again O'Connor has chosen to construct an alternative interpretation in presenting Pius Mulvey as her oppressor, and in doing so reveals the pluralities associated with the 'varieties of disguise' and transformation of identities which are echoed throughout the novel, as a means of negotiating the different means by which the characters form their own means of survival and 'living on'.

It is through his relationship with Mary that Pius constantly reinvents himself. Presented as the constant through which David and Mulvey renegotiate their identities throughout the novel, Mary operates as the in-between space of these two sets of oppositions, which subvert traditional connotations of English/Irish relations. David *should* be Mary's oppressor, yet it is he who rescues her from the disintegration of her

life brought on by Mulvey's actions in evicting her and her husband (his own brother) from their own land. For Mulvey, 'It had only taken a moment to cross the border between victimhood and oppression and he felt no guilt for making the step' (p. 94). Betraying his own family and community in this way represents a rejection of his inherent nationalism; in behaving like a 'predatory English landlord' he has become an 'exploiter whose monstrous violence is fuelled by disappointment in love.'⁷⁴ That this love should be for Mary and in so destructive a form allows O'Connor to present a more pluralistic notion of English/Irish relations as he contrasts it with the honourable feelings David has sustained towards Mary throughout the novel. It is also ironic that as a symbol of Ireland, David embraces the wish to be accepted by Mary, and therefore as Irish, throughout the novel, whilst Mulvey rejects her, and so too his sense of Irish identity, choosing instead to believe that, 'There was no reason to confine yourself to being yourself [...] there were plenty of reasons to be someone else' (p. 180-1). This is in stark contrast to Mary's more traditional and accepted belief that, 'They would live here and die here, like his people before him' (p. 107). Indeed, after he abandons Mary and leaves Ireland he spends most of the novel reinventing his identity in multiple forms: 'nobody was sure of exactly what he was,' (p. xx) leaving the reader trying to unravel the same riddles that Eagleton applied to Heathcliff: 'Who is he? What is he? What does he want?'⁷⁵ In focusing our attention on issues such as these, O'Connor subtly inserts into his narrative more complex questions of what lies below the surface of society. As each of these characters are presented through their differing and transforming relationships with Mary, figure of the nation, the subtext of O'Connor's representation therefore ties them to the land and the nation in differing ways, echoing the multi-faceted nature of Irish society and

the complex relation the nation has with those who are perceived as ‘outsiders’ and the malevolent disguises worn by those believed to be ‘our own’.

Redemption through transformation

It is only after his period of transition on board the *Star of the Sea* that Mulvey can finally find a way forward with his life through the redemption offered by Mary and all that she symbolises. His multiple ‘narrative[s] of self-identity’ are indeed reflective of Kearney’s comments that ‘each one of us has the freedom to re-invent our past’⁷⁶ as a means of moving forward in the future. As a figure of the nation, Mary Duane is finally presented, again to draw upon Kearney’s terms, as ‘a model of unity in plurality’.⁷⁷ Her forgiveness of Mulvey at the end of the novel has a redemptive quality synonymous with that of an ideologically elevated symbol of sublime innocence.

In considering the notion of transformed identities, David Lloyd suggests an alternative post-colonial procedure as to how the Famine should be remembered in popular memory: that in the light of undergoing resistance to a distinctly colonial discipline, the Famine can be understood in terms of cultural transformation. The meaning of the Famine as a transformative cultural event is based on one level on the largest clearance of land in Irish history, and the penetration of ‘the mentality of political economy into the disciplining of the Irish body’,⁷⁸ on another. On the other hand, the Irish peasantry understood the Famine in terms of divine punishment, which

when inflected by the resistance of social and political movements, develops the cultural transformation of Famine in popular memory: ‘There is no singular memory of the past at all, whether historical or popular, let alone one of the Famine. Both individual and social memory, which in any case necessarily intersects, are the sedimentations of material and discursive struggles.’⁷⁹ Essentially then, it is important to understand how the Famine figures in popular memories and how such accounts ‘explicitly and implicitly’ refigure historical understandings of the event.⁸⁰

In applying this to an analysis of *Star of the Sea*, it is important to establish the explicit meaning of how situating the narrative in the Famine can illuminate our understanding of the event, but more significantly, to address the implicit meanings: to unveil the hidden meanings that are masked within in order to re-figure historical understandings of the event and to determine the extent to which Joseph O’Connor has, as Dixon articulates in the Epilogue, gone ‘in disguise into this kingdom of lies. To use the shocking story of the Monster of Newgate to tell another more important and still more shocking story’ (p. 391). Lloyd reinforces this point, suggesting that the meaning of the Famine does not lie in itself as an event, but on what is camouflaged within: ‘in how it aims to signify within a set of practices through which the confrontation of incommensurable social formations produces new and again differing formations.’⁸¹ Within the narratives of resistance and confrontation, eviction and hunger recounted in *Star of the Sea*, new social formations and the ‘emergence of other modes of living on’⁸² are witnessed in efforts to survive and escape. What is most significant is the articulation of the ‘determination to survive in altered states’ and the acknowledgement that ‘to pass on is to be changed’.⁸³ Mary’s forgiveness of

Mulvey points to the ability to move forward in the light of redemption, in her embodiment of the recuperative power of 'living on' and surviving:

Wherever she found it can never be known. But she did show it. She did find it. When the moment of retribution rolled up out of history and presented itself like an executioner's sword, she turned away and did not seize it. (p. 374-75)

The sense of renewal inherent in her forgiveness may be symbolic of her own redemption from the colonial violation she has left behind. No longer on board the *Star of the Sea* she is able to move forward in her transformation, 'subdued but not subjected.'⁸⁴

Lloyd therefore emphasises that it is an orientation towards the future in the most minimal of actions which will drive forward the basis for a collective survival. This is evident in *Star of the Sea* as from the outset of the novel, Captain Lockwood voices the names of those passengers of the steerage class who have died on the ship in an intimate act of collective remembrance, adding whatever details he can to humanise these victims and acknowledge their existence:

the cause in each case being the infirmity consequent on prolonged starvation. Margaret Farrell, fifty-two yrs, a married woman of Rathfylane, Enniscorthy, County Wexford; Joseph English, seventeen yrs (formerly, it is said, apprenticed to a wheelright) of no fixed abode but born near Cootehill, County Cavan. (p. 2-3)

Lockwood is relentless in continuing his recounting of personal details of each person who dies onboard the ship at the start of each of his accounts for the ship's log throughout the voyage as a means of representing all those who have remained unheard and lost as entities rather than individuals concealed beneath the dust of historical documentation. There is perhaps a connotation here that in revealing these truths, 'The best place to hide is in the open' (p. 215). Toibin has reinforced the importance of this, as 'the names are enough to allow you to imagine them, to think you may have known them.'⁸⁵ Indeed, his tribute to the humanity of each of these victims reflects 'the truth, heard from afar, of the men and women who were caught up uncomprehending and frantic in that disaster.'⁸⁶ Through Lockwood, the narrative of *Star of the Sea* encourages an acknowledgement of the facts of the Irish past, as painful as they may be, in order to confront the truth of the illusory qualities of national memory and the 'apparent amnesia' about the Famine.⁸⁷ The importance of facing up to historical facts is reinforced: these people were real; they mattered. Thus, at the end of the novel the reader is at last permitted to act as witness to Mary's conscious acknowledgement of the grief over the loss of her daughter – an event which has itself been buried within the fragmented structure of the novel to signify her own repression:

And as the name was uttered, some began to pray; and others began to weep in sympathy. And others again who had lost children of their own began to utter children's names. As though the act of saying their names – the act of saying they ever had names – was to speak the only prayer that can ever begin to matter in a world that turns its eyes

from the hungry and the dying, they were real. They existed. They were held in these arms. They were born, and they lived, and they died. (p. 374)

What is significant here is that this group of people who represent the Irish nation onboard the *Star of the Sea* now 'bind together' by what they share, in contrast to O'Connor's comments at the beginning of the novel where he suggests that any nation will bind itself together more by 'what it fears' (p. xix). This is clearly indicative of an altered state of consciousness, reflecting the transformative power in acknowledging the painful facts of the Famine. In coming to terms with the legacy of the Famine it is important to replace such communal forgetting that O'Connor references in the Prologue with acts of moral commemoration that echo Mary Robinson's words that, 'even across time and distance, tragedy must be seen as human and not historic.'⁸⁸ It is therefore vital to reflect upon the people who have died as a result of the Famine from a humanitarian perspective as individuals, rather than just inevitable victims; as 'men and women with plans and dreams of future achievements. It takes from their humanity and individuality to consider them merely victims.'⁸⁹ Lloyd consolidates this view further in a different context, asserting the importance of the notion of regenerative possibility, which may be applied to the intertwined narratives that are voiced in *Star of the Sea*:

We need to retrieve these stories, not so that they can become another dominant history, displacing the former, but so that they can form a repertoire for what I would call the history of possibilities, thinking, once again, of the ways in which even the defeated struggles and gestures of the oppressed remain in memory to re-emerge as the impulse to new forms of solidarity.⁹⁰

Transformative remembering

In considering the processes of public remembrance and commemoration of the Famine it is therefore important to differentiate between the function of communal forgetting and transformative remembering. Joseph O'Connor offers such an imaginative re-interpretation of the past, drawing upon the link between history and memory to emphasise the importance of transformative remembering. In linking the past and the present through questioning how much protection was offered to Ireland in the critical context within which the novel is set, he also poses the question of how much protection contemporary Ireland offers to predisposing the conditions of world hunger or to the protection of economic migrants into Ireland:

For as truly as the night comes down on every day, if the world were somehow turned down-side up; if Ireland were a richer land and other nations now mighty were distressed; as certain as I know the dawn must come, the people of Ireland would welcome the frightened stranger with that gentleness and friendship which so ennobles their character. (p. 279)

In stressing Lockwood's certainty a little too loudly, O'Connor opens up a critical binary issue. In drawing upon the moral responsibility that Mary Robinson commented on, he reveals an opposition in the way that Ireland's emigrants were welcomed as they sought escape and new lives in the Famine, and the way that

hostility has been observed as emigrants seek similar refuge in Ireland today:⁹¹ ‘To wander alone among strangers, they risk all’ (p. 279).

Joseph O’Connor’s novel, *Star of the Sea*, may therefore be perceived as his own act of Famine commemoration. In presenting a vision of human suffering and highlighting the acts of survival in its aftermath, and in binding together, ‘The frail Famine voices [that] now reach us across an aching void...’⁹² with the muted voices of suffering immigrants today, he may prove that ‘...in hearing them attentively, we might reclaim our Famine ghosts from their enforced silence and invisibility.’⁹³ For in remembering rather than forgetting, and transforming as opposed to accepting, the burden of the past must not be wholly overcome but shifted, enough perhaps, to allow those voices to be heard.

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- ⁹ Mary Robinson, 'Cherishing the Irish Diaspora', p. 2. (para. 14 of 26)
- ¹⁰ Mary Robinson, 'Cherishing the Irish Diaspora; On a Matter of Public Importance, An Address to the Houses of the Oireachtas', February 1995 <<http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~irlker/diaspora.html>> [accessed 16 November 2009] (para. 14 of 26)
- ¹¹ Cormac O'Grada, *Ireland's Great Famine: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (Dublin: University College Press, 2006), p. 218.
- ¹² Tony Blair in Kathy Marks, 'Blair Issues Apology for Irish Potato Famine', *The Independent*, 2 June 1997 <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/blair-issues-apology-for-irish-potato-famine-125>> [accessed 20 December 2009] (para. 3 of 3)
- ¹³ Cormac O'Grada, *The Great Irish Famine: New Studies in Economic and Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 43.
- ¹⁴ Charles Trevelyan, *The Irish Crisis*, (1848) noted in Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 326.
- ¹⁵ Colm Toibin and Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Irish Famine* (London: Profile Books, 2004), p.13.
- ¹⁶ John Waters cited in Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 30-1.
- ¹⁷ Cormac O'Grada, *The Great Irish Famine: New Studies in Economic and Social History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995) p. 2.
- ¹⁸ O'Grada, *New Studies in Economic and Social History*, p. 2.
- ¹⁹ Cormac O'Grada, *Black '47 and Beyond: The Great Irish Famine in History, Economy, and Memory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 3.
- ²⁰ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 12-13.
- ²¹ O'Connor, *Socialist Review*, (para. 8 of 15)
- ²² Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 13.
- ²³ O'Grada, *Black '47 and Beyond*, p. 3.
- ²⁴ Pierre Nora cited in Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), p. 82.
- ²⁵ Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 82.
- ²⁶ Avril Doyle cited in Cormac O'Grada, *Ireland's Great Famine*, p. 228.
- ²⁷ O'Grada, *Ireland's Great Famine*, p. 230.
- ²⁸ O'Grada, *Ireland's Great Famine*, p. 230.
- ²⁹ Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', p. 221-2.
- ³⁰ Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 9.
- ³¹ J. Lee cited in Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 318.
- ³² Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 2.
- ³³ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 13.
- ³⁴ Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine*, p. 187.
- ³⁵ Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine*, p. 3.
- ³⁶ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 81.
- ³⁷ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 87.
- ³⁸ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 3.

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- ⁴⁰ Joseph O'Connor in Jose Manuel Estevez-Saa, 'An Interview With Joseph O'Connor', *Contemporary Literature* 46, 2, (2005), 161-175 (p. 163).
- ⁴¹ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 14.
- ⁴² Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 5.
- ⁴³ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 15.
- ⁴⁴ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, p. 4.
- ⁴⁵ Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 9.
- ⁴⁶ Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland: Politics, Culture, Philosophy*, (London: Routledge, 1997), p. 64-5.
- ⁴⁷ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), p. 16.
- ⁴⁸ Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist; trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin; London: University of Texas Press, 1981).
- ⁴⁹ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 15.
- ⁵⁰ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 16.
- ⁵¹ Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, p. 4.
- ⁵² Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, p. 111.
- ⁵³ Kevin Whelan, 'The Green Atlantic: Radical Reciprocities Between Ireland and America in the Long Eighteenth Century', in *A New Imperial History: Culture Identity and Modernity in Britain and the Empire, 1660-1840*, ed. by Kathleen Wilson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 216-238 (p. 221).
- ⁵⁴ Whelan, 'The Green Atlantic', p. 232.
- ⁵⁵ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 15.
- ⁵⁶ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 4.
- ⁵⁷ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 9.
- ⁵⁸ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 9.
- ⁵⁹ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 15.
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- ⁶¹ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 11.
- ⁶² Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 4.
- ⁶³ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 21.
- ⁶⁴ Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 7.
- ⁶⁵ Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 6.
- ⁶⁶ Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 6.
- ⁶⁷ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 11.
- ⁶⁸ Richard Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 234.
- ⁶⁹ Foster, *Modern Ireland*, p. 318.
- ⁷⁰ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 11.
- ⁷¹ Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, my p. 2.
- ⁷² Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction*, my. P.4.
- ⁷³ Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 120.
- ⁷⁴ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 20.
- ⁷⁵ Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 21.
- ⁷⁶ Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 117.
- ⁷⁷ Kearney, *Postnationalist Ireland*, p. 117.
- ⁷⁸ Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', p. 223.
- ⁷⁹ Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', p. 224.
- ⁸⁰ Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', p. 225.
- ⁸¹ Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', p. 226.
- ⁸² Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', p. 227.
- ⁸³ Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', p. 227.
- ⁸⁴ Lloyd, 'Colonial Trauma/Postcolonial Recovery?', p. 227.
- ⁸⁵ Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 14.
- ⁸⁶ Roger McHugh cited in Toibin and Ferriter, *The Irish Famine*, p. 20.
- ⁸⁷ Joseph O'Connor in Jose Manuel Estevez-Saa, 'An Interview With Joseph O'Connor', p. 164.
- ⁸⁸ Mary Robinson, 'Cherishing the Irish Diaspora', p. 2. (para. 10 of 26)
- ⁸⁹ Mary Robinson, 'Cherishing the Irish Diaspora', p. 2. (para. 13 of 26)

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- ⁹⁰ David Lloyd, *Ireland After History, Critical Conditions: Field Day Essays and Monographs*, (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 105.
- ⁹¹ Declan Kiberd has reinforced this notion claiming that: ‘*Star of the Sea* used the reports of dead bodies arriving on coffin-ships in 1840s America to cast an angular light upon a contemporary Ireland in which refugees from Eastern Europe arrived asphyxiated in container trucks in Rosslare.’ Declan Kiberd, ‘Sites of Endless Ambiguity,’ *Irish Times*, 5 May 2007: Weekend 12 cited in Sinead Moynihan, “‘Ships In Motion’: Crossing the Black and Green Atlantics in Joseph O’Connor’s *Star of the Sea*,’ *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 12:1, April 2008, 41-58 (p. 44).
- ⁹² Kevin Whelan cited in Cormac O’Grada, *Ireland’s Great Famine*, p. 229.
- ⁹³ Kevin Whelan cited in Cormac O’Grada, *Ireland’s Great Famine*, p. 229.

CHAPTER THREE

The Secret Scripture by Sebastian Barry.

Introduction

In his essay, 'Something of us will remain', Roy Foster examines the ways that Sebastian Barry has utilised history in his works of drama and fiction. He outlines the ways in which Barry writes about minor characters on the margins of society in an attempt to rescue them from obscurity and 'the forgotten, marginalized and awkward minor acts of Irish history.'¹ The secretive personal recollections which predominate much of Barry's work are often based on the fractures in family relationships, as he interweaves the tensions of personal recollection into the losses of Irish experience and historical trauma. His characters predominantly exist on the margins and reflect lives lost to history, their fractured and often secretive personal history manifested in a form of ghostly exclusion. Foster suggests that these 'anomalous outsiders and their individual histories' mirror the uncertainty of Ireland's position at key historical moments in an attempt to 'understand rather than judge' Ireland's position in the British Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century: 'part colonized, part colonizing, neither one thing nor the other.'² Essentially, Barry's works of both drama and fiction deal with the uncertainty of history and the unreliability of recorded truths; with the interaction between history and personal memory, presenting history as a 'juggernaut', which leaves characters trapped and confused in the face of a future they are afraid to acknowledge.³ However, it is perhaps through accessing the 'strange privacy' (p. 14) of his characters' enclosed worlds that he can 'rescue figures adrift in history's flood, and salvage a sense of belonging.'⁴

Sebastian Barry's most recent novel, *The Secret Scripture*,⁵ can therefore be read through the frame of Foster's comments. Published two years after Foster's essay, the novel is structured around this central problematic notion of belonging as it parallels the national and the personal against the aftermath of traumatic experience. The importance of stories lies at the core of the novel as Barry contextualises his key theme through simple stories of ghostliness: 'The gloomy house, the grey woman, the groaning ghost swam behind his eyes', (p. 8.) then intricately weaves his narrative around the more complex issue of the haunting effect of trauma in the story of the hammers and feathers. This story is not only the metaphor which lies like a 'secret and ruinous burden at the very heart' (p. 19) of his protagonist Roseanne's life, but ultimately acts as a key structuring device upon which the rest of the novel hinges.

At the beginning of the novel the first thing that Roseanne recounts is the story of how her father intended to prove to her how all things from hammers to feathers fall at the same rate. After dropping two hammers and a handful of feathers from the top of the round tower in the graveyard where he worked, Roseanne's task was to report from outside the bottom of the tower what the outcome was. However, despite peering up to the top of the tower 'faithfully, faithfully, willingly, willingly' (p. 22), to discover the outcome of the experiment, all Roseanne recalls is that the feathers drifted away amidst a 'curious music' in her head. (p. 23.) What follows in the rest of the novel is Roseanne's attempt to piece together her fragmented memories, to recount the events of her life which led to her placement in the asylum in Roscommon which she now inhabits at one hundred years of age, having been effectively hidden from the outside world for much of her adult life.

However the fragmented nature of her narrative reflects the uncertainty of her memories and her hesitation about the truth of what she is writing. Through the parallel testimony of her psychiatrist, Dr Grene, an alternative version of the events of Roseanne's life gradually unravels, stemming from the story of the hammers and the feathers and the effect that this traumatic experience had on the rest of her life, as she recalls: 'First the bullets, and then a thin falling cascade of lightest blood, over my uniform, my hands, my father, my life.' (p. 52.) The metaphorical tension between the fall of the hammers as the 'cold hand of history'⁶ and the feathers which 'drifted, drifted away' (p. 23) is essentially representative of the tension between memory and traumatic experience. In interrogating the disjunction between the two, in *The Secret Scripture* Barry therefore attempts to unravel the relation between history and personal memory in the aftermath of trauma.

Set against this representation of personal trauma is the notion of national loss, which is examined in the novel against the backdrop of a somewhat silenced national memory in the wake of colonial oppression surrounding the Irish Civil War and the formation of the Free State.

CHAPTER THREE

‘Somewhere there at the edge of things...’

*‘I have chosen:
out of myth into history I move to be
part of that ordeal
whose darkness is
only now reaching me...’⁷*

The complex memory of the Civil War: an event which remains on the margins of Irish history

In contrast to previous discussions of the national amnesia and the silence surrounding the trauma brought about by the Famine, the silence enshrouding memories of the Civil War are much more closely guarded. Joseph O’Connor has described this period in Irish history as possessing a ‘malignant omnipresence’⁸, a phrase which encapsulates not only the memory of the events themselves but the attempts made to cover them up. Bill Kissane has commented that in those counties in Ireland where there were more extensive numbers of deaths that ‘silence has been the preferred way of dealing with the memory of the civil war.’⁹ As such, the novel addresses the complex memory of the Civil War through its diverse perspectives. Dr Grene reflects that he is ‘still a little musty on that whole period. It seemed to us at school so much a series of dire errors and – it is such a belligerent history.’ (p. 117.) The very fact that his knowledge of events is so diluted is reflective of the extent to which some of the

‘secrets’ of the civil war remained as such, and perhaps explains the reason why Roseanne comments that there ‘is silence all about’ (p. 4.) at the very beginning of her account.

Therefore, through the contrasting perceptions of his parallel narrators which are developed in differing historical and social time frames towards the events that take place, Barry is reinforcing the notion that the memory of the Civil War has been shrouded in silence and as such its neglect has condemned it as an event which remains on the margins of Irish history.

This consignment of such an integral period in the history of Ireland to the ‘ditches of history’ (p. 20) is therefore one of the novel’s primary concerns. The fractures associated with the creation of the Irish Free State are presented as brutal due to the nature of the internecine conflict, particularly in the geographical location in which the novel is set. In his study of the regional effects of the Civil War on Sligo, Michael Farry has noted that while some counties were hardly affected by the fighting, in Sligo the fighting was even more intense than it was during the previous War of Independence with Britain. He suggests that this was due to a decided reluctance on the part of the IRA to relinquish any of the independence they had obtained during the period of the Truce to any form of central control.¹⁰ Through foregrounding the opposition associated with the birth of the new state against the senseless deaths on both sides of such a destructive conflict, Barry essentially highlights the apparent challenges to the very notion of freedom which was being fought for. In lamenting the death of his brother Willie, John Lavelle pinpoints the fractures evident in communities:

...he's after being killed up there on the mountain by a crowd of mean, unthinking vile bastards that call themselves soldiers, but are not, and are worse to us than any Black and Tan ever was in the war just gone by. (p. 40.)

In revealing such personal losses at the political intersections in communities through the filter of the nationalist 'Regulars' in support of the Treaty against the republican 'Irregulars', Barry exposes the divide in the new state which 'given that both sides had recently been fighting together, had immense psychological and political implications that made the conflict more vicious.'¹¹ The notion of such political fractures within communities is substantiated by the emphasis on their vulnerability as the 'lads of the new army in their awkward uniforms [...] looked only terrified in the light of the fire.'(p. 51) Similarly, 'The long thin boy from the mountain, with the trousers not quite to his ankles' provides a clear image of the realities of the 'unsavoury history'¹² of the Civil War. The bitter split between Republicans and Free Staters, of 'Irishmen killing their own' (p.113) has indeed left a lasting legacy which has scarred and haunted the history surrounding the establishment of the Free State.

The Civil War is therefore presented through the polarized views of rival nationalist leaders de Valera and Collins. Emanating from this is Barry's representation of Michael Collins, whose loss has haunted Irish politics since his assassination by republicans during the Civil War. Roseanne recounts that: 'Tom thought that all the great men had been killed during the troubles, Collins of course in chief.' (p. 179.) In remembering Collins as a version of an Ireland that could have been, Barry represents him as a particularly ghostly figure. Foster has also noted that Collins is a recurring figure in Barry's work, presented as 'a half-mythic

figure, emblematic of a future that never happened.’¹³ Collins’ representation in *The Secret Scripture* as a ‘charismatic lost leader’¹⁴ is in stark opposition to the ‘traitor de Valera’ (p. 200):

Tom spoke with understandable disgust, as these men were the very ones his own crowd had striven to subdue, imprison, and alas execute. So how it came about that the very men against the Treaty, and who lads like Tom had wanted erased from the Irish story, were now the men in charge ... You could almost feel a lurch in the life of Sligo. (p. 163.)

The presentation of divisions in Irish political history

The spectral presence of Collins and the suggestion of the extent to which his death altered the course of Irish politics by his absence in contrast to the way de Valera ‘tried to strangle the new country at birth’ (p. 178) is emphasised in the presentation of such sharp divisions within Irish nationalism. The fact that these divisions in Irish political history manifested into warfare and extreme measures at a time that should have been ‘seen as a triumph of national unity’¹⁵ combined with the tragic scale of casualties on both sides remains as one of the painful memories of the Civil War and its aftermath. Even more sensitive is the number of deaths which occurred, particularly those who were as Tom Garvin notes: ‘executed without trial, for no particular crime other than being on the wrong political side.’¹⁶ Garvin’s comments regarding the final ceasefire is particularly significant as he emphasises that ‘The extent of the disaster perpetrated by the IRA has never been quantified and rapidly became part of Ireland’s extensive secret history, not least because a large chunk of the IRA ended up

as the government ten years later.’¹⁷ Garvin’s comments are reflected in Barry’s representation of these events. Dr Grene reflects that ‘It is a wonder the country ever recovered from these early miseries and traumas’, (p. 236) and indeed, it is no wonder that they have maintained such a spectral presence on the margins of Irish history, and from this position perpetuate the notion that such memories of the civil war are hard to remember, and much easier to forget.

Remembering in order to forget

In discussing the way in which the memorialisation of the Civil War has been shrouded in forgetfulness, Anne Dolan has noted that while the impact of civil war cannot be misunderstood, the commemoration of those who died has become confused; she suggests that remembering victory in ‘a war no-one wished to fight’¹⁸ challenges the very notions of collective memory, when such memories are in essence haunted by ‘the harrowing and the anguish of the soul, of having to see one time comrades in arms brought out and shot to death by a firing squad.’¹⁹ In exploring the problems surrounding the remembering of the Free State dead of the civil war on both public and private levels and the ways in which they were commemorated by the state, Dolan has noted that ‘It erected monuments to the dead, it erected monuments to victory. It often erected the same monuments to both. But just as it was expected to, it often chose to forget.’²⁰ It is this notion of remembering in order to forget which fostered a silence ‘that erased all but the victory’²¹ and which it may be argued further has manifested itself as a haunting influence in Irish historiography. In representing personal trauma against the haunting influence of the Civil War, *The Secret Scripture* therefore

attempts to address the complex issue of forgetting through presenting a range of diverse perspectives which are themselves not only haunting, but become haunted in their remembering.

On the margins of society

It is therefore against this backdrop of the unspeakable memories and silences of the Irish Civil War that Sebastian Barry deliberately manipulates notions of memory and truth, and the ways in which the past surfaces in the present through the testimony of his central character Roseanne. In representing an articulation of the disrupted memory of unresolved traumatic events, the broken narrative of Roseanne's testimony reflects the way in which past events can maintain a haunted influence between the individual and the world. At the beginning of her account she declares: 'I am only a thing left over, a remnant woman'; (p. 4) as such the surfacing of the past in the present that she recounts may therefore represent the 'irruption of one time into another'²² as a haunted history. Such 'haunting' of unresolved past events may represent the figurative return of elements which have been 'silenced or culturally excluded'²³, and which are now returning to her at a point of emotional crisis as she attempts to present her own testimony in the form of her secret account. Peopled by 'ghostly characters', Roseanne's testimony of her relationships with her mother and father, Tom and John Lavelle does indeed reflect some form of cultural haunting symbolic of a character who has lived much of their life on the margins of society.

Her disrupted narrative reveals a sense of uncertainty and apprehension about the relationships between ‘humankind’ and that of her history, her nation and her place within them. Indeed, her troubled understanding of each of these essentially present themselves as haunting manifestations which almost place her outside of her own existence and as Jameson writes, make ‘the present waver: like the vibrations of a heat wave through which the massiveness of the object world – indeed of matter itself – now shimmers like a mirage.’²⁴ Roseanne questions ‘Where is that world?’ (p. 35) from her exiled position within it in the asylum, where ‘sisters, mothers, grandmothers, spinsters, all forgotten lie. The human town not so far off, sleeping and waking, sleeping and waking, forgetting its lost women there, in long rows.’ (p. 33.) The ghosts which haunt Roseanne thus present a challenge not only to her understanding of the past, but also to the present; to her sense of who she was and what she is; to what happened and how she arrived here; from what has been withheld from her and what she has hidden from herself leading to her marginalised position in the realm of ‘the other’.

Blurred boundaries of identity and belonging

This space of ‘the other’ is therefore at the heart of the novel as the position from which the boundaries between the past, the present and the future become blurred and wherein Roseanne attempts to negotiate notions of identity and belonging. It is a space which is metaphorically referred to throughout the novel as one that ‘makes equal in their fall the hammers and the feathers’, (p. 278) and in drawing together the somewhat repressed ghosts of the past which resurface in the present it can be closely linked to the Derridean concept of

hauntology. Jacques Derrida has commented that ‘the question of spectres is...the question of life’,²⁵ and so it is for Roseanne as her past resurfaces in her present through her ghostly memories: ‘...somehow to see them in my mind’s eye, or somewhere behind my eyes, in the darkened bowl of my head, still there, alive and talking, truly, as if their time was real time and mine was an illusion. (p. 21.) This idea of spectrality is central to Derrida’s work on hauntology, in which he urges the need for us to ‘learn to live *with* ghosts’ if we are to live ‘more justly’.²⁶ In insisting upon the need to ‘speak *of* the ghost, indeed *to* the ghost and *with* it’, we must be attentive to the figure of the ghost as being neither absent nor present, dead nor alive. In development of this, it may be suggested that in blurring the boundaries of oppositions between presence and absence, the living and the dead, hauntology can be interpreted as an exploration of the in-between space of the two wherein it becomes possible to interrogate a sense of otherness.

Indeed, the notion of spectrality has had a significant bearing on the image Roseanne forms of her own identity. In removing herself from ‘humankind’ she has fulfilled what her father’s revered Sir Thomas Browne refers to as ‘the greatest imperfection [...] that is, to be ghosts unto our own eyes.’²⁷ Throughout the novel she reveals herself through her varying haunted relationships which act as points of mediation between herself and the ‘real’ world which she feels removed from, as if she had been placed ‘outside the frame of the photographs of life. The delightful landscapes of ordinary life.’ (p. 202.) The most significant influence upon Roseanne’s sense of identity is the close relationship which she shared with her father. Indeed, Roseanne’s father is the centre point from which Roseanne developing sense of identity and her place within her community is anchored. As a ‘celestial minded Presbyterian man, which was not a particularly fashionable quality in Sligo’, (p. 6) he is accepted in the predominantly Catholic town. Indeed in Roseanne’s mind, as ‘superintendent of the Sligo

dead' (p. 9) Roseanne finds comfort in what she believes is his position as gravedigger in a Catholic churchyard, convincing herself that a Presbyterian man being allowed to dig the graves of the Catholics would allow him acceptance into the 'peculiar Catholic nature, from which of course he felt excluded.' (p. 37.) In negating such exclusion, Roseanne holds firm to the belief that his job also protected them in their position on the edge of the Catholic community in Sligo; as Presbyterians who 'might be thought to have no place in the Irish story' (p. 37), Roseanne believes that her father mediated a form of accepted marginality within such a 'cold town' (p. 3) as Sligo at this point in history, ultimately asserting that difference within communities did exist, albeit at the hands of people like Father Gaunt as representatives of the hegemonic power of the Catholic church.

The in-between space: the transcendence of suffering

Roseanne is aware of their position on the periphery as she comments: 'Truth was, Presbyterians were not much loved in Sligo' (p. 41), yet her opinions and perceptions of herself and others are formed through the filter of her family's role in the community and her father's ideas and developed through the anecdotes which he tells. Looking back she recalls that 'His voice entered my head as a sort of honey, that lingered there potently, buzzingly, banishing all the fears of childhood.' (p. 13.) Roseanne recalls that 'he thought of the Protestant religion as an instrument as soft as a feather transformed into a hammer by the old dispensation, and used to batter the heads of those that laboured to live in Ireland.' (p. 64.) For Roseanne, her father represents a form of acceptance amidst the 'hatred in Ireland in those times'; (p. 35) he is a physical embodiment of the in-between space of the hammers and

the feathers that he referred to and the space within which Roseanne positions herself throughout the course of the novel. As she recalls her father 'loved whatever in his mind he thought Ireland to be' (p. 64), Roseanne also loves in her mind whatever she thinks him to be. As her father transforms his own reputation in Sligo through the metaphor of the hammers and the feathers, Roseanne centres herself alongside him. However when her father dies, in a sense her own centre of gravity is removed and she remains floating unanchored on the edge of her own life:

It is all love, that not knowing, that not seeing. I am standing there, eternally, straining to see, a crick I the back of my neck, peering and straining, if for no other reason than for love of him. The feathers are drifting away, drifting, swirling away. My father is calling and calling. My heart is beating back to him. The hammers are falling still. (p. 23.)

Throughout her life her father remains the centre from which the rest of her life seems removed. At the very beginning of her account she states that 'The world begins anew with every birth, my father used to say. He forgot to say, with every death it ends.' (p. 3.) After his death, the world as Roseanne previously knew it did end. She comments that 'It was as if something had been taken from the pictures and sounds of the world', (p. 66) as from this point her life is not only haunted by the memory of her father, but her future relationships are determined by the memory she holds of him, so that she is not only haunted, but becomes haunting herself in her inability to move on from the ghosts of her past.

As the memory of her relationship with her father continues to haunt her and remains the only position from which she can grasp some sense of identity, her relationship with Tom takes on a surreal quality; as Tom had no linkage to her father he therefore has no 'real' connection to Roseanne's haunted vision of the world. As their relationship is then haunted by his lack of connection to her father, she presents herself as a ghost herself to Tom:

I had the curious sensation of looking out on someone else's world, someone else's Tom, someone else's Sligo. Like I wasn't going to be there very long, and had not been there long enough, or had never even been there. Like a ghost to myself and certainly not for the first time. (p. 201.)

In this manner the image of her own sense of identity retains an almost spiritual quality. Indeed, she frequently passes comment on the notion of 'humankind' and its suffering as if she is removed from humanity on a transcendent level.

Her sense of transcendence is increased further after she has been exiled in Strandhill and in a physical sense literally left alone, on the edge and removed from all other forms of human company. With only the lights from an occasional car to provide any signs of other human existence and the call of the owl from its own 'backland under Knocknarea', (p.210)

Roseanne has become removed from her previous forms of reality, which even the owl is permitted to inhabit in her absence, so that she feels her 'own heart was also calling, signalling out into that difficult human world.' (p. 210.) In having been removed from the everyday life that she had previously known and whose lights and sounds continued to her haunt her, Roseanne acknowledges her need to turn to another realm of existence: 'And

whatever my life had been up to that day, it was another life after that.’ (p. 223.) It is from this in-between space of otherness, amidst the weight of the hammers of the past and the unknown lightness of the feathers of the possible future that lies ahead, where Roseanne embraces the spectral as she recalls the shadows of her former existence: ‘Roseanne, Roseanne, if I called to you now, my own self calling to my own self, would you hear me? And if you could hear me, would you heed me?’ (p. 194.) It is this haunting figure in the asylum who recalls the spectres of her past in order to call to account some form of social reckoning, which is only available to her in the form of her secret account, socially prevented from any other form of acknowledgement from her marginalised position ‘somewhere there at the edge of things’.

Beginning by coming back: the ‘space of remembrance’

In her spectral vision however, her fated relationship with John Lavelle is inextricably bound up in her memories of her father: ‘And his name swam into my mind, maybe only because my father had spoken it [...] I stared at him. Here truly was an astonishing revenant.’ (p.112.) Similar to the memories she holds of her father, her impression of John as revenant resonates with Derrida’s concept of the spectre: ‘a spectre is always a *revenant*. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*.’²⁸ Thus, Roseanne’s fate is determined at the very point that John Lavelle returns to Sligo, when during a chance encounter when she bumps into him while she is at the cinema with Tom. In commenting that ‘John Lavelle wasn’t just another fella. He wasn’t just a bowsie in the street making a remark behind my back, he was an important person because he had known my father and things

about my father', (p. 182) Roseanne acknowledges a form of supernatural pull towards him. Essentially, as revenant, John becomes a physical embodiment of her father and she is drawn to the 'space of remembrance'²⁹ that he brings as his continual return allows her to dwell in the haunted memory of her father: 'He was like a piece of the history of my childhood that I could not sever myself from.' (p.197.) In asking Roseanne to meet him on Knocknarea, John ultimately secures Roseanne's fate as in reality, she secured her father's on the day that she first met John in the graveyard and she was told to go and fetch Father Gaunt to bless the body of John's brother. Thus, as Roseanne recalls: 'Sligo, Strandhill, my fate, my fate, as woeful as my father's, my ridiculous, heartless, funny fate', (p. 151) is bound up in the hauntological domain, as the revenants of the past return. As Roseanne admits, 'It was love of my poor father. To be close to a man who was close to my father', (p. 197) that determined the course that her life eventually took:

I didn't know what drove me up that mountain. It was maybe a sort of infinite curiosity rising out of love for my father. Needing to be brought again close to his memory, or any memory of him that seemed to make him more present, even the events of that miserable night in the cemetery – both miserable nights. (p. 196.)

As such we are reminded of the continual presence of spectrality in the present, of ghosts that return to enable a revisiting of the past or to point to what lies ahead, reinforcing Derrida's comments that 'at bottom, the spectre is the future, it is always to come, it only presents itself as what might come or come back.'³⁰ While the spectral presence of her father is pointing towards what Davis has termed 'a still unformulated future',³¹ Roseanne is hovering in the in-between space which represents the essence of the hauntological as she attempts to encounter

her own unspeakable story, which in its inability to be articulated or resolved is essentially preserved. Moreover, it is in the spaces in-between where the presence of such spectral influences have most effect: the spaces in between the opposition of Tom and John, Tom and Eneas, between the past and the present, the present and the future, and in the spaces in-between the fall of the hammers and the feathers where it becomes possible to engage with the spectral and where notions of identity and belonging can be confronted and renegotiated.

In exploring this realm of the in-between space, it is important to engage in some form of communication with the 'spectre' and in doing so open up that which was previously unspeakable, without expecting a revelation of hidden secrets. It is therefore the process of opening up rather than the determination of meaning which is the essence of the spectral. As Colin Davis suggests: 'For Derrida, the ghost's secret is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past as the not yet formulated possibilities of the future.'³² In *The Secret Scripture*, Roseanne is therefore turning to her own 'inward sight' (p. 2.) to confront the ghostly memories which have formed much of her life. In doing so she must face up to the ghostly figures of her past and contemplate 'the return of what has been concealed'³³ without necessarily exposing that which has been kept hidden. From her perspective as marginalised woman, Roseanne acknowledges that:

...all speaking is difficult, whether peril attends it or not. Sometimes peril to the body, sometimes a more intimate miniature, invisible peril to the soul. When to speak at all is a betrayal of something, perhaps a something not even identified, hiding inside the chambers of the body like a sacred refugee in a site of war. (p. 80.)

Her account ‘contains already secrets’ and Roseanne believes ‘my secrets are my fortune and my sanity’; (p. 24) through engaging with them Roseanne may be able to release the ghosts of her past that have haunted her throughout her life but without necessarily gaining any physical consolation. In conversing with the spectral Roseanne’s fortune is more of a spiritual reward as she consoles herself with the thought that:

To be alone, but to be pierced through with a kingly joy, now and then as I believe I am, is a great possession indeed. As I sit here at this table marked and scored by a dozen generation maybe of inmates, patients, angels, whatever we are, I must report to you this sensation of some gold essence striking into me, blood deep. Not contentment, but a prayer as wild and dangerous as a lion’s roar. (p. 95.)

It is therefore through embracing the spectral in the solitary process of opening up what has previously remained hidden in her past which provides some sense of reward. By reclaiming her own space in the ‘human dimension’ of time in the act of writing her account, Roseanne can reaffirm her own existence – reinforced by leaving her mark in time through the tangible act of stabbing at the page with her pen in the pages of her testimony ‘as if pinning myself there.’ (p. 34.) Furthermore, Roseanne is also re-claiming herself spiritually as she believes in the sacred element of leaving an account before God that ‘must, must contain only truth [...] If I have a soul remaining, and perhaps I do not, it will depend on it.’ (p. 227-8.) In hovering between the physical and the spiritual, Roseanne’s haunted testimony does indeed fall somewhere between an account and a scripture in its attempts to reclaim her humanity and

acknowledge with simple yet beautiful honesty that ‘Past or present, there is a human dimension to time, human voices within it but also human griefs ordained by it.’³⁴

Between the past and the present

In occupying such a space in the hauntological domain between the past and the present, the spiritual and the physical, Roseanne’s testimony of herself provides a ‘point of convergence’³⁵ upon which rests the possibility of moving forward. In writing about texts which invoke moments of historical crisis in Irish history such as the Famine, Chris Morash writes that ‘We encounter only the ghosts of the dead who are, as ever, absent.’³⁶ However, in *The Secret Scripture* it is the ghosts of the dead who are ever *present* and which provide the site upon which the future can exist through the process of remembrance. With reference to Walter Benjamin, Morash suggests that ‘Remembrance’, is ‘the means by which the dead are saved from oblivion.’³⁷ Thus, the clouded formation of Roseanne’s memories of a lost history presents a form of ghostly resistance to such historical dispossession. In writing herself back into her own past, Roseanne’s history ties her across time and space: ‘Everything is always there, still unfolding, still happening. The past, the present, and the future, in the noggin eternally.’ (p. 210.) In reflecting upon the mystery of Roseanne’s past and her untold story, Dr Grene recalls that: ‘The Arabs say that everything is already written in the book of life, and our job is merely to fulfil the narrative already there, invisible, unknown.’ (p. 125.) Having fulfilled her own narrative but still remaining invisible and unknown, from her confinement in the asylum Roseanne therefore attempts to reclaim her own presence in history. In contemplating her past and her father’s fate she recalls that: ‘There are things that

move at a human pace before our eyes, but other things move in arcs so great they are as good as invisible.’ (p. 55.) In reconnecting with her past through writing her account and leaving her mark upon her own invisible fate, Roseanne is firmly locating herself in time and space. In attempting to reconcile the varied tensions of her past, such traces:

can occasion a translation across time into the contemporary moment.

In this sense, the present is haunted by the past; the past is revisited by the present, which tries to extract from it a seed of the future. The past is also haunted by the future, because [...] all life is an unfinished drama moving forward to some unknown realization.³⁸

The Secret Scripture therefore promotes the primacy of personal ‘stories’ and the human dimension to history, echoed in Eavan Boland’s assertion of the need to ‘tell the human and poetic truth.’³⁹ This is reflected in Roseanne’s sentiment that even though she has no ‘heroic history to offer’, (p. 56) she too is determined to write the truth of her story:

Poor ground, false ground. I think an account before God must, must contain only truth. There is no human agency I need to bamboozle. God knows the true story before I write it [...] If I have a soul remaining, and perhaps I do not, it will depend on it. (p. 228.)

Anchoring a presence in history

Indeed, the importance of ‘stories handed down’ is established from the start of the novel as the means by which Roseanne’s memory of her father is formed through remembering the ‘miniature legends’ (p. 11) of his life: ‘My father’s happiness not only redeemed him, but drove him to stories, and keeps him even now alive in me, like a second more patient and more pleasing soul within my poor soul.’ (p. 12.) Therefore as her father anchored himself in Roseanne’s memory through the anecdotes which he told, likewise, it is her intention to anchor herself as a presence in history through re-telling her own story. Her determination to integrate herself into what the ‘wide canvas of Irish history’,⁴⁰ will thus help to rescue her in some way from the ‘cold hand of history’ that Foster referred to, as Roseanne reaffirms with her comments:

It is funny, but it strikes me that a person without anecdotes that they nurse while they live, and that survive them, are more likely to be utterly lost not only to history but the family following them. Of course this is the fate of most souls, reducing entire lives, no matter how vivid and wonderful, to those sad black names on withering family trees, with half a date dangling after and a question mark. (p. 11-12.)

Indeed, Roseanne believes that the fate of her own soul hinges upon the account that she leaves; as her fate is so inextricably bound up with that of her father’s, who also ‘struggled to grasp things that were in truth far beyond his reach’, (p.55) in essence Roseanne offers her secret scripture as a form of prayer back to him. Just as he had shared ‘all the intimations, suspicions and histories of his heart’ (p. 64) with her every night of her childhood, she can

now recite the secrets of her own life back to him, and in doing so, her account will make it seem on some spiritual level like ‘life perfected, made good.’ (p. 65.) In this sense writing her story allows her to take refuge in the memory of her father where she can find a measure of safety in choosing which ‘memories’ to include or in fact, distort. Even as a child Roseanne had difficulty in trusting or accepting things as they appeared, even her own reflection in a mirror caused her to question ‘the soul of the person that peered back’. (p. 57.) In the same way that her mother attempted to disguise the edges of the mirror in her bedroom that were ‘strangely decayed’ (p. 57) by decorating them with tiny painted on black stems and leaves, Roseanne’s decoration of the pages of her account with similar black stems and leaves represents an attempt to disguise the distortion of the truth of events as she has written them, to disguise those parts of her memory that have also become ‘strangely decayed’ or repressed. Attempting to superficially embellish the presentation of her version of events in this way points to the idea that Roseanne is editing the past and presenting it as she would like to remember, it as she admits: ‘I am peering back with my mind’s eye, and all I see is fabulous glitter,’ (p. 149) rather than recording the truth of how it actually was.

Redemption through escaping into ambiguity

To this end the fragmented quality of her narrative reflects an ambiguity throughout which questions not only the accuracy of her own memory, but the nature of historical truth. In this respect much of her testimony may be located in the realm of ‘The Fantastic’⁴¹. For much of the novel both the reader and Roseanne hesitates to wonder whether the account she is giving is real or whether it is an illusion based on the product of her imagination, as she opens

herself up to the possibilities of her own delusion: ‘A cailleach is the old crone of stories, the wise woman and sometimes a kind of witch. [...] This cailleach is deluded in the head! The old midwife. I am only the midwife to my own old story.’ (p. 102.) Roseanne acknowledges that there are versions of what happened that don’t fit her own memory, that there are memories in her head that remain curious to her, but dismisses the importance of events against individual belief in the truth: ‘For history as far as I can see is not the arrangement of what happens, in sequence and in truth, but a fabulous arrangement of surmises and guesses held up as a banner against the assault of withering truth.’ (p. 56.) This ambiguity between the truth and her possible imaginary perceptions leaves both Roseanne and the reader uncertain as to whether these events have indeed taken place:

Unfathomable. Fathoms. I wonder is that the difficulty that my memories and my imaginings are lying deeply in the same place? Or one on top of the other like layers of shells and sand in a piece of limestone, so that they have both become the same element, and I cannot distinguish one from the other with any ease [...] Imaginings. A nice sort of a word for catastrophe and delusion. (p. 227.)

This period of uncertainty ‘in which the hesitation occurs between the real and the *imaginary*’ is a variety of Todorov’s concept of the fantastic.⁴² The fantastic is concerned with events that cannot be explained by the usual ‘laws of nature’ and the ambiguity between deciding whether the events have an integral place in reality or whether they are a product of the imagination or an illusion of the senses.⁴³ The essence of the fantastic is the period of hesitation experienced during such uncertainty, and may be occupied simultaneously by both the reader and the central character. Moreover, the fantastic ends once the moment of

hesitation is over – it is the *hesitation* which sustains the spirit of the fantastic in ‘nearly’ reaching the point of believing.

For Roseanne, it seems that this uncertainty will never be determined and her hesitation about the truth of events is all that remains certain: ‘It makes me a little dizzy to contemplate the possibility that everything I remember may not be – may not be *real*, I suppose. There was so much turmoil at that time – that what? I took refuge in other impossible histories, in dreams, in fantasies? I don’t know.’ (p. 209.) While her intentions are to begin anew and ‘leave an account, some kind of brittle and honest-minded history of myself’ (p. 5), she is also aware of the haziness of her memories and that looking back at them through time cannot always be trusted: ‘I did not know that a person could hold up a wall made of imaginary bricks and mortar against the horrors and cruel, dark tricks of time that assail us, and be the author therefore of themselves.’ (p. 4) For Roseanne, a physically inconsolable ‘rumour of beauty is all that remains’; (p. 278) in accepting that the events of her life remain inconsolable, she concludes her story with memories of Eneas McNulty, the figure who finally sealed her fate and secured her forced exile in the asylum as a result of her pregnancy after their chance encounter during his visit to her hut in Strandhill. At the end of her account she recounts an image of herself with Eneas and their child standing together in the moonlight as if they were the only people on the earth. Her belief that it is ‘A memory so clear, so wonderful, so beyond the bounds of possibility’, (p. 277) thus allows Roseanne to leave the realm of the fantastic. Ultimately, her acceptance of the impossibility of this as an event that could be based in reality ensures that her period of hesitation is now over and she can now enter a new space opened up by the element of truth that she acknowledges in her testimony: ‘I know it...My head is as clear as glass.’ (p.277.) As the only affirmation in her account that confirms that she believes what she is saying is true, Roseanne closes her story with the

knowledge that for all its inconsolable nature, in writing the secret scripture of her life she has heeded the warning that Eneas recalled from the bible that '*They who are not written in the book of life will be cast into the lake of fire.*' (p. 247.) The book she has written of her own life therefore ensures that despite her inability to change the events that have happened, spiritually, in trying to engage with the uncertainty that the ghosts of her past bring she retains an element of hope for some form of redemption.

Furthermore, while Dr Grene does also resolve her ambiguous memories to a certain extent, as the almost epiphanic moment of the 'truth' of his birth confirms that certain events in her testimony did indeed take place, stylistically this twist in the plot is enough to leave the reader occupying an element of the fantastic in their own hesitation to accept this as credible. However, in opposition to Roseanne's personal recollection of events, the question of whether the testimonies of Father Gaunt are true or not remains unresolved. Such divergence between the varying accounts of Roseanne and Father Gaunt therefore questions the nature of personal memory against historical 'truth'; Dr Grene reflects that 'History is only memory in decent sentences' and despite acknowledging that 'many mysteries remain' (p. 288) regarding Roseanne's story, he chooses to believe that 'they have written not so much wrongful histories, or even competing histories, [but] both in their human way quite truthful'. (p. 291.)

On the margins of society

In allowing Father Gaunt to be so intent on 'undoing' Roseanne through his 'massive Ciceronian effort' to traverse her narrative by 'turning everything to ashes and cinders' (p.

238), Barry is again underpinning the marginalised position of those non-Catholics who, like Roseanne, remained on the margins of society as a result of the hegemonic power of the Catholic church. Roseanne comments that Father Gaunt 'was like a scything blade' for whom 'the grass, the brambles and the stalks of human nature went down before him'. In ultimately rejecting his offer to save her mortal soul after her father's death by advising her '*in loco parentis*' (p. 100) to marry Joe Brady, a man not only similar to her father in age but who had taken his job at the cemetery, Roseanne is seemingly rejecting the rigid codes of the Catholic faith offered to her. In doing so she perpetuates Father Gaunt's disregard for her 'Protestantism as a simple, primal evil in itself (p. 239) and his opinion of her as a 'mournful temptation' (p. 98) to the men and boys of Sligo. Whilst Roseanne's rejection of Catholicism is far from threatening, and may instead be perceived to be more of a rejection of Father Gaunt's attempts to advise her in place of her father, her wish to remain separate from the Catholic majority is what predominantly secured her personal and historical displacement from her community. When Father Gaunt later imposes a forced exile upon Roseanne to remain in her hut, excluded from the rest of her community while he seeks to annul her marriage to Tom, she becomes subject to the full force of his power: 'which in that situation was absolute, and it seemed to me in that moment that I knew his nature. Small, self-believing to every border, north, south, east and west, and lethal.' (p. 222.) In thus removing her powers of self-determination at the social level, Roseanne's banishment from society essentially resulted in a form of increased 'self-alienation'⁴⁴. Developing the ideas of Franz Fanon, Baxter uses this term to discuss a 'distrust of the self' that develops as a result of the disjunction between internal and external experience developing out of the anxieties of traumatic experience, particularly those produced in the aftermath of colonialism. In this context, Roseanne was subjected to a form of accepted internalization from external experiences, increasing her position of marginality in the new nation that was developing in

the aftermath of colonialism. Such disparities within communities intensified a sense of isolation and alienation, as the ‘forgetting’ of those dispossessed such as Roseanne: ‘failed to encapsulate all the different subject position [and] perspectives of those who did not fit in with the specific idea of national identity being projected at that time.’⁴⁵ Roseanne’s experiences of marginality therefore encapsulate the national response to personal trauma in the aftermath of the Civil War, particularly as represented by the responses of the Catholic church as championed by de Valera, the scriptor of the new Free State itself.

In passing comment on the sense of powerlessness felt as conveyed against the ‘absolute’ power of Father Gaunt and other priests who ‘felt in those times that they owned the new country’, (p. 219) Barry yet again exposes another of the secrets of the Civil War and 1930s Ireland through insinuating that the very notion of Irish freedom which was so fiercely fought for in this period remained closed to those Irish citizens who were non-Catholics. Thus, in setting in opposition the ‘recorded truth’ of Father Gaunt against the personal memories of the forced exile imposed upon Roseanne, Barry reveals another of those invisible arcs in which the notion of Irish identity was contested. In opening up the possibility of corruption within a nation coming to terms with freedom and being intent on asserting its independence, against the removal of personal freedoms inflicted upon some of its citizens, the novel calls to question ‘The absolute power of such as Father Gaunt leading as day does to night to absolute corruption.’ (p. 237.) In ultimately choosing to accept Roseanne’s version of events as she remembers them he reinforces the point that lies at the core of both her account and the secret scripture of Ireland itself: that ‘the truth may not always be desirable, that one thing leads to another thing, that facts not only lead forward to resolution but backwards into the shadows.’ (p. 293.) His words thus essentially underpin the inconsolable nature of both secret scriptures at the heart of the novel. In a different context David Pierce has passed similar comment that

‘Some things cannot be retrieved without doing injustice to other struggles in history’;⁴⁶ in revealing some of the darker silences of the enclosed world contained within Roseanne’s story, Barry yet again reveals the social fractures and ambiguous spaces within Irish history wherein religious exclusion and confusions of identity are unveiled.

Bearing witness: shared memories fostering a sense of belonging

Moreover, in lifting Roseanne out of history, *The Secret Scripture* externalises what Thomas Laqueur has termed, ‘interiority’⁴⁷ as the novel asserts that personal memories based on past traumas such as hers can now be allowed to come out of the shadows to be collectively voiced. Laqueur asserts that the internal and invisible symptomless ‘psychic injury’ of trauma is what defines the contemporary ‘condition of victimhood’. As a term which allows the articulation of the formerly incommunicable, opening up and externalising individual and collective experiences of trauma through understanding it in terms of inner wounds has the potential to transform our ‘view of humanity’. What remains important is the communal effort to share in such experiences as those that Roseanne recounts as an attempt to reclaim some sense of belonging. This notion of shared memories fostering a sense of belonging is further reinforced by Stef Craps and Gert Buelens’ suggestion that listening to another’s trauma has the potential to link disparate historical experiences and in doing so contribute to the creation of new forms of community.⁴⁸

In this sense it is the purpose of Dr Grene’s parallel testimony to offer and accept some form of redemption for the ‘fugitive pieces of memory’⁴⁹ to which Roseanne bears witness as the

juxtaposition of their narrative voices allows a bridge to be formed between the articulation of both of their marginalised perspectives. In accepting that Roseanne was being as truthful as she could be and that ‘We have enough problems with linear narrative and true memory’ (p. 290), Dr Grene’s comments reflect the possibility of reading *The Secret Scripture* as a postcolonial narrative in its attempts to bear witness to its own incapacity to recover a history. Sam Durrant has suggested that postcolonial narrative is ‘structured by a tension between the oppressive memory of the past and the liberatory promise of the future.’⁵⁰ In arguing for an ‘ethics of remembrance’⁵¹ Durrant emphasises the centrality of mourning in postcolonial texts and the way they invite us to participate in a ‘ceaseless labor of remembrance’.⁵² In bearing witness to the ‘unrepresented pasts’ which haunt the present, postcolonial narrative functions as more than a matter of representing the unrepresented, but protests at the failure of community and ‘all those whose living human presence continues to be disavowed by the present world order.’⁵³ In doing so, novels such as *The Secret Scripture* therefore seek to remember those, like Roseanne, who have become vanquished in a history of suffering, and in acknowledging their powerlessness to lay such suffering to rest, the act of bearing witness to it transforms suffering into a mode of redemption.⁵⁴ The parallel narratives of Roseanne and Dr Grene therefore allow a silent mediation between the fragmented memories of her oppressed past and the redemptive force of the ‘liberatory promise of the future’.⁵⁵ Thus, like Benjamin’s ‘angel of history’ which shadow’s Durrant’s work as ‘the figure of inconsolable mourning’⁵⁶, Roseanne’s gaze is also fixed unwaveringly on the past as she contemplates it in all its temporal dislocation:

It is not like long ago, it is not like a story, it is not like it is over and done. It is all to do. It is something like the gates of St Peter, banging on the gates, asking

for entrance to heaven, and in my heavy heart knowing, too many sins, too many sins.
But perhaps mercy! (p. 265.)

Similar to the angel's vigil which is carried out in memory of the future, writing her secret account presents her own form of vigil as she attempts to reclaim her own past, and as she inwardly writes herself back into it ensures that she will not be lost to history, indeed as Benjamin writes, that 'nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history.'⁵⁷

In attempting to write herself into the book of life, Roseanne recurrently refers to Queen Maeve in her cairn on Knocknarea. Indeed this is a site which holds a haunting prescience for Roseanne as the site of the pivotal event which altered the course of her life and led to her forced exile from society by Father Gaunt as she recounts 'single events added to an epic story, making the great mound for her to sleep under. I say sleep but I mean moulder, diminish, vanish into the hill.' (p. 196.) Her constant references to Knocknarea are almost sacred, symbolising the importance of the local landmark as a measure of her distance from the outside world, 'rearing up as if fleeing away into the past, the remote and unknowable past.' (p. 310.) Roseanne aligns herself with Queen Maeve, who haunts her as a vanished figure standing tall and buried in full armour, bearing witness to the various catastrophes which fall 'wreckage upon wreckage'⁵⁸ at Roseanne's feet. In 'her own buried exile,' (p. 311.) and resonant with Benjamin's angel of history, she would perhaps 'like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed.'⁵⁹

Glimpses of the redemptive future

The constant references to angels throughout the novel is symbolic of the polarized conflict between the ghosts of Roseanne's past and her glimpses of the redemptive forces of the future: 'Being an angel now. I am joking...Flapping my heavy wings in heaven...Maybe. Do you think so?' (p. 257.) Hinging upon this conflict is the sense of disconnection that she feels towards 'humankind', which she believes is subject to its own forces of opposition:

I once lived among humankind, and found them in their generality to be cruel and cold, and yet could mention the names of three or four that were like angels. I suppose we measure the importance of our days by those few angels we spy among us, and yet aren't like them. (p. 277.)

David Pierce has commented that this statement distances Roseanne from the reader,⁶⁰ however it can be argued that it serves more crucially to 'enable an appreciation'⁶¹ of Roseanne's alienation allowing the reader to connect to her sense of marginality throughout the novel, supported by Dr Grene's opinion of Roseanne that she is: 'Extraordinary, a sort of manifestation of something unusual and maybe alien in this provincial world.' (p.18.) The fact that Roseanne alienates herself from humanity is what ultimately allows Dr Grene to form an empathetic connection with her as he believes she has been a 'touchstone' in his life, representing 'in a curious way, my own history, my own life.' (p. 17-18.) In being able to offer some consolation to Dr Grene in his grief from the inconsolable position which she has

been forced to remain on the periphery even of her own humanity essentially allows her story to frame a redemptive force for Dr Grene.

Caught between the ghostly hauntings of her past and the angel pointing towards the future in memory of the past, Roseanne thus inhabits what Gerry Turcotte has referred to as a 'postcolonial space of ambiguity';⁶² an in-between space of reconciliation wherein the possibilities of renewal are opened up to embrace 'the miracle of the ordinary soul' (p.292.) and the 'power of life itself'. (p. 278.) Indeed, Dr Grene refers to Roseanne as a physical embodiment of such a spiritual reawakening, as someone who offers him a form of healing without realising it. In seeking to heal her she has healed him; in attempting to expose her truth she has revealed what was concealed in his; and in attempting to draw her own story to a close Roseanne has allowed his to begin anew. Without realising it she has become one of those angels who walk among us, and her secret scripture acts as a point of mediation in itself opening up the in-between space of the past and the present. In embracing the ambiguity of the two her story has revealed 'something larger than old Sligo mountains, something difficult but oddly bright, that makes equal in their fall the hammers and the feathers.' (p. 278.)

Roseanne's secret scripture may therefore be seen as testament to the spiritual connection that the past holds to the present, to the 'sacred dimensions of what it means to bear witness'.⁶³ In returning to the site of her memories of the past at the end of the novel, Dr Grene reinforces the 'liberatory promise' engendered in the oppressive memories of Roseanne's past. As he breaks off a rose from the branch of a neglected rose bush 'with a few last vivid blooms' (p.

311) outside her hut in Strandhill ‘whose roses were different, bright and open’, (p. 312) he feels as if he ‘were stealing something that didn’t belong.’ (p. 312) This ‘something’ may be the possibility of a ‘just future’⁶⁴, symbolised by the newness of the rose he has just peeled away from the brambles which surrounded it. As a counterforce to his own personal mourning and the preoccupations with his own troubled past, the brightness and openness of the rose signifies a personal commemoration of the relationship between memory and forgetting, trauma and redemption. In parallel, in rescuing the rose from obscurity he thus symbolically rescues Roseanne from those ‘shattered remnants of the past, rescuing and redeeming the stories of the conquered and the dispossessed.’⁶⁵

Set against Roseanne’s attempts to reclaim a lost history lie Sebastian Barry’s own spectral comments regarding the nature of social alienation that permeates the experiences of the ageing in contemporary society. Through commenting on the somewhat neglected and forgotten lives of many of the patients in Dr Grene’s asylum, Barry highlights the engendered dislocation from society which haunts the future of many of the aged and is reflective of the multi-layered sense of exile which continues to haunt those who find themselves lurking on the margins of their own forgotten history. Through Roseanne’s perception of her own ageing identity, Barry exposes the frailty of the perceptions by which we are externally judged and which illuminate the ghostly in all of us and in doing so opens up the possibilities of embracing rather than dispossessing the stories that the ageing in contemporary society have to offer.

Gerry Turcotte has written that ‘There is no journey forward without ghosts; there is no telling without fear. We tread lightly through the stories, but leave prints wherever we happen to go.’⁶⁶ Taking account of such stories and the experience of older generations therefore frames the formation of new identities in a changing society and allows a better understanding of transformations in individual and collective experience.⁶⁷ In its concern for justice *The Secret Scripture* can therefore be read as a gesture of deference to those dispossessed, forgotten and marginalised members of society who have been lifted out of time and placed into the contemporary moment.

References

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- ² Foster, ‘Something of us will remain’, p. 184.
- ³ Foster, ‘Something of us will remain’, p. 194.
- ⁴ Foster, ‘Something of us will remain’, p. 196.
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- ²⁵ Jacques Derrida in *The Contemporary Irish Novel*, p. 43.
- ²⁶ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. xviii. (emphasis in original).
- ²⁷ *The Secret Scripture*, paratext.
- ²⁸ Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* trans. by Peggy Kamuf, (New York; London: Routledge, 1994), p. 11 (emphasis in original).
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- ⁶⁷ Fiction and the Cultural Mediation of Ageing project.

PART TWO

CONTEMPORARY IRISH CRIME WRITING

CHAPTER FOUR

Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor Novels

Introduction

'Times have changed, sonny.' These are the words which are simply articulated to Jack Taylor in the opening paragraphs of *The Guards*,¹ the first novel in Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor series, as he recounts events prior to his forced departure from the Garda Síochána – the police force of Ireland. In essence these events are the central premise upon which the series of eight novels is based. Among the first crime novels to be situated in Ireland, Bruen's novels depict twenty-first century Galway in the midst of social, political and economic transformation through the darkened vision of ex-Guard Jack Taylor, essentially reflecting the tensions between tradition and modernity in contemporary Ireland.

Reflections of Celtic Tiger Ireland

The Celtic Tiger evolved in Ireland in 1994 as a term used to describe the unprecedented growth in the Irish economy as one of the fastest growing economies in the world. Diarmaid Ferriter points out that the 'Celtic Tiger' label refers to the way in which 'Ireland's economy grew at a pace akin to the 'tiger' economies of south-east Asia,' citing the creation of 513,000 new jobs between 1986 and 2000.² The transformation in the Irish economy in the period

1994 to 2007 was overwhelming, with economic success being largely attributed to a combination of high levels of foreign investment with ‘high productivity, cost competitiveness, wage restraint and curbs on public spending.’³ As Ferriter points out, after decades of stagnation and under-development, Ireland had become rich.⁴ However, Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michael Cronin emphasised the inequitable social impact of the Celtic Tiger economy, stating that while economic success brought great wealth to a small elite, it also correlates with growing social inequality.⁵ Furthermore, such rapid economic transformation exposed significant inadequacies and corruption in the Irish state. Dermot Keogh and Andrew McCarthy point to the ill-management of state-funded industrial schools, tribunals into political corruption and investigations into ‘gross negligence’ in the Garda Síochána.⁶ Importantly, Keogh and McCarthy suggest that it is this ‘paradox of economic advancement and institutional crisis’⁷ which has led to a severe decline in public confidence in the institutions of civic life. Most crucially however it is in the context of uncertain times such as these that they suggest the public would search for some stability and reassurance in the Catholic Church as the one institution they could rely on. However, the exposure of a series of scandals in the Catholic Church which were repeatedly mishandled by the Church authorities only served to heighten the sense of doubt and disillusionment felt by the public towards all institutions of civic life in Ireland.

It is therefore out of this context of mistrust and instability that Irish crime writing flourished. In its propensity to reveal what lies at the core of society, crime fiction as a genre exploded in Ireland within the Celtic Tiger period, and indeed continued to do so since its collapse since 2008, inherently exposing the underside of the new prosperity in contemporary Irish society.

Indeed, the central premise upon which Ken Bruen's Jack Taylor series is predicated lies in exposing the crisis in public confidence during this uncertain period both towards the Irish state and most significantly, towards the authority of the Catholic Church.

Bruen therefore utilises the genre of noir fiction transposed onto an Irish setting to reinforce the notion that the place of religion in the lives of Irish people in the twenty-first Century should no longer be measured against the dominance of the institutional church. Throughout his series of novels, he reveals the congruity between the 'dark streets' of cosmopolitanising Galway whilst presenting a deconstruction of the hegemony of the Catholic Church.

CHAPTER FOUR

Contemporary Irish Noir

In essence the paradox of economic transformation with institutional and religious crisis is drawn together by Bruen as he refers to an ‘unholy trinity’ of the Church, the Guards and Celtic Tiger entrepreneurs who ‘want to see this town grow.’ (*Priest*, p. 203.) Throughout the series he attempts to respond to the political and religious disengagement in Irish society as outlined in *The Guards*: ‘People are fed up with the guards and the courts. They’ve had enough’, (p. 146) an issue which continues to be articulated through his protagonist, Jack Taylor throughout the series of novels and culminating in *Priest*, written in the wake of the publication of the Ferns Report which investigated allegations of clerical child abuse⁸: ‘Take a look around you. This is the new Ireland, no one believes in the Government or the Clergy [...] The only item people trust is money – greed is the new spirituality.’ (p. 161.) Indeed, the breakdown of traditional institutions of Irish life are reflected in the comments of Roy Foster. Foster has remarked that some of the most traditionalist paradigms that defined national identity since the foundation of the state have contributed to the transformative shifts in the Republic of Ireland.⁹ He suggests that the ‘calcified congruence of Irishness, Catholicism and Republicanism’ have now been broken down.¹⁰ Correlating this is ‘the rise of prosperity, the decline of Catholicism and the re-definition of non-Catholicism’,¹¹ which are key factors in contributing to the political, economic and religious transformations in Irish society.

Development of Irish noir

Bruen's portrayal of his protagonist-narrator captures his recalcitrance towards such change as he negotiates the boundaries between the old and the new. His position is clearly established at the beginning of *The Guards* as he identifies himself as an ex-Guard who is openly reluctant to be perceived in an alternative role that may be viewed as a progressive development of his former, more traditional identity: 'There are no private eyes in Ireland. The Irish wouldn't wear it. The concept brushes perilously close to the hated "informer". You can get away with most anything except "telling".' (p. 11.) In framing Jack Taylor through his reluctance to be perceived as a private investigator, Bruen effectively nudges the boundaries of established codes and conventions of classic noir fiction and transposes them onto a modern Irish landscape. The manner in which Jack clings to his former identity allows Bruen to tease out the tensions between 'tradition' as perceived by Jack and the changes brought about by economic and cultural transformation. Jack admits that:

The day I got kicked off the Force was among the darkest of my life [...] Everything for me related to my time as a Guard. I never recovered from losing it. All the disasters, one way or another, they'd their basis in that loss. (*Priest*, p. 112.)

Jack regards his time as a Guard as a period when he felt he was upholding the traditional values of society, as though he was 'part of the country, a tangible power for the betterment of the nation.' (*Priest*, p. 232.) In contrast, unanchored in a changing society he feels as if his life has become a string of bad decisions in a haphazard existence, where 'the odd has become the norm', (*Priest*, p. 317) and where the only sense of stability that he retains is

‘item 8234’: his old all-weather Garda coat which he clings onto, ‘for reassurance, for nostalgia.’ (*Priest*, p. 219)

Through presenting Jack Taylor as ‘an advocate of old Galway, the keeper of the Celtic flame’, (*Cross*, p. 285) Bruen forms a link between the inner concerns of his protagonist as he traverses the ‘dark streets’ of a developing Galway and parallels them with the general concerns of Irish society in the midst of rapid change.

The loss of traditional Irish rituals

Moreover, building on the uncertain existence of his protagonist, Bruen also depicts the loss of traditional Irish rituals as another means by which he blends a distinct sense of Irishness with conventional codes of noir fiction as a means of expressing the concerns of society. Jack comments with some resentment how the ritual of lighting a candle had gone ‘techno’, with an automated press-button system at the Augustinian Cathedral, (*Priest*, p. 65-6) and that the Poor Clares Convent had ‘gone online’, accepting all major credit cards for the donations upon which their existence depended. The pull between the lament for the loss of rituals such as these and the ways in which signifiers of traditional Irish life tap into the developments of a transforming society are most strongly conveyed when Jack is reminded of their absence in contemporary culture. In *Cross*, this is conveyed by a simple word:

“Can I get you a drop of tea, loveen?”

Jesus.

Loveen.

Time was, this term of endearment was as common as mugging. You never heard it anymore. It conveyed effortless warmth and an intimacy that was reassuring without being intrusive. For one insane moment I thought I was going to weep. The old ritual also dying out. (p. 220.)

That these rituals are being eroded and replaced by ‘new-fangled’ cults, alongside a gay ghetto called the ‘pink triangle’ and the existence of a ‘Guns R Us’ culture in Galway are indicative of a completely transformed culture. It is therefore in juxtaposing contrasts in Irish society such as these wherein Bruen draws upon the traditional correlation of an expanding urban locale and a changing moral context to reflect a more multidimensional approach to noir fiction. Indeed, Lee Horsley has referred to such a shift in the presentation of the genre as constituting ‘a new responsiveness to altered socio-political circumstances’, wherein hard-boiled fiction becomes the basis for a form of protest writing.¹²

In his essay on cultural history and the Celtic Tiger, Declan Kiberd has drawn attention to a perceived absence in contemporary Irish writing which offers neither any ‘major celebration or corrosive criticism’ of the profound social developments in Ireland, suggesting that the current generation of writers are ‘passing up the rich pickings’¹³ on offer in the current climate and its potential to develop sustained renditions of the Celtic Tiger in literature’.¹⁴ However, it is to this end that Bruen has adapted some of the traditional conventions of American noir and channelled them in new directions to represent the transformations in the environment out of which the new genre has flourished. As such, Irish noir is a continuing, rapidly developing diversification of American hard-boiled crime fiction which reflects the

contradictions in society associated with the rise and very recent collapse of the Celtic Tiger. As a suitable backdrop for the creation of a new template for noir fiction, these aggressive changes in Irish society mark the onset of a new paradigm in contemporary Irish writing.

In her study of white masculinity and hard-boiled fiction Megan Abbott has suggested that the anxieties and fears inherent in contemporary cultural narratives are depicted and largely driven on by the mass market popularity of hard-boiled crime fiction with its potentially 'dangerous influence' on popular culture. She outlines the point that in their development in 1920's America, the hard-boiled novel: 'embodied, assuaged and galvanized an array of contemporary anxieties: Depression-era fears ... anti-immigrant paranoia, Cold War xenophobia, and the grip of post-World War II consumerism.'¹⁵ Ninety years later similar anxieties are still present in society in transformed manifestations. Gerry McCarthy reinforces this point in his article on the dark side of the Celtic Tiger, commenting on the similarities between America in the 1920s and contemporary Ireland: 'For the Celtic tiger read the Roaring Twenties and the economic boom that preceded the Wall Street crash.'¹⁶ Despite the time lapse the connection between the growth of the genre and the conditions from which it arose is clear, as is the fear and anxiety which noir fiction continues to represent. Therefore, while Kiberd levels his questioning of the lack of representation of such profound developments in Ireland in 'good novels', he may have deliberately failed to give credit to this most potent of mediums for its ability to accurately express the hidden tensions lying underneath the surface of a developing society, and to reflect what P.D. James has referred to as 'the minutiae of everyday life' and its capacity to reveal more about the contemporary moment than 'more pretentious literature.'¹⁷ An analysis of the noir novels of Ken Bruen will therefore not only allow an exploration of the ways in which contemporary Irish noir depicts the contentious issue of Irish Catholic identity as set against the rise and collapse of the Celtic

Tiger but will also allow for an exploration of popular crime fiction, too often dismissed as inferior cultural artefacts, to be drawn into the range of texts critically considered in Irish Literary studies.

Nostalgia for a lost era

Indeed the potential for crime fiction to reflect the social and political concerns of everyday life may be attributed to the recognisable conventions which are easily recognised and associated with the genre and which as Lars Sauerberg has commented, can ‘accommodate an ever updated actuality.’¹⁸ As such the development of Irish noir consolidates typical features of hard-boiled detective fiction whilst updating them through reflecting current changes in social and political conditions. One of the key areas in which this is most apparent is in the ‘regionalisation’ of contemporary crime writing, wherein narratives are driven using what Hans Bertens and Theo D’haen have termed a ‘non-metropolitan’ setting which may operate as more than just a backdrop to the plot.¹⁹ Sauerberg points out that regional settings highlight and problematise current social issues related to gender and ethnicity in particular. Setting his novels in Galway therefore allows Bruen to update the genre to optimise the representation of the city’s developing cosmopolitanism away from the more conventional metropolitan setting of Dublin. In choosing Galway as the ‘urban jungle’ which his private-eye in denial must traverse, Bruen effectively replicates the processes involved in transmuting the classic codes of hard-boiled fiction onto the Irish landscape by drawing upon well-known institutions of Galway and easily recognisable features of the city. Indeed, in interweaving his protagonist’s nostalgia for a lost era, Galway is almost lovingly described:

Long walk is among my favourite routes. You pass under the Spanish Arch then along by the water, the Claddagh right across. Nimmo's Pier marks the point. Before you lies Galway Bay, you can almost see the Aran Islands [...] The sound of the seagulls, the smell of the ocean, you gulp deep breaths and want to mouth a rosary of gratitude.

(*Priest*, p. 196.)

By juxtaposing endearing depictions of the city as one where 'sound carries along the breeze like the faintest whisper of prayers you never said', (*Cross*, p. 13) with the 'updated actualities' of Galway as a developing modern city possessing a darker, foreboding edge, Bruen fulfils part of the 'drive towards authenticity' that Bertens and D'haen have referred to.²⁰ In this respect, Bruen captures the darkness lying on the underside of the prosperity of Celtic Tiger Ireland in depicting 'A city on the predatory move [...] in the hours before dawn [...] that's when it's the war zone,' (*Guards*, p. 75) in referring to the yob-culture and murder of a young man down by the public toilets.

The adaptation of new settings and landscapes in the hard-boiled novel therefore stretches the boundaries and conventions of the genre to reflect social and economic change, thus allowing the private - eye to critique the subversive world which lies just below the surface of the image of a prosperous nation. The dominant image of the city in hard-boiled detective fiction is that of a decaying wasteland, devastated by drugs and violence. Geoffrey O'Brien has commented that '...when it is not a bleak rural wasteland inhabited by murderous primitives, it is a glittering hell ruled by money and violence, flaunting images of beauty that are either

deceptive or unattainable.²¹ While these contrasts are evident in Bruen's representation of cosmopolitan Galway they have been transformed to reflect a differing ideological purpose. Traditional images of the city of the hard-boiled tradition have developed out of an 'urban jungle', defined by Ralph Willett as 'vicious, savage, devoid of spiritual values',²² as an antidote to the rhetoric of Celtic Tiger entrepreneurs, politicians and the church. In transposing these conventions onto the Irish landscape, Jack Taylor clings to his spiritual values albeit in a non-traditional way and the issue of religion is the key way in which Bruen further distinguishes his brand of Irish noir from the traditional American formula. In doing so he is therefore able to offer significant insights into the struggle with transformations in contemporary Catholic and Irish identity.

Representations of Contemporary Catholicism

The importance of contemporary Catholic and Irish identity can be contextualised from as far back as the seventeenth Century, since Catholicism has been identified as intrinsically linked to Irishness.²³ A powerful sense of common identity based on a perception of Ireland as an essentially Catholic nation has long fostered a sense of national consciousness, particularly since the English Reformation which was seen to nourish Catholic Irish resentment and hostility towards Protestantism and the English. Catholicism and its centrality to the identity of the Irish had historically thwarted the relationship between Britain and Ireland. Brian Jenkins has commented that despite distinctions in their respective versions of 'the reformed faith', England, Wales and Scotland were united in a common Protestantism which fuelled hostility towards Ireland's faithfulness to Catholicism. Indeed, he suggests that Catholicism:

‘created a powerful and enduring image’ of an ‘organic unity’ of a Gaelic past and the Catholic religion.²⁴ Jenkins elaborates further on the inseparable nature of Catholicism and nationality by equating them with Irish persecution by the English: ‘Our country suffered for being Catholic; our people suffered for being Irish; the bond between our Nationality and our faith is, therefore, One for ever.’²⁵ This unity of Catholicism and nationalism was further strengthened in the twentieth Century during the drafting process of Ireland’s First Constitution when the Vatican’s Cardinal Secretary of State, Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli commented that ‘Ireland was *the* Catholic country’ in communication with one of Eamon de Valera’s advisors,²⁶ a statement which became legitimised as an ideology when the Constitution of Ireland determined that: ‘The State recognises the special position of the Holy Catholic and Roman Church as the Guardian of the faith professed by the great majority of the citizens.’²⁷ Essentially, in drawing so strongly upon the ethos and social values of the Catholic Church, de Valera’s 1937 Constitution established the centrality of Catholicism to the complex notion of Irish identity.

In conjoining both religion and nationalism at the centre of the Irish Constitution, these ideals were embodied by de Valera’s dominant political party, Fianna Fáil and maintained a hegemony which lasted for much of the twentieth Century. In essence it is this hegemony which is interrogated throughout the Jack Taylor series, whereby Bruen questions not only what it means to be Irish, but in its traditional equation with religion, what it means to be Catholic in contemporary Irish society. The Jack Taylor series may therefore be analysed through the frame of deconstructing the hegemony of Catholic nationalism in modern Ireland.

Throughout the novels, the power and dominance which the Catholic Church held in Irish society for most of the twentieth Century is questioned through the presentation of a growing secularisation in contemporary society. An increasing antipathy towards the authoritarian Church is reflected in the manner in which Bruen's representation of the Church's role in Irish society escalates through Jack Taylor's more secularised and critical approach towards Catholicism as the series develops. In *Sanctuary*, the most recent novel to be considered here, Taylor reflects that 'Ireland had changed so much. A guy manhandling a priest wasn't going to bring the cavalry; in fact, it might well bring a lynch party. (p. 89.) This projects the conclusions which Taylor has been grappling with since the first novel in the series, *The Guards*, where while acknowledging a decline in the central role of Catholicism in society he presents a more liberal approach to its relevance in everyday life. In introducing Grogan's, 'the oldest unchanged pub in Galway', (p. 12) he describes how the bar is free from ornamentation with the exception of a triple frame containing pictures of a pope, St Patrick and John F. Kennedy:

Once the pope held centre field, but after the Vatican Council he got bounced. He clings to an outside left [...] I dunno which pope he is, but he has the look of them all. It's unlikely that he'll regain mid-field any time soon.' (*Guards*, p. 12-13.)

The fact that the pope is 'clinging' to the left of JFK is representative of the growing antipathy in society in general towards the authoritarian Church, an attitude which increases as the series progresses as a statue of 'Our Mother of Perpetual Help' is stolen (*Magdalen*, p. 44) and a barman replies sarcastically to a priest that he can use the street in response to a request for a smoking room. (*Sanctuary*, p.90).

Essentially, such rejection of the traditional tenets of the Catholic Church such as the pope, the clergy and religious statues as outlined above point towards what John Littleton has termed a 'loss of the sense of the sacred.'²⁸ Littleton suggests that the dominance the Church held throughout the twentieth century has been replaced by a disaffection towards all forms of organised religion, reflecting a rejection of the defining characteristics of Catholic identity of universality, tradition and sacramentality.²⁹ He argues that there has been a marked shift in contemporary Irish society towards more individualistic and personally autonomous expressions of Catholic identity resulting in a tension between 'unity and diversity'.³⁰ In developing this idea further this tension is suggestive of the idea that Irish Catholic identity currently exists in a liminal space between the two, on the cusp of tradition and modernity. As a character also torn between tradition and modernity, Jack Taylor rejects the conformity of the Church's authority and manifests the tension between 'unity and diversity' in a representation of the decline in contemporary Catholicism in Ireland.

In this respect the noir genre allows Bruen to effectively utilise its conventions in presenting his reluctant private investigator protagonist in a manner typical of the genre as an individualist with an overriding sense of self-determination. More significantly, through nudging the conventions of the genre and transposing it onto an Irish setting, Bruen juxtaposes and subverts traditional character expectations of noir by presenting him in a manner which not only foregrounds the primacy of the individual over community, but in doing so also allows him to tease out the tensions central to an interrogation of the function of religion in contemporary Irish culture. To this end, Jack Taylor resists cultural conformity by intentionally marginalising himself. While his isolation is largely of his own choosing, he

also acknowledges that much of it is also out of his control due to his unpredictable, approaching incessant abuse of alcohol: ‘The roads not less travelled but blindly staggered upon. People who’d been kind to me and I had abused so very badly [...] Behold a pale rider, tanked to the gills.’ (*Guards*, p. 121.) Not only does he maintain a reputation in Galway for being a good private investigator because he has nothing else in his life, (*Guards*, p. 17) but finds relief in the anonymity that his marginalisation brings, whether self-imposed or a by-product of his alcoholism in having been barred from every pub in the city: ‘He didn’t know me. What a bonus.’ (*Guards*, p. 238.) He is aware that his drink problem is intrinsic to the events in his life which have contributed towards his position of marginality and isolation: ‘drinking whiskey has led me down so many dark streets,’ (*Magdalen*, p. 84) but even in his more prolonged periods of sobriety, Jack feels a detachment from society which he is reluctant to attempt to repair despite the fragility of mind such self-marginalisation brings as he admits: ‘At infrequent times, I’d let loose a cackle of demented laughter, and that scared the bejaysus out of me. When you frighten yourself, you’ve hit a planet of new darkness.’ (*Priest*, p. 246.) In *Cross*, however, he reluctantly opens himself up to the vulnerability that his self-inflicted isolation has brought: ‘I admitted to me own self – a thing I hated to do – I was scared. I was alone. Your Irish bachelor in all his pitiful glory, shabby and bitter, ruined and crumbling. With a plan.’ (*Cross*, p. 95.) The plan he refers to only serves to emphasise the uncertainty he feels towards his position in Galway as frustrated with the dissonance between tradition and modernity all around him he seeks to leave Ireland, thereby foregrounding his uncertain individual existence over the community based approach to living traditionally endorsed in Irish society. In reflecting upon the clash between the local and global view of Ireland he feels even more disenfranchised with his ‘community’:

Ireland prided itself on being

Confident

Aware

Modern

Our image abroad was that of hip coolness. We were, in the words of the culture, a *happening* place. Imagining we'd moved far from the provincial, closed, parochial society of the bad years, events were occurring to remind us we hadn't moved as far or as fast as we'd thought.' (*Priest*, p. 320.)

Characters on the margins of the political and economic system

Furthermore, Jack Taylor often embraces the counter-culture of other characters on the margins of the political and economic system. As Damien Shortt outlines in his essay on the novels of Dermot Bolger, 'Secularising the Sacred', some of these are similarly young, working-class characters who represent their own varying forms of uncertain existence.³¹ Jack reluctantly accepts the young private-eye wannabee, Cody, into his working life in *Priest*, to the extent that he eventually views him as his surrogate son; in *Cross* and *Priest* it is the counter-culture of a drug-dealing Zen activist whom Jack embraces. Other characters whose issues he takes on board include a young neighbour who gets badly beaten up for being homosexual in *Cross* and a community of Tinkers who are attacked in *The Killing of the Tinkers*. In the same novel Jack even marries an immigrant from Hamburg whom he met in London and befriends a rogue English policeman called Keegan who foregrounds the commercialisation of Irish identity. Jack comments with some incredulity on the diversity of

these uncertain characters and how he finds them: 'or they me? It's like there's a neon sign above my head that reads: 'Gather here, you crazies of all creeds.' They did.' (*Sanctuary*, p. 20-1). However as Shortt pointed out in relation to the novels of Dermot Bolger, it is through exposing the marginalised positions of all these characters that he can therefore find voices for those struggling against cultural hegemony, in a manner which positions his writing as an interrogation of the fluidity of Irish identity and thus of Catholic nationalist dominance.

The key character whom Jack foregrounds in this perspective however is Cathy: an ex-London punk 'who'd washed up in Galway while trying to kick her heroin habit.' (*Priest*, p. 150.) Cathy works for Jack in *The Guards* as his unlikely secretary and through Jack later meets her husband, Jeff. The fluctuations in their relationship are often intrinsic to the narrative drive of most of the novels after the death of Cathy's daughter Serena-May in *The Dramatist* and central to Jack's own presentation as a character on the margins. Significantly, Cathy is the only constant in Jack's life throughout the series. As an equally un-conformist character whose moral choices run counter to established expectations, she also counters Jack's own actions and choices. When Jack turns to drink she acts as his mentor warning him against it. When Jeff disappears Cathy turns to Jack for help in finding him. When Jack is sober and babysitting Serena-May, it is Cathy who pushes her out of the window in an irrational and immoral act. And when she hides behind Jeff at the end of *Sanctuary* in fear of seeing Jack for the first time since she shot Cody, Jack balances her actions yet again by walking by in the only redemptive ending throughout the series. Offsetting the uncertainty of both Cathy and Jack is Ridge, a female Guard and lesbian who maintains a rather tempestuous friendship with Jack since the death of her uncle, Brendan Flood. He is another of Jack's associates who never recovered from his relegation to the margins of society in his position as ex-Guard. Ridge also acts as a more stable influence in Jack's life, despite her

own minority position in society. Through the balancing actions of both of these marginalised characters at opposite ends of the spectrum, Jack is always involved in the tension of ‘the other’ that lies at the heart of diversity. Indeed, Declan Kiberd has commented that for Irish people, ‘Ireland must be forever staged as the Other’;³² as such, Jack is integral to foregrounding diversity over unity in contemporary Irish society.

Furthermore, as a typical private investigator, Jack has his own brand of morality and on some occasions no morality at all, which in an Irish setting runs counter to the hegemonic Catholic nationalist morality of society. Taylor is so blatantly un-conformist to established notions of moral behaviour, yet he maintains his own form of social justification for his immoral actions to encapsulate the conflict between a society formerly dominated by the established Catholic Church in Ireland and the forces of modernity which are nudging the boundaries of society. Even more controversial than the diverse range of characters who assist Jack in his attempts to keep the dark streets of Galway a little safer, is the contrast of character choices in the murderous nuns and abusive priests, as traditional tenets of the Church presented as forces of evil that must be overcome: ‘The murder of priests was not part of our history. The difference now was, we no longer needed occupying armies to do it. We were the killers.’ (*Cross*, p. 241.) In facing such evil, Jack’s lack of morality is presented as acceptable, as depicted in his disgust when he realises Sister Mary Joseph’s complicity in not believing it was ‘her place’ to report knowledge of the abuse that she knew was occurring to the Guards in *Priest*: ‘Spitting anger has informed most of my life, but the white-hot aggression I felt towards this old woman was new to me and I couldn’t rein it in.’ (*Priest*, p. 297.) Indeed, Jack’s anger towards the clergy as human representatives of the Church

escalates as the series develops, articulated in his feelings towards Father Malachy: ‘I’ve hated few men as much as I hated him. You’re in some state as a Catholic, when you hate a priest.’ (*Priest*, p. 48.) That his anger is now specifically focused on the human representatives of the Church is paralleled with a depiction of the way in which he clings to symbols of Catholicism, therefore asserting his rejection of the institution of the Church as a dominant authority which he believes has no place in contemporary society, as opposed to the spiritual ethos of Catholicism which he still retains in a symbolic dimension through the rituals which he clings to.

Most significantly, it is Bruen’s representation of the Catholic priest, Father Malachy, which reflects his defiant presentation of the loss of faith in Catholicism. From the beginning Jack describes him as his ‘nemesis’, continually ‘enveloped in cigarette smoke’, (*Magdalen*, p. 60) in a manner which reduces the representation of a figure of authority within the hierarchy of the Church to that of grotesque caricature:

A familiar figure came shambling across the square, enveloped in nicotine. Father Malachy. He looked as he always did: angry, shabby, about to explode [...] He sat down, wheezing deeply [...] I saw a slow, cunning light his eyes [...] He blessed himself – not easy with a cigarette in his hand, and ash dribbled on to his black jacket. (*Sanctuary*, p. 149-50.)

This image of Father Malachy encased in a haze of smoke is symbolic of the negative attitude which society now associates with the clergy. Through the increasing bitterness with which Jack refers to Father Malachy, Bruen reflects the processes of transformation in the changing role of the Catholic Church in Ireland in the twenty-first Century. Indeed, his critique of the

Church as a functional institution culminates in *Sanctuary* when Jack asks for his help in explaining the meaning of Benediction:

‘Benediction is a blessing, but in your case it can only be a curse.’ And he moved past me, heading for the cartons of cut price cigarettes.

I resisted the temptation to kick him in the arse.

It took some doing. I said, ‘See you soon.’

Without even turning round, he spat, ‘Not if God is good.’ Nice ecclesiastical parting remark. (*Sanctuary*, p. 59.)

Jack’s response clearly places Father Malachy and thus the institution of the Church as a target of satire. In doing so this resonates with Eugene O’Brien’s comments in relation to the presentation of the priests in the television series *Father Ted*, where he states that:

The Church is now seen as just another organisation, as part of the way in which society and culture are ordered, and which is subject to the same rules, regulations and expectations as the other societal structures with which it competes.³³

O’Brien’s comments confirm the way in which Bruen uses his satirical comments about Father Malachy as a springboard from which to interrogate the centrality of the influence of Catholicism as an organised institution and expose the tensions of faith in an increasingly secularised Ireland. Throughout the Jack Taylor series these tensions are primarily focused on

the clash between the traditional and the modern. Jack often recounts stories from when he was growing up to contrast his disaffection with contemporary society. Here, the contrasts between his opinion of Father Malachy as someone for whom ‘The temptation to bang him on the upside of his dandruffed head’, (*Cross*, p. 155) contrasts greatly with his memories of ‘bishops who ruled like feudal lords’, (*Guards*, p. 212) and the role that the priest played in society when he was young: ‘His word was law, he’d more power than any Guard. Who could have foretold the massive fall from grace.’ (*Priest*, p. 124.) The power previously maintained by the clergy that Taylor refers to is what makes Bruen’s depiction of Father Malachy so shocking. ‘A lunatic who set the alarm to smoke in the small hours of the morning’, and for whom ‘life was simply an irritation that occurred between cigarettes,’ (*Cross*, p. 154) is the complete antithesis of what Tom Garvin has pointed out in his comments that as representatives of Irish Catholicism, the clergy were the ‘primary possessors’ of ‘the truth; a truth which yielded them wisdom and thus power:

Priests had seemed at one time to possess not just religious authority but also magical powers in the eyes of many of the people. Priests had a great psychological grip on the minds of the less well educated and perhaps in particular on the minds of women.³⁴

It is through this frame that Bruen presents a multi-levelled critique of the role of the clergy in contemporary society, in the contempt that Taylor holds not only for Father Malachy but for the power he continues to yield over Taylor’s mother. In seeming to project all her disappointments in how Jack has turned out his mother clings to the prestige that she believes the priest holds, which only serves to heighten the contempt that Jack feels for both of them, a contempt which he articulates using Carol O’Connell’s words to describe Father Malachy

as he observes them walking down the street linking arms: ‘*a dirty, backdoor invader, a professional destroyer of lives, who well understood the loathsome workings of the world’s worst scum*’. (*Magdalen*, p. 60.)

That such contempt is so prevalent in Irish society has been largely determined by an outpouring of revelations regarding patterns of sexual abuse by priests in positions of authority in the 1990s. While Roy Foster asserts that the role of Irish Catholicism in society was already in decline well before the scandals were made public, it was the nonchalant attitudes of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church towards ignoring or covering up the revelations which ‘signalled the end of a culture of deference’. As Foster outlines:

The Church’s moral authority was further destroyed by the hierarchy’s apparent inability to apologise for its inaction in practically every case. Traumatic publications such as the Ferns Report conveyed not only appalling records of sexual exploitation by clerics but a near criminal inability among their superiors to handle the social responsibilities they had inherited with their position.³⁵

As a result the Church’s position in society altered drastically, a shift which is the central premise of the novel *Priest*, which reflects the changed perception of the Catholic Church and the clergy in particular in the wake of the Ferns Report.³⁶ Bruen establishes this position from the beginning of the novel: ‘The land of saints and scholars was long gone [...] The deluge of scandal enveloping the Church had caused the people to lose faith in the one institution that had seemed invulnerable.’ (p. 23.)

While Bruen focuses such a fall from grace in his representation of the clergy as symbolised by the dissonance between Father Malachy and the priests of his youth, it is Jack's own clash between the traditional and the modern which teases out the tensions inherent in contemporary society at a much more personal level. This is observed most perceptibly in his comments about some of the traditions that are rarely observed in Ireland today:

I thought again about the centuries in Grogan's. Any given day, come noon, they took off their caps, blessed themselves for the angelus. Even bowed their heads as they quietly whispered the prayer.

Save for those odd pockets of remembrance, the angelus, like the tenements and pawn shop of Quay Street, had been blown away by the new prosperity. Who's to measure the loss? I couldn't even recall the prayer. (*Guards*, p. 180-1.)

His depiction of religion is undoubtedly interrogative and critical with the clash between the traditional and the modern clearly drawn, but at times it is also ambiguous in its nostalgia for an earlier Church, filled with rituals, mystery and a sense of reverence. In her incisive study of Catholicism since the 1950s, Louise Fuller has commented on the Irish situation in the post-Vatican era, suggesting that the updated focus of the Vatican Council on new symbols and new ways of communicating the liturgy in the vernacular were proving ineffectual in connecting to the population's sacred 'inner core' in the rapidly changing society: 'despite the updated liturgy, the correlation between life and liturgy, as envisaged by the council had not been achieved.'³⁷ Colm Tóibín also reflects on the fierce, fiery symbolism of Catholicism in Ireland when he was growing up, referring to a 'black and white' period of religiosity

which left no room for grey areas, and which has now been replaced by a 'strange ghostly presence.'³⁸

The symbolic presence of rigid certainties

In a time of such uncertainty, it is the symbolic presence of rigid certainties which Bruen evokes so nostalgically. Jack goes out of his way at the beginning of the series to attend mass at the Poor Clare's Convent; attending is a ritual in itself from which he derives a sense of comfort and solace: 'The ritual, the smell of incense, the Latin intonations are a comfort beyond articulation.' (*Guards*, p. 53.) A sense of reverence is portrayed when he prays in Irish, clinging to the notion that he feels safer this way as the English translation just didn't work, 'not in my heart where it mattered.' (*Priest*, 185.) Indeed, Jack's reflection that: 'I'd learnt my prayers in Irish, and they only held true resonance if said thus. Course no more than any other frightened Catholic, I'm partial to a blast of Latin. The easy majesty talks to my peasant soul', (*Magdalen*, p. 199) is thus indicative of the way in which Jack is presented as a physical manifestation of Eamon Maher's ideas of 'clinging to a time when the ceremony was shrouded in mystery.'³⁹ Furthermore, his prayers are often both impulsive and involuntary, and 'surface without beckoning' (*Guards*, p. 233) as an indication of his need for some spiritual fulfilment. The ritual of lighting candles is a symbolic action in all of the novels, representative of remembrance, which in itself is also becoming something that he feels he needs to cling onto:

Time was, I took my candle business to the Augustine till they went techno [...] That doesn't do it for me, I need the whole ritual of the taper, the smell of the wax, to see the candle take flame. It comforts me, makes me feel like some items are not for sale.

(*Cross*, p. 252.)

However, it is with 'a sense of unfulfilment' (*Priest*, p. 66) that Jack realises that what was once sacred has also been transformed in the name of prosperity and feels intrinsically saddened at the automation of the ritual of lighting a candle by putting money in a box and pressing a button, feeling cheated at the loss of his 'ritual of comfort, as old as poverty.'

(*Priest*, p. 66.)

In essence Jack feels continually disappointed with the lack of fulfilment which the Church as a physical institution provides in contemporary Ireland. As outlined previously, he believes it has become just another faceless organisation, an 'unholy trinity' with the Guards and the entrepreneurs nurtured by the Celtic Tiger. In drawing upon Shortt's assertion in a different context, Jack has come to the realisation that 'organised religion can no longer provide a satisfactory philosophical paradigm through which he can live his life.'⁴⁰ His lack of faith in the clergy has been replaced by a need for personal fulfilment, articulated in his response to a call to support the clergy: 'I didn't believe that any more, but I still believed in him.' (*Priest*, 45.) In stating that he would strive to be a better person in memory of his father, rather than because it is his moral obligation as established in the traditions of the Catholic Church, Jack reflects his need for an alternative form of spiritual fulfilment. At the end of *Sanctuary*, the last novel to be considered in this series, Jack concludes the conflict which he has been battling with; as he is just about to leave the church from which he has rescued

Superintendent Clancy's child, he considers: 'It was comfortable and warm, but no, I'm not going to call it a place of sanctuary. Not for me anyway.' (*Sanctuary*, p. 189.) In rejecting the institution of the church he opts for a more individualised expression of his faith.

Indeed, he laments the 'spiritual remnants' of his Catholic upbringing that Tóibín refers to, particularly 'the sense of our origins beyond the bounds of sense, an awareness of mystery and wonderment, grace and sacrament.'⁴¹ The importance of these remnants of his spiritual belief in contemporary society is reflected in the way in which Bruen draws heavily upon Catholic symbolism such as Jack's rosary beads, which he placed under his pillow claiming he 'could use all the help available.' (*Guards*, p. 293.) In having them, but not essentially using them, and in praying, but not in an organised or collective way, Jack effectively manages to find the point between the two that Littleton refers to as 'unity *in* diversity' as opposed to a continual tension between unity *and* diversity.⁴² Thus, in finding comfort in mouthing 'a rosary of gratitude' (*Priest*, p. 196) and believing that the best prayers of all are carried along on the Galway wind (*Cross*, p. 13) or in giving someone in need ten euro, Jack recognises that there is still a need for what Maher has referred to as 'mystery and the transcendent' in contemporary Irish society.⁴³ This perspective is reinforced in the last paragraphs of *Sanctuary*, in the contrasting symbolism of the single white feather on the ground which is mangled by Father Malachy's heavy shoe as Jack is just about to pick it up: 'I was going to lash him for the feather but figured, one way or another, the Church crushed anything outside their control.' (p. 202.) In signifying the presence of his guardian angel being crushed by the institutional, authoritarian presence of Father Malachy, Jack perceives the event as just another 'defeated miracle'. (*Sanctuary*, p. 202.) In turning his back on the priest and thus rejecting the type of faith that he signifies, he then foregrounds his own interpretation of faith as he calmly walks past Cathy and Jeff without venting any of his rage

and frustration for the pain he has endured at their hands, symbolic of the individualistic way which he has chosen to practice his faith. As the only redemptive ending in the series it signifies that perhaps Jack Taylor has finally accepted his own state of liminality and found a form of transcendence within his daily life which has calmed his inner conflict between tradition and modernity.

A desire for cultural pluralism

Thus, in finally accepting that there is a place for religion in his life, Jack reinforces Dermot Keogh's assertion that the place of religion in the lives of Irish people should no longer be measured against the institutional church.⁴⁴ While symbols of Catholicism are reflective of a strong attachment to the religious values and a strong desire for reassurance in these most uncertain of times, they are but a base upon which new Catholic structures for the twenty-first Century can be built. Furthermore, Declan Kiberd has pointed out that nationalism and religion are no longer the staple markers of Irish identity, but have been replaced by a desire for cultural pluralism in recognition of the concept that: 'identity is never fixed' but 'perpetually up for renegotiation.'⁴⁵

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CHAPTER FIVE

Tana French and Metaphysical Detective Fiction

Introduction

At the beginning of *The Likeness*, Tana French's police detective, Cassandra Maddox, remarks: 'My own border fence between real and non-real has never been all that great',¹ (p. 76) thus establishing her propensity towards the liminal. Indeed, it is this state of liminality which the novel explores through tracing the changes in her perspective as a detective who grapples with the borders of her own professional integrity as the novel progresses. In their own exploration of liminal borderlands in Irish literature, Irene Gilsean Nordin and Elin Holmsten define liminality as: 'a borderland site of ambiguity and indeterminacy, a transformational state characterised by a certain openness and relaxation of rules, leading those who participate in the process to new perspectives and possibilities.'² In her role as undercover detective, Cassie is essentially in such a transitional state of what Nordin and Holmsten refer to as 'a state of flux between two different states of being.'³ This comment may also be applied to Tana French's crime fiction as she explores the liminality of the genre through which she writes in pushing the boundaries of conventional crime writing in new, transformative directions. In doing so she explores the fluctuations of individuals alongside the parallel changes of Ireland in the midst of its own state of transformation. These dual states of liminality are captured at the point at which the individual and society meet – the lived in places which essentially become the liminal

borderlands in which modes of identification and notions of belonging in contemporary Ireland are explored. The manner in which Tana French represents material sites within these borderlands in her series of crime novels will therefore provide a useful interrogation of contemporary Irish identity.

Tana French has published three crime novels, each set in different ‘lived-in’ places in twenty-first Century Ireland, each of which is centred around a particular point of crisis - reflective of the point at which the shifting of individuals meets the shifting of place. The first of her novels, *In The Woods*,⁴ was nominated for three prestigious literary awards including the Anthony, Macavity and Los Angeles Times book awards and actually won the Clarion award in 2007 for First Fiction, and the Edgar award in the USA in 2008 for best first novel. Her success with this novel was followed up in 2008 with *The Likeness*⁵ and her most recent publication *Faithful Place*⁶, has also been nominated for the 2011 Best Novel Edgar award. French’s novels reveal a propensity for pushing the boundaries of crime fiction in order to explore more philosophical issues concerning identity and as one reviewer, Colin McEnroe, comments: ‘the forces that shape and sustain our lives.’⁷ Indeed, *In the Woods* converges on the boundaries between a police procedural and a psychological thriller. On the surface the plot revolves around detectives Rob Ryan and Cassie Maddox uncovering the killer of a twelve year old girl, Katy Devlin, found dead at the site of an archaeological dig in the Dublin suburb of Knocknaree. However, beneath the surface of this is an exploration of a mystery that occurred in Rob Ryan’s past twenty years ago in 1984. In the very same neighbourhood two of his friends disappeared in Knocknaree woods while the three of them were playing, and have never been since.

Only Adam, as Rob was then known, was discovered in a traumatised state backed up against a tree with his trainers full of blood. The similarities in the location of the two cases lead Rob back to his past – of which he has subconsciously blocked out all memory – and in investigating the secrets within the Devlin family, is forced to confront the layers of secrets within his own past. These events are paralleled by a political subplot concerning the development of a new motorway on the site of the archaeological dig, and its effects on the community. Among the lines of investigation are that Katy might have been killed by someone taking part on the dig, or by someone who is not happy with her father's protestations against the motorway being built through the archaeological site. In uncovering the identity of Katy's killer, partners Rob and Cassie interrogate various links between the past and the present in order to unravel the mysteries within the parallel plots.

In her follow up novel, *The Likeness*, French continues her exploration of the boundaries between the past and the present with a narrative voiced by Detective Cassie Maddox several months after events on Operation Vestal. Developing Cassie as the main protagonist in this novel, French pushes her unique perspective of the genre further by blurring the boundaries further between memory and fantasy, the real and unreal, victim and investigator. The setting of this novel is the village of Glenskehy, outside Dublin, where the body of a student has been found in a derelict cottage and the victim identified as Lexie Madison. What makes the discovery so shocking is the fact that the victim is not only Cassie's double, but that Lexie Madison is the name formerly used by Cassie as an identity created while she was an undercover detective. Having transferred out of the murder squad, Cassie is persuaded

by her former boss, Frank Mackey, to go back undercover and masquerade as Lexie in the house she shared with four other students to uncover the killer. Taking on her identity, she must therefore return as Lexie to Whitethorn House, under the pretence of having survived the attack and recovering from her stab wounds in hospital.

Cassie's remit is to probe the lives of the other students who share the house: Daniel, Abbey, Rafe and Justin, in an attempt to draw the killer out. In doing so, however, she becomes mesmerised by the lives that the five of them live and the tight bonds that they share in the enclosed world they have created for themselves within Whitethorn House. Tantalised by their strange closeness, she finds herself becoming increasingly emotionally attached to the other housemates, and loses sight of her task of uncovering whether one of them killed Lexie, or whether the threat came from outside the house. In following Lexie's habits, she chooses to focus on leads from outside, unwittingly closing herself to the possibility that one of them killed Lexie, and blinkering herself to the fact that it was indeed one of them who committed the crime. The closer she gets to them, the more she deceives herself, to the extent that when her cover is blown, she refuses to admit it to Frank. Moreover, she refuses to ultimately solve the mystery in all its finality by deceiving him into believing that Daniel killed Lexie, rather than specifically identifying the housemate who delivered the fatal wound.

In a similar vein French's third novel, *Faithful Place*, also confronts the issue of self-deception, focusing on the way in which pivotal issues from the past can shape the present. Continuing the pattern of developing supporting characters from previous cases to become protagonists in the next, the key narrative voice is that of Detective

Frank Mackey. The central location in this novel is a neighbourhood in the heart of Dublin where Frank grew up. Having left the Liberties twenty-two years ago, the plot interrogates the events in the past which caused him to leave and which subsequently shaped the course of his life. Believing that he was abandoned by his girlfriend Rosie Daly on the night they had arranged to elope to England, Frank left Faithful Place after finding a note written by Rosie; he assumed the note had been left for him as it implied that she had gone to England alone. After developing a new life for himself and forging a career as an undercover detective, Frank is forced to return to Faithful Place when his younger sister Jackie contacts him to inform him that Rosie's suitcase has been found hidden in the abandoned house in the Place where they used to meet, containing her birth certificate and their ferry tickets to England. This discovery causes Frank to question the tenets upon which he has built his life: the shadow of doubt that Rosie's departure left upon him, alongside the hope that one day she would return, ultimately changing the course of his life in the past and now turning his life upside down in the present. After reluctantly returning to his family home and its dysfunctional relationships, Frank is forced to observe the investigation of the discovery of the suitcase from the sidelines. In this novel the characters are as insular as those in the previous novel, living in their own form of closed community, but in a much more grounded, narrow-minded way reflecting the working-class antagonisms upon which the relationships between his parents and siblings is built. Rosie's body is finally uncovered in the basement of number sixteen, the house where they used to meet, and in a strange twist of the plot, Frank's brother Kevin is also found dead in the garden of the same house, having supposedly jumped out of the window. Again, layering the mysteries of the past upon the mysteries of the present exudes the ethos that even if you manage to leave it behind, you can never really escape your past. In

exploring the underlying layers of his past, Frank ultimately uncovers his brother Shay as Rosie's murderer, but in refusing to be tied to the murder of his own brother Kevin, the question of truth and reality is in essence left unbound.

It is in this liminal space formed in the opposition of truth and reality; the natural and the artificial; performance and reality through which French explores notions of belonging in contemporary Ireland. The physical boundaries of contemporary place and the parallels between the boundaries of the mind create dual states of liminality which open up new spaces for the re-negotiation of identity. Captured at the point at which the individual and society meet – these lived in places essentially become the liminal borderlands, intrinsically linked to a sense of contemporary identity, and as such interpretations of both must be fluid and open for modes of belonging to be explored.

CHAPTER FIVE

‘Twisted versions of familiar’

Where does spirit live? Inside or outside

Things remembered, made things, things unmade?

What came first, the seabird’s cry or the soul /

Imagined in the dawn cold when it cried?⁸

Conventions of metaphysical detective fiction

In twisting the boundaries of the conventional detective story French’s crime writing draws upon elements of metaphysical detective fiction. In digressing from traditional conventions, the metaphysical detective story pushes the boundaries of the genre in what Patricia Merrivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney have referred to as a ‘postmodernist experimental’ manner.⁹ Rather than following the expected formula of providing a narrative from in which questions arise and are then neatly tied up, the metaphysical detective story questions the narrative itself and its interpretation, probing what Merrivale and Sweeney refer to as ‘the nature of reality, and the limits of knowledge.’¹⁰ In their study of the evolution of this genre they define the metaphysical detective story as:

a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective story conventions – such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader – with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing, which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot.¹¹

Such transcendence from the plot itself can manifest itself in a variety of ways within the narrative; some detective stories become self-reflexive, concluding the mystery with questions rather than answers. Other ways in which metaphysical narratives transcend the plot are exemplified in detectives that ‘cross-over’, becoming the characters they started out seeking, or in other instances, reflected in the detective finding an accidental solution to the crime or even failing to do so altogether. Merrivale and Sweeney emphasise that rather than answering all the questions and tying up all the loose ends in a definitive solution to the crime, metaphysical detectives are themselves confronted with notions of their own identity and the ‘insoluble mysteries’ of their own subjectivity and interpretation.

Tana French’s twist in altering the detective story in this manner lies in the manner in which her protagonist detectives explore the boundaries of their own existence and their interpretation of memory, reality, truth and illusion. In addition to Detective Maddox’s previously mentioned comments regarding her own perceptions of the real and the non-real, the capacity for transcending beyond the typical boundaries of a mystery plot is made explicit by each protagonist at the start of their narrative and thus acts as an indicator towards the propensity of the metaphysical nature of their narrative. Rob Ryan begins his account in *In the Woods* with a warning about his

‘fundamental but cracked’ relationship with truth and the painstaking strategies ‘constructed of lies and concealment and every variation on deception.’ (p. 6.) While he emphasises the binarism which lies at the core of his career: that he craves truth, and that he lies, Frank Mackey in *Faithful Place* outlines his propensity for believing he is a ‘mirage-master’ in creating illusions that make you believe you are in control. (p. 5.) Indeed, Cassie also warns of the ‘dark thread’ that all undercovers have running through them. (p. 78.) Together these comments all point towards the existence of the liminal, whether explicitly acknowledged or as an undercover act of self denial in itself.

Alongside her refusal to provide a definite narrative closure in some aspects of the plot in each novel, French therefore evokes what Merrivale and Sweeney refer to as those ‘unfathomable mysteries’ at the heart of metaphysical detection: ‘What, if anything, can we know? What, if anything, is real? How, if at all, can we rely on anything besides our own constructions of reality?’¹² For two of French’s detectives this vulnerability is transformed with the powerful lure of undercover work, particularly as Cassie comments in *The Likeness* at the prospect of going undercover again and the appeal of: ‘the ruthlessness, no borderlines.’ (p. 39.) Through inverting the classic ‘Golden Age whodunit’ narrative onto material sites in twenty-first century Ireland, French opens up traditionally closed settings in a manner which not only destabilizes crime fiction conventions but also nudges the boundaries of community in extending the tension in the narrative beyond the detection of the crime. Thus, Cassie’s placement within Whitethorn House in *The Likeness*, Frank’s return to his family home and neighbourhood in *Faithful Place* and Rob’s journey back to the area

where he grew up in *In the Woods* allows an opportunity to ‘investigate a murder case from the inside’, (p. 39, *The Likeness*) whilst also allowing French to explore and manipulate the liminal parameters of the genre in turning standard literary investigative procedures inside out.

Indeed, the narrative style of each of her novels questions the nature of the reality of each of the detectives who primarily drive the plot. In subverting traditional conventions of the detective story, metaphysical detective fiction is ‘self-reflexively’ concerned with its own search for meaning in an analytical manner, which in essence detects the detective as much as the crime itself. In all three novels each of the detectives is drawn into their own ‘metaphysical’ identity quest which parallels and dominates the detection of the crime itself. In the first of French’s novels, *In The Woods*, it is the mystery of lead detective Rob Ryan’s past which transcends the mystery plot itself, in his quest to fill the gaps in his memory left by the trauma of his childhood. As French comments: ‘Rob spends all of *In the Woods* trying to find a way to go back into the netherworld of the woods and come out on the other side. Moving through these zones is the only way to get anywhere, but it comes with risks.’¹³ Remaining an event which has lain beyond his understanding for much of his life, the circularity of the plot structure reinforces the deeper mystery of his own identity quest in leaving the story’s initial enigma unresolved.

Maintaining a sense of fluidity, it is Rob’s partner Cassie, who in true metaphysical style, self-consciously questions the nature of her identity as a detective due to the

outcome of events on Operation Vestal in *In The Woods*. At the start of *The Likeness* she questions herself and the nature of her own reality, attempting to disguise the discomfort of confronting the ‘unfathomable’ question of what she can rely on or know with any certainty after having crossed the boundaries of her professional relationship with her partner on their previous case and in trying to assimilate the ensuing disintegration of their partnership. In attempting to embrace such uncertainty by taking on Lexie’s identity as an undercover assignment, Cassie not only has to become her – in essence she must ‘perform’ Lexie – but in spending so much time on the border between her own identity and Lexie’s, unknowingly embarks on her own metaphysical identity quest in seeking to become herself. Significantly, throughout the novel the reader is induced to discover the next move that she, as detective, will make, rather than those of the murderer she is seeking to detect. Thus, it is as much Cassie’s mystery of ‘being and knowing’ which remains to be solved, as it is uncovering the mystery of the victim’s murder. The enigma of exploring who Lexie actually was, and finding out who murdered her and why, becomes what Anna Botta refers to in a different context as a ‘pretext’ for her own ‘interior quest’.¹⁴ In adopting Lexie’s identity, and in her reluctance to let it go, Cassie’s own construction of reality is therefore paradoxically questioned.

Following on from *The Likeness*, French’s third novel, *Faithful Place*, interrogates the ‘loss of essential truths’ which have shaped the course of Detective Frank Mackey’s life. Again, drawing upon elements of metaphysical detection, it is the negation of events in his past as he believed they happened which reveals his lack of certainty in what he has held as an ‘essential truth’ – that not only did Rosie Daly leave him as

they were on the cusp of running away together, but that one day she would return. Significantly, while her disappearance has been metaphysically intrinsic in shaping Frank's life, it is the antithesis of her as a metaphysical character that makes Frank's trust in her return so certain:

Rosie never played games; she just opened her mouth and told you, straight out, even if it hurt [...] someone who didn't do intrigue was the most intriguing thing of all. So when she said *I swear I'll come back someday*, I believed her for twenty-two years [...] all the time I was married to Olivia and pretending to belong in Dalkey, I was waiting for Rosie Daly to walk through every door. (p. 38.)

When it becomes clear that Rosie was murdered, and therefore never chose to leave him, Frank loses certainty in everything which he believed informed his judgement throughout his adult life: that one day he would be able to finally locate Rosie through his periodic searches on police computers, or that she would come and find him with the answers to all the questions he didn't even need to ask. The realisation that there would never be any more possibility of a second chance or that her return would 'send every jagged edge sliding smoothly into place', (p. 120) therefore causes him to question the nature of his reality and how it has been constructed:

Rosie Daly dumping my sorry ass had been my landmark, huge and solid as a mountain. Now it was flickering like a mirage and the landscape kept shifting around it, turning itself inside out and backwards; none of the scenery looked familiar anymore. (p. 121.)

The loss of these ideas, which are in essence illusions that Frank has maintained as essential truths and which he believed gave him control over his life, reminds us again of Merrivale and Sweeney's metaphysical questioning of 'What, if anything, can we know?' Furthermore, in allowing Frank to find a form of closure in uncovering Rosie's murderer, French twists the conventions of the genre further in a metaphysical fashion by refusing to provide any definitive solution to his brother's murder and securing Frank's sense of liminality. French reinforces this by commenting how: 'Frank spends the whole of Faithful Place balancing on a knife-edge between being a Mackey and being a policeman.'¹⁵ In determining the outcome of the parallel mysteries within the narrative in such a binary manner, French therefore leaves both the detective and the reader with a lack of certainty which reinforces metaphysical detective fiction's ontological notion that life itself 'is the enigma to be solved'.

The primacy of place: nudging the boundaries of crime writing in new directions

Another significant strategy that French utilises in manipulating of the boundaries of the detective genre is the primacy that she places upon the setting of her novels. In capturing the essence of the nature of varying communities in contemporary Ireland, the settings which French utilises operate as more than a backdrop to the plot in a form of what Hans Bertens and Theo D'haen refer to as 'new regionalism'.¹⁶ Bertens and D'haen refer to settings which claim the reader's interest for their own sake, independent from the plot, offering an 'authenticity of place' which nudges the boundaries of crime writing in new contemporary directions, asserting that: 'It offers

us authentic, that is, emotionally charged *couleur locale* rather than the sort of schematic background we usually find and that is only there because crimes do not take place in a geographical and social vacuum.¹⁷ Indeed, this point is reinforced by Marilyn Stasio of *The New York Times*, who comments on the propensity for the setting of the Liberties in *Faithful Place* to transcend the plot:

Although the story revolves around its sympathetic narrator, a tough-minded police officer who wised up years ago and made a clean break from the old neighborhood, the street he grew up on is the novel's main character and the source of its raging vitality.¹⁸

Thus one of the key proponents of French's crime novels is the emphasis placed on the variety of settings which she deploys, each of which afford a reflection on the nature of varying communities and their place in modern Irish society: Knocknaree and the importance of sacred sites (*In The Woods*); the Big House legacy on modern rural communities (*The Likeness*); and working-class inner-city communities of Dublin (*Faithful Place*).

The importance of place in shaping the direction of French's crime fiction is therefore significant. Through excavating the underlying layers of the society out of which such crimes originate by exposing the fears and anxieties of her protagonists, she is able to explore notions of contemporary fracturing of identity. As has been outlined, each of her detective protagonists are not existential heroes, at odds with the world, but real people who precisely embody the contradictions of a changing Ireland. As such, the

places that they occupy act as physical points of intersection, wherein the fracturing of personal identity conjoins with an apparent fracturing of space. It is therefore in these liminal zones where her characters interact with the changing spaces around them to reveal differing strands of Irish culture in different temporalities, each meeting at different points of crisis. In essence, a fracturing of time is revealed as it becomes evident that Daniel does not belong in the ‘contemporary cultural moment’ of *The Likeness*, whereas Cassie, who does belong, wants to continually remove herself from it. Similarly, in *In the Woods* Rob behaves ambivalently towards his present existence, spending much of his time trying to remember his repressed past, while in *Faithful Place* Frank has spent most of his adult life in a state of liminality – torn between trying to alienate himself from his past whilst at the same time remaining fixated on something that in fact never really existed as he chooses to remember it. Essentially, French utilises each of these differing points of crisis, where the shifting of individuals meets the shifting of place, to deconstruct the sites upon which contemporary notions of identity can be examined.

The functional chaos of place

In considering the movement towards space as a philosophical concept, rather than place as a geographical study of location, the functional chaos of place becomes marked as meaningful geography; through exploring the communal geography of place alongside individual crises in identity provides the space in which these two concepts meet provides an ideal platform from which to examine these parallel social and individual vulnerabilities. Sara Upstone comments that making space from place

involves ‘reinstilling the undefined.’¹⁹ She suggests that in the re-writing of space and re-defining the set of boundaries which protect and secure, identity is re-negotiated.²⁰ Furthermore, in a more specific context, in his investigation of literary utilisation of space in relation to cultural nationalism in Ireland, Jonathan Allison also argues for a re-thinking of places as confined spaces with borders around, and suggests that they should instead be imagined as spaces of interactive process. He comments on the shift in traditional literary celebrations of place as reflective of a movement away from identification with large spaces to smaller spaces of retreat. Indeed, he questions: ‘How can we place our faith in spaces constructed by boundaries that perplex and confine the subjects in whose name they are made?’²¹ It is this notion of rejecting geographical and confining boundaries, and instead embracing the effect that re-writing the spatial has on the changing nature of contemporary community which French explores further. Interestingly, Allison points to the significance of Knocknarea, the central location of *In The Woods*, commenting on the way in which Knocknarea appeared in some of Yeats’ poetry as a ‘celebration of communion with the landscape and implicitly the spirit of the nation.’²² It is no surprise therefore, that in French’s novel this idea is inverted. Rather than depicting a sense of harmony and celebration of place, Knocknaree is depicted as the location of a de-valued sacred archaeological site on the cusp of being destroyed to allow for the construction of a new motorway, reflecting a sense of dislocation from the ‘communion’ and harmony with the landscape that Allison refers to.²³ In choosing the discovery of a child’s dead body which has been almost ceremonially placed upon a sacred stone as one of the key factors which drives the narrative, French reinforces the inversion of traditional literary representations of place to interrogate the moral core of contemporary Irish society, which is intrinsically linked to changing values and loss of community.

Using spaces of conflict to promote the de-stabilisation of self

Significantly, the notion that the site itself becomes a space of conflict rather than one of harmony, further endorses the contemporary struggle to define the importance of 'place' in society set against the preoccupation with individual self-definition and success. This is reflected in *In The Woods* in the conflict between the anti-motorway protestors and their attempts to preserve the historical site as well as their community, and the motorway developers and self-serving politicians who support their schemes. Such dislocation emphasises the inevitable shift in economic and social positions, a thread which Cassie picks up on in *The Likeness* as she comments on how 'uncool' it is for her to drive 'an ancient, bockety Vespa' in the Ireland of the Celtic Tiger 'where you are what you spend.' (p. 17.) Here, French is interweaving notions of economic change with personal conflict. Moreover, this explicit social struggle is matched in *In the Woods* by the incompatibility between the past and the present for Rob himself, which is reflected in his inability to remove himself from the liminality of his transitional state throughout the course of the investigation, torn between his conflicting memories of Knocknaree and the woods as a child and negotiating these same conflicts as a detective in the present. For Rob, this manifests itself in a mode of self-deceit which becomes highly irrational to the extent that his blinkered approach to Katy's sister, Rosalind, and his inability to perceive her objectively as Katy's killer, stretches the plausibility of his behaviour within the metaphysical parameters of the novel. In mapping Rob's unsettled behaviour against the highly charged and unsettled space of his past, French points towards the de-stabilisation of self-deceiving characters in parallel to Ireland's self-deceiving economic situation.

Indeed, in *The Likeness*, French also comments explicitly on the effect of this noticeable shift in economic and social positions, particularly as the novel is set in the early years of the twenty-first Century – during the peak of Ireland’s economic boom. Daniel picks up this thread as he points out:

Our entire society’s based on discontent: people wanting more and more and more, being constantly dissatisfied with their homes, their bodies, their decor, their clothes, everything [...] Throughout history - even a hundred years ago, even fifty - it was discontent that was considered the threat to society, the defiance of natural law, the danger that had to be exterminated at all costs. Now it’s contentment. What a strange reversal. (p. 247.)

At its core, the novel explores the fractured, multi-layered nature of Irish society, focusing on the sense of displacement and self-deception that such transformative shifts in economic behaviour can bring. Indeed the reversal of traditional conceptions of behaviour and attitudes, such as those outlined by Daniel above, is a recurring concept in the novel as a twisted underside to commonly held conceptions of ‘the truth’ is revealed. On many levels, such deception consumes the central characters as they are defined against particular strands of Irish culture. That these cultural strands are themselves framed by different points of crisis allows French to explore the notion that something is lying beneath the surface of contemporary Ireland which is blurring the boundaries of the protagonists and twisting the layers of self-deception of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Cassie establishes the context of this sense of de-stabilisation in her comments near the beginning of the novel:

For ten years Dublin's been changing faster than our minds can handle. The Celtic Tiger's given us too many people with helicopters and too many crushed into cockroachy flats from hell, way too many loathing their lives in fluorescent cubicles, enduring for the weekend and then starting all over again, and we're fracturing under the weight of it. (p. 16.)

Space as a symbol for the translation of identity

French opens up this spatial image of contemporary Dublin in her representation of the way in which Daniel, Abbey, Rafe, Justin and Lexie have rejected it. They have clearly chosen to withdraw from such a post-modern existence through investment in more meaningful space, in this instance in the Big House of a small village outside Dublin. In choosing to retreat from the chaotic space of contemporary Dublin to a more fixed historical place such as Whitethorn House, they assert the notion of anti-Tiger modernity, emphasising that not everyone can exist in such a fracturing society. The novel therefore explores notions of belonging and identity through utilising charged literary spaces as the primary setting and by paralleling an unsettled image of place alongside the unsettled behaviour of characters, suggestive of the idea of a de-stabilised society. Through drawing upon fixed historical places, which are in essence symbols of history, and twisting and inverting dominant conceptions associated with

these places, the novel explores the idea that the fixed points and certainties of the past are also in fact deceptive, and that the idealistic nostalgia of the past so strongly held in Ireland is unsustainable. Indeed, in considering the importance of place and its link to history, Paul Carter comments that ‘history is a fabric woven of self-reinforcing illusions.’²⁴ It is this notion of ‘self-reinforcing illusion’ and its intrinsic link to spatiality and the negotiation of identity which the novel explores. To draw upon Carter further, the novel therefore utilises historical conceptions of place as a ‘point of departure’,²⁵ to allow the novel’s protagonist to undertake her own form of exploratory journey and re-negotiation of identity. In *The Likeness*, this ‘point of departure’ is the meaningful space of the Big House with its legacy as an ordered spatial entity, traditionally imbuing a sense of authority and control.

Drawing upon the Big House as a symbol for the translation of identity has become an ambiguous subject. The big houses of Anglo-Irish landlords are often associated with the imposing presence of the Protestant Ascendancy, who mostly built them upon the lands of dispossessed Catholic Irish. That these dispossessed poor then worked upon these lands to create an income for their Anglo-Irish landlords further exacerbated the religious and cultural gulf between landlord and tenant.²⁶ As an enclosed space within which oppositional forces of displacement are associated, the big house simultaneously represents the exclusivity of financial and social status for its owners at one extreme and a form of exile from more traditional notions of communal property for the Irish peasants who formerly ‘owned’ the land at the other. Terry Eagleton comments on the Big House as a ‘Romantic symbol all in itself’, an ‘ambivalent’ zone between Nature and Culture:²⁷

The house is a kind of historical subject in itself, a process of which its particular inhabitants are merely the bearers; and this projects responsibility for their own actions onto a communal reality which is always elsewhere. Like the Romantic symbol it is at once local and universal, rooted in one dear perpetual place yet microcosmic of an entire social order...²⁸

It is upon this ambivalent spatial frame of the Big House and its capacity to provide what Eagleton further refers to as an ‘assured frame of communal identity’,²⁹ that French explores the capacity for varying contemporary communities to move beyond traditional boundaries and expectations of identity and class. By inverting the expectations of the inhabitants of Glenskehy who wish to embrace social and economic change and those held by the occupants of Whitethorn House who preclude it, French in essence reverses the frame of communal identity and social order upon which the desire for financial and social status is based on the one hand, and the form of exile which Eagleton refers to above, on the other.

The Likeness offers such a ‘spatially- re-ordered’ deconstruction of traditional representations of the Big House.³⁰ Whitethorn House is initially presented through Cassie’s perception with a sense of grandeur and awe; although she refers to it as ‘a simple house: a wide grey Georgian’, (p. 67) from the start it operates as more than a backdrop to the plot as she imbues it with a mystical, historic presence just by looking at a photograph of it:

Tiny swirling flecks of snow blurred the ivy and hung in the dark windows, and the silence of it was so huge that I felt like I could put my hand straight through the glossy surface of the photo and down into its cool depths [...] That house shimmered in my mind like some fairy fort that appeared for one day in a lifetime, tantalising and charged, with those four cool figures for guardians and inside secrets too hazy to be named. (p. 68.)

The fact that Cassie is romanticising her own nostalgic conception of the house as a fixed, historic entity before she even sets foot inside it is entwined with her personal longing to belong somewhere, as she confesses: ‘What I wanted was someone I belonged with, beyond any doubt or denial’ (p. 49-50.) The ceremonial manner in which the ‘Fantastic Four’ (p. 54) live and the manner in which they have created their own social order within Whitethorn House is in stark opposition to the empty but busy nature of her life in Dublin, which heightens the appeal of the house and its occupants even more:

... the more I thought about it, the less bizarre their lives seemed and the more they enchanted me. Dublin goes fast, these days, fast and jam-packed and jostling, everyone terrified of being left behind and forcing themselves louder and louder to make sure they don’t disappear. (p. 122.)

She craves the close relationship the four of them share, the private smiles they have, ‘just for one another,’ (p. 67) and the unspoken power of their friendship: ‘It was like a shimmer in the air between them, like glittering web-fine threads tossed back and forth and in and out until every word or mouth reverberated through the whole group.’

(p. 167.) In this sense Tana French is presenting Whitethorn House as a place of retreat from modern life in the way she situates the housemates outside its boundaries and encloses them within the protected ‘boundaries’ of the house, albeit imaginary boundaries of their own making. By inverting the traditional image of the Big House as a ‘house charged with centuries of power’, (p. 407) to a space of imaginative retreat with an altruistic ‘equal shares’ philosophy, where the inhabitants are constantly referred to in a communal capacity, any traditional boundaries of class or identity are blurred:

...they didn’t have boundaries, not among themselves, not the way most people do [...] everything, except thank God underwear, belonged to all of them [...] and I liked the blurred boundaries. They reminded me of something warm and solid that I couldn’t quite pinpoint. (p. 243.)

Thus within the spatial frame of the house identity and social order can be re-negotiated. The inhabitants of Whitethorn House are essentially modern ‘misfits’ who ‘found each other’ and have attempted to re-draw their own boundaries of belonging. Their no phones, no computers and ‘no pasts’ philosophy endorses the house as a liminal space of escape from the Dublin of the Celtic Tiger, in contrast to the surprisingly less rigid views of the wider community of Glenskehy, who are willing to embrace the changes to their community that economic change would bring. This is evidenced in local man Naylor’s desire for Whitethorn House to be transformed into a golf club or spa, thereby regenerating the local community and making it a viable place to live, not just a place to escape from. This oppositional cast of mind between the ‘snotty...rich kids up at Whitethorn House’, (p. 141) and the local community

thereby further removes the housemates from any links with community, and in a fatally deterministic way, with reality too.

Breaking the boundaries between the real and the non-real

Thus, French is utilising Whitethorn House as a space within which an interplay between the real and the non-real can take place, initially for Daniel, Abby, Rafe and Justin as Lexie's housemates who are seeking some form of escape from contemporary life, but also for Cassie as her own boundaries between the real and the non-real begin to break down. This becomes apparent initially as a form of wish-fulfilment as she describes being in Whitethorn House like walking 'into your best-loved book [...] strange and new and utterly familiar.' (p. 163.) The breakdown of her personal borders with reality is intensified the longer she remains within the physical boundaries of Whitethorn House, particularly as she begins to feel more at one with the other housemates and slots herself into their 'seamless' (p. 168) behaviour: 'sliding into each other at the edges till you started to lose track of which one you were talking about.' (p. 143.) Their other-worldliness and difference fascinated her before she entered the house as she comments on a photograph of them together:

partly it was the way they dressed, austere, almost Puritan [...] Separately they might have looked subdued, even boring, in the middle of Dublin's orgy of designer label self-expression, but together: they had a cool, challenging quadruple gaze that made them not just eccentric but alien, something from another century, remote and formidable. (p. 58.)

However as she begins to feel more comfortable in performing Lexie, Cassie's sense of who she really is begins to dissolve, along with their sense of difference. As Lexie 'belonged' to and with the other housemates, Cassie increasingly feels that by 'becoming' Lexie, she will thus be one of them, thereby removing any boundaries between them. In essence, it is her attraction to the fixity which they represent that she finds most compelling. She succumbs to the sense of permanence they exude: to the way they have marked each of their rooms as their own by testing out paint colours on the walls; she is drawn to the fixity of the house, to its creaking, its layers of history its permanence in the community; but most significantly, she is tantalised by the fixity that her performance of Lexie brings – a chance to finally belong, despite the fact that she cannot forget that fixity is a consoling myth. Therefore in mapping Cassie's desperation to belong, her craving for a more clearly defined sense of identity alongside an imaginary idealism of place which is 'lacquered gold by the evening sun and glowing vivid as a vision,' (p. 160) Tana French is effectively interrogating Carter's previously mentioned concept of 'self-reinforcing illusion' in a multi-levelled manner through exploring its effects on the individual as well as the wider national community.

Re-negotiating identity in the 're-writing of space'

Cassie's nostalgic descriptions of Whitethorn House can be perceived as representative of a wider nostalgia for the past in Ireland. In her study of 'Space, Place and Identity in Irish Fiction,' Claire Norris reinforces the idea that 'Space and

place in Irish fiction play an integral role in both the creation and rediscovery of identity, on both a personal and a national level.³¹ Norris focuses her study on the formation of national and personal identity in predominantly nineteenth Century representations of the 'Big House'. In drawing upon the strong sense of history that the image of the Big House connotes, along with its connection as a fixed image of the past, Norris concludes that the emphasis upon identity in Irish fiction is essentially built upon the past and should therefore be embraced. However, it is this sense of the inevitability of historical presence which is being re-written in *The Likeness*, as the certainties of the past as associated with historical motifs such as the Big House are inverted, thus exploring a re-negotiation of identity in the 're-writing of space' and re-drawing of boundaries in contemporary Irish writing.³²

Interestingly, French utilises another highly charged space to re-draw the boundaries of Cassie's negotiation of identity in the cottage where Lexie died. As a place which Cassie discovers she had previously used for personal space away from the other housemates when she was alive, the cottage acts as an oppositional force to the powerfully charged ideological associations of the Big House. As a derelict famine cottage it also stands as a symbol to the scars of history, as Cassie comments it 'had a century and a half of its own stillness stored up', (p. 209) indicative of the notion that Cassie is inhabiting more than just a fractured present, but that the past is equally cut through with other narratives which are always in play. In acknowledging that Lexie had only been a momentary blink in the history of the cottage, it is at this point that Cassie, in likeness, fully absorbs Lexie. After visiting the cottage for the first time alone 'as' Lexie, she admits, 'I thought about her differently that night.' (p. 210.)

Being in the place where Lexie died - and pretending to be her alive – combine the physical space of the cottage and the abstract notion of the blurring of the boundaries between her and Lexie, as she comments: ‘I imagined her sitting on this same bit of wall on other, lost nights, and I felt so warm and so solid, firm moving flesh overlaid on her faint silvery imprint, it almost broke my heart.’ (p. 210.) Hereafter Cassie adopts the cottage as her own physical space of retreat away from the others; as a space where she can be in tune with Lexie, and as a space away from the other oppositional forces in her own life: the need to belong in Whitethorn House and her escape from Frank and the realities of her job, the cottage essentially becomes a space of transformation for Cassie. During this first visit to the cottage she notices ‘a tiny shift in the air [...] subtler than a breath; secretive; pleased’, (p. 210) thereby ostensibly marking the subtle blurring of her own changing parameters.

Indeed it is subtleties such as this which illuminate the naturalness of the cottage as a space where Cassie does not feel the need to ‘perform’; in taking solace in the gentleness of simple acts such as sitting down against the wall in the silence of the deserted cottage, that Cassie feels at one not only with Lexie, but with herself. The dichotomy between being able to feel her heart beat in the place ‘where hers had finished beating’ (p. 471), in a space exuding newness and re-growth with the clump of bluebells and hawthorn saplings growing out of the ground upon which Lexie had bled to death, are signifiers of the cottage as a space of liminality: a space where new growth is interspersed with death, and where ultimately the past is intertwined with the present. This is the space where Cassie’s sense of identity is ultimately re-negotiated – where she lost her sense of self and also where she finally re-gains some

semblance of it. The transformational propensity of this space is reinforced in the contrast between the naturalness of the cottage where things are ‘made out of her’ (p. 471), and the artificiality of the house ‘lit up like a Christmas tree’. (p. 472.) In the house she must mask her true feelings with an acute sense of fluidity as she loses sight of that which she is masking herself from – initially from Daniel and the other housemates – but more significantly from herself, and from Sam and Frank as representatives of the outside world and reality later on.

Boundaries of the mind as spaces for the re-negotiation of identity

In one of the key turning points in the novel, Cassie returns to the house after the solitude of the cottage to find that the others have decided to have an impromptu party. Upon seeing the house with lights and music pouring out of all the windows and in seeing the others behaving in an uncharacteristically carefree manner, indeed in their own transformational moment, Cassie becomes utterly consumed in the space in between the loss of the sense of herself and her ‘performance’ of Lexie:

In all my life I had seldom wanted anything as wildly as I wanted to be in there, get this gun and this phone off me, drink and dance until a fuse blew in my brain and there was nothing left in the world except the music and the blaze of lights and the four of them surrounding me, laughing, dazzling, untouchable. (p. 474.)

In embracing the babble and the sparkling breathlessness of Whitethorn House, the ‘Fantastic Four’ and their forced attempts at ‘being decadent’, (p. 472) Cassie realises that she wants Lexie’s past to be her present. In wanting to remove her gun and phone – as physical reminders of the fact that she is ‘performing’ – she wishes to remove herself from the reality of her own present, from Frank and Sam and the now blurred boundaries of the outside world. In re-drawing the boundaries of her own mind she wishes to confine herself within a set of boundaries which don’t essentially exist, but are in fact a pretence: where everything is ‘black and silver and shifting’, (p. 478) and where in her imaginings the night is ‘soft-edged and enchanted [...] as if none of the jagged edges had ever existed.’ (p. 476.) It is ultimately in opening up the obsession which Cassie has associated with Whitethorn House and what she wishes it to represent as a retreat away from the outside world and her present life and its assumed sense of historical fixity, that Tana French closes the possibility of this down. At the point at which Cassie completely gives herself over to the house and the life the housemates lead, and the point at which she loses all sense of her own identity, that it all comes crashing down around her. In her own unforced attempts at decadence in joining in with the impromptu party, it is at the moment in which she completely abandons her objective and throws off all sense of caution that Daniel discovers her true identity and the pretence of her identity collapses. However, her sense of identity still remains on the edge as she refuses to fully acknowledge the fact that her cover has been revealed to Frank – to do so would allow a fragment of reality to seep into the protected world of Whitethorn House. In choosing to hide this from Frank, she allows the layers of self-deception to thicken around her.

This concept is also reinforced by Frank's artful masquerade, which invokes the layers upon layers of masks and disguises throughout the novel. He has a legendary reputation for his skill in undercover operations, which he uses to great effect in the very aptly named Operation Mirror, as he pretends not to know Cassie by questioning her in the house as Lexie. However, the layering of deceit is developed as he questions Cassie in her performance of Lexie, and the manner in which he inverts his interrogation of her as a detective who has 'crossed over' – rather than Cassie – the detective masquerading as Lexie. He knows that Cassie is hiding something and interrogates her to the full extent so that she, along with the reader, questions who she actually is and what she is doing:

he was raging and he meant every word, to me, to Lexie, probably even he didn't know which. This girl: she bent reality around her like a lens bending light, she pleated it into so many flickering layers that you could never tell which one you were looking at. (p. 575.)

In infiltrating the layered world of secrets within Whitethorn House, Cassie fails to realise that in performing her role, Frank is also performing his and interrogating her own actions and motives. Frank knows that Cassie has been 'burned' by Daniel, but doesn't make this known to Cassie; he chooses to let her continue believing she is playing a role, while in reality he is watching out for the moment when she realises that she has actually crossed the borderlines into becoming the subject being watched. However, outside the boundaries of Whitethorn House and its space of liminality, Cassie is more susceptible to the real world, and after arguing with Frank in the police

station, becomes sharply aware of having crossed the line as her confused sense of identity is drawn more sharply into focus:

There were a thousand tiny phrases and glances and objects that had been scattered through this case like breadcrumbs, going over-looked and unconnected because I had wanted – or thought I wanted – to be Lexie Madison so much more than I wanted to solve her murder. (p. 542-3.)

Once this reality sets in, she finally realises that she has been deceiving herself and acknowledges: ‘the truth is more intricate and less attainable than I used to understand, a bright and illusive place reached by twisting back roads as often as by straight avenues.’ (p. 663.) Thus, to return to Carter once again, the extent of her ‘self-reinforcing’ illusion is made explicit.

In drawing upon the fixity that individuals place upon historical places, along with the fixity of a nostalgia for the past that has been argued should no longer exist in contemporary Ireland, French explores the dichotomy between the physical boundaries of contemporary place and the parallels between the boundaries of the mind to open up new spaces for the re-negotiation of identity. Place is intrinsically linked to a sense of identity, as such interpretations of both must be fluid and open. Tana French’s subtle examination of the nature of shifting individuals and shifting places is subtly manifested in the contrast between the natural and the artificial, the real and the unreal, and performance and reality in each of her three novels. Daniel remarks to Cassie in *The Likeness* that time works so hard for us, if only we let it –

possibly in tune with Seamus Deane's idea in a different context that we need to let our fixity with times past go in order for this to occur: 'Identity is here and now, not elsewhere and at another time [...] In a strange, but unattractive way, we will remember the future because we have forgotten our total past.'³³ Deane views nostalgia as 'tenderminded'; these novels are a refusal of such nostalgia in their assertion of toughness: tough characters trying to cope with the harsh realities of modernity amidst varying material sites in contemporary Ireland.

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CHAPTER SIX

Brian McGilloway's Inspector Devlin Series:

Borderlands; Gallows Lane; Bleed a River Deep; The Rising

Introduction

The Irish border runs for three hundred and sixty kilometres from Lough Foyle in the north-west to Carlingford Lough in the north east of Ireland. Created in 1921 the border separated six of the thirty two counties of Ireland into Northern Ireland and the Irish Free State. During the Troubles military checkpoints were installed at the main crossing points between the north and south, until 2005 when they were removed in accordance with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement.¹ From the early 1970s to the late 1990s, however, some areas of the borderland were notoriously dangerous places, often referred to as 'contact zones' or 'Bandit Country', particularly in the border area in south Armagh.² Another area with a particularly high security presence was the border region between Derry, the second largest city in Northern Ireland, and County Donegal. Just beyond this the town of Strabane in County Tyrone, Northern Ireland is linked to Lifford in County Donegal by the Lifford Bridge which spans the River Foyle. As a locational intersection, this point not only marks the physical border between the Republic and the North, but also operates symbolically as a spatial signifier of the unique-ness of this borderland region as an imaginative construct. Formed upon a sense of place as an intersection of varying influences, the abstract space of the borderlands allows for an exploration of the 'wider complex webs of social relations that bind places together',³ and is suggestive of more permeable

concepts of place and identity. It is within this borderland space that Brian McGilloway has located his crime series based on Inspector Benedict Devlin.

The continuing importance of place and issues of liminality – as previously discussed in relation to noir and metaphysical detective fiction – is maintained in McGilloway’s writing, but with a different focus due to his setting on the borderlands. In geographical terms, Lifford is situated on the border between the north and south of Ireland. However, the space within which the events of McGilloway’s series are anchored is much more multi-dimensional. It is in drawing upon both the physical and abstract manifestations of this unique setting in the borderland region, changing on a superficial level whilst maintaining an undercurrent of tension, which allows McGilloway to reinterpret the genre for what may be termed a twenty-first-century post-ceasefire era. Indeed, the concept of a border in such a post-ceasefire era is something of a misnomer in terms of its function as a physical construct. The checkpoints and official border crossing points reminiscent of the conflict between the north and south are no longer useful as the border has virtually become defunct. However, in more abstract terms the continued legacies of the place marked by the border cannot either be avoided or forgotten and the notion of what such borders represent in the minds of the inhabitants of this region is an issue which McGilloway subtly unfolds throughout his Inspector Devlin series.

Indeed, Elmer Kennedy-Andrews comments that the notion of place in Ireland is an evolving concept: ‘Places are formed not only out of layers of history and tradition

which become the bedrock of identity, but out of the horizontal connections which are developed with surrounding places.’⁴ In this sense, the borderlands may be perceived as an evolving area upon which new theories of place and spatiality can be determined, emphasising how traditional constructions of place based on principles of exclusion and territoriality are no longer valid. A sense of place which no longer connotes fixity and tradition, but is instead capable of generating new processes of fluidity and ‘new relations between rootedness and mobility, centre and periphery, global and local’,⁵ thus lies at the core of re-writing the literature of place in such contested areas as the Irish borderlands.

Through focusing on the borderland region, rather than restricting the location of his novels specifically to either the north or the south, McGilloway is able to therefore foster a greater sense of fluidity between the two areas. In their work on the social, economic and cultural dimensions of the Irish border, Catherine Nash and Bryonie Reid have suggested that exploring the impact of physically crossing the border in an everyday dimension, ‘may be the basis for new senses of identity and commonality that imaginatively cross the borders of old categories of religion, culture and political affiliation.’⁶ In translating such ‘border crossings’ into his work, McGilloway’s crime fiction provides a platform from which to explore ‘the conventional and reconfigured categories of identity shaped by borderland life.’⁷ Furthermore, drawing upon such fluidity provides a more positive and open foundation upon which new models of narrative can be built, reinterpreting the difficulties of this region with a post-conflict focus.

CHAPTER SIX

‘Fighting on the side of the angels’

Policing the border

In the opening paragraph of his first novel, *Borderlands*, McGilloway clearly establishes the ‘peculiarities’ of the Irish border region deriving its signification as a crossing point as he outlines the discovery of a young girl’s body lying ‘half in one country and half in another, in an area known as the borderlands.’ (p. 3). The primary signification of the location of this crime is to establish the collaboration between An Garda Síochána in the Republic and the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI). Through exploring jurisdictional issues and the crossover between the two forces, McGilloway therefore interrogates contemporary relations and issues concerned with policing the border region. McGilloway reinforces this in an interview, commenting that:

The Devlin books are set on the Irish border where I now live. Its choice was more because I wanted a setting that would reflect the borderlands of Devlin’s own personality, but also as a way of expressing the duality that marks the sense of community in Northern Ireland – two sides separated by an invisible line. I thought I could reflect the changes in the North by the changing relationship between the Guards in the Republic and the PSNI in the North.⁸

Indeed, the Police Service of Northern Ireland was established as part of the Good Friday Agreement's provision that policing arrangements in Northern Ireland should be reviewed, wherein the former Royal Ulster Constabulary became renamed as the PSNI in 2001. Cooperation between the two forces has been encouraged since the establishment of the PSNI, and McGilloway's re-fashioning of the police procedural genre as the medium through which he explores such collaboration is reflective of the way in which contemporary Irish writers are working through their own struggle to find adequate ways of representing literary interpretations of such changing connections.

Conventions of the 'police procedural' novel

As one of the most rapidly proliferating sub-genres of crime fiction, the 'police procedural' has continued to mutate in form since its development in the 1940s. Reacting to the desire of crime writers to produce more realistic crime stories, the genre essentially depicts a more realistic representation of crime than those typically reflected in the noir fiction of the 1930s, with the main focus based on the collective notion of police work, with more than one detective usually working on more than one case. George N. Dove has suggested three defining features of the police procedural: 'a mystery to be solved; a team of detectives assigned to the mystery; the use of regular police procedures and forensic science to solve the mystery.'⁹ The key distinguishing feature of the procedural is the notion of realism applied to the manner in which the detectives gather and identify evidence in order to solve the crime – the manner in which the detective slowly pieces together clues, with a focus on mental

acuity as opposed to action.¹⁰ However, whilst McGilloway's protagonist Inspector Benedict Devlin undoubtedly takes pride in 'Good old-fashioned police work', (*Bleed A River Deep*, p. 157) there is little obvious focus on mental acuity. Moreover, Devlin's professional outlook is unremarkably based on the premise: 'I make what difference I can in my own way.' (*Bleed A River Deep*, p. 116). This is one of the ways in which the Inspector Devlin series reflects McGilloway's re-interpretation of the police procedural genre in the unique setting of the borderland region.

In his study of 'The Police Novel', Peter Messent comments on Ian Rankin's tendency towards 'addressing major social issues' within a political and cultural context in his series of police novels based around Detective John Rebus.¹¹ Similarly, McGilloway grounds his narratives in contemporary social issues with important political and cultural ramifications such as fuel laundering, people-trafficking, hidden arms caches, prostitution and drugs, reminiscent of Messent's comments regarding Rankin's work: 'it asks the type of questions about the larger condition of society, its values and systems of authority.'¹² McGilloway's very subtle reflection of how global issues such as people-trafficking and fuel laundering are increasingly becoming local problems, therefore interrogates the contemporary social climate of Ireland in the wake of the Celtic Tiger, in parallel with a subtle exploration of new forms of violence in the post-ceasefire era. These issues lie at the core of the narrative in *Bleed A River Deep*, as McGilloway comments:

The Celtic Tiger attracted people from all over Europe to Ireland in a way that reminded me of the Irish immigration to America during the famine. This tied

in neatly with the idea of the gold rush and the gold mine opening in Donegal. I also liked this as a metaphor for the whole Celtic Tiger phenomenon. Like the boom years, the gold mine encapsulates excess and possessiveness and, ultimately, the vacuity at its center.¹³

As a reflection of the values, justice and nature of authority in contemporary Irish society, McGilloway stages these issues through an ‘institutional lens’ which focuses attention on the representation of the police as ‘state apparatus’ within the larger social network.¹⁴ This is particularly pertinent in terms of McGilloway’s reinterpretation of the ‘procedural’ in the context of his location on the borderlands in the post-ceasefire era and the way in which this allows insights into the collaborative nature of policing between both sides of the border and exposing the inner-workings of the mind of those who seek to uphold notions of morality and justice in contemporary communities. Furthermore, Devlin forms a bridge between vigilante rough-justice as seen in operation with Whitey McKelvey in *Borderlands*, and official justice, in the same way that he acts as a symbolic bridge between the two communities on both sides of the border and their respective institutions of law enforcement.

Thus, the vital and varying roles that McGilloway develops between Devlin and his community is reflective of McGilloway’s commitment to realism through the ways in which he attempts to work through an extensive exploration of the hierarchical nature of contemporary law enforcement in Ireland. To this end the Devlin series depicts the strong emphasis on teamwork implied by the procedural genre, as Devlin draws upon

help from his partner Caroline Williams in the first two novels, then PC Helen Gorman in the third novel, *Bleed A River Deep*. In these novels, Devlin is presented in a collective, but the focus is very much centred on him as the protagonist.

Furthermore, the difficulties of remaining within the boundaries of regulations that delineate the procedural hierarchies are presented through his continual feelings of being devalued by authority, marked by his ongoing clash with Harry Patterson. In a different context, Eddy Von Mueller suggests that the police procedural maintains a propensity for revealing such alienation from superior officers as part of its claim to realism. Combined with the alienation police officers often feel from the communities within which they are placed, this leads to them operating within a liminal space, which frequently leads to rogue or unruly behaviour.¹⁵ In this sense, the police procedural genre offers crucial insights into the nature of twenty-first century police work:

The procedural's personnel, from the beat cops to the dicks to the brass, are variously depicted as frustrated, over-worked and psychologically traumatized. Among TV cops, substance abuse is rampant (especially alcohol abuse, a major theme in police culture, police storytelling and the history of police reform), divorce, infidelity, questionable parenting routines, and acts of brutality or inappropriate use of lethal force not infrequent. Many police agents are contemptuous of civil and state authority, and are willing to bend or break the law in pursuit of justice...'¹⁶

While such representations focus on the emotionally traumatized police officer or detective leading a dysfunctional life, McGilloway's portrayal of Inspector Devlin

marks a definite shift in conventional paradigms of the genre. Above all else, he is depicted as ‘an outsider among the other men in the station.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 19.) He is presented as a unique protagonist within the police procedural genre: a wholesome family man, who faces the horrors of the world by day, then goes home to do the washing up and put his children to bed at night. Devlin does not conform to standard genre expectations of a police detective in a ‘protagonal collective’, exemplified in *Gallows Lane* as he pretends to smoke an unlit cigarette and sip at beer during station celebrations after a major drugs find, where he proclaims his disinterest in drinking, having ‘never really taken to drinking whiskey in the way expected of an Irishman.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 19.)

Most importantly for Devlin, despite establishing his unconformity to conventional expectations of police detectives in comparison to brash detectives like Patterson, his main concern is that, ‘it suited my family life just fine.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 19.) In an interview in the *Derry News* prior to the publication of *Gallows Lane*, McGilloway confirmed:

I wanted Devlin to reflect some of my own concerns - that he would have a young family, that he would be trying to juggle job and family, and everything else. I suppose the book is about Devlin trying to fulfil all his roles, trying to be a husband and a father and doing his job, trying to reconcile all those things.¹⁷

Indeed, Devlin is referred to as ‘an exception among policemen;’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 101) the antithesis of the more traditional loud, bold and often unthinking Harry

Patterson – Devlin’s equal as Inspector in the first two novels, but after going head to head against each other for promotion, his superior as superintendent thenceforth.

Devlin often feels a sense of unease and indecision, in contrast to Patterson’s arrogance and unthinking approach. In moments of conflict with Patterson, he chooses to walk away, uncertain of how to express his emotions. At times this inability to express himself leads him into uncertain moral decisions, as in *Bleed A River Deep*, his lack of verbal reasoning leads him into accepting an expensive gift from Weston, knowing that he ‘had accepted more than just a gift for my wife.’ (*Bleed A River Deep*, p. 13.)

In spite of his indecision, Devlin often lets his actions make up for his inability to know what to say, going beyond what may be expected of him in terms of comforting the family of victims or those he should be more intent on questioning. In *Gallows Lane*, as Mrs Webb, the wife of murdered Peter Webb, breaks down in tears, and unsure of what to say Devlin instead lays his hand on her shoulder, ‘rubbed her back lightly, and looked out of the windows towards where the earliest of the apples were starting to fill out on the trees in their orchard.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 139.) In another case in *Bleed A River Deep*, Devlin comforts Natalia, a young woman whose husband was shot during a fake armed robbery, by kissing her on the cheek and promising that he won’t let the gang responsible for smuggling her and her husband into the country hurt her. His sense of guilt is taken to further extremes as he brings Natalia home to stay in his house: ‘I thought of knocking and checking on her, but there was nothing I could say to her, no words of comfort that would mean anything, or express the sorrow and guilt I felt at what had befallen her.’ (*Bleed A River Deep*, p. 265.) His

indecision is aptly summed up by his wife as he frequently turns to her for guidance on what he should do. Debbie's reaction of 'Do what you always do, Ben. Drift!' (*Gallows Lane*, p. 79) not only reinforces Devlin's unconventional approach to police work, but also outlines her frustrations of his career impeding on their family life as even she is frustrated at his over zealous honesty: 'You're not the only honest policeman in the world, Ben – stop acting the martyr' (*Gallows Lane*, p. 150). Indeed, Devlin's tortuous approach to remain unstoppable in his personal mission to protect his family and community is given most prominence as Debbie attempts to contextualise his almost irrational need to account for everyone else's actions: 'You're not a judge, Ben. You're a policeman and a father and a husband, and a man. Stop trying to be more than that.' (*Gallows Lane*, p. 160.) In essence, this is the central dilemma around which Devlin's life revolves – trying to find, and often failing to gain a sense of equilibrium between the varying and competing aspects of his life; in balancing what is expected of him against the very high parameters of what he expects of himself. In a similar conversation in *Bleed A River Deep*, Debbie attempts to contextualise her husband's inner struggles yet again: 'You can't change the world [...] You can only make your little corner of it a nicer place to live.' (*Bleed A River Deep*, p. 120.) Her comments thus emphasise both the urgency and the futility of Devlin's quest to be all things to all people: to his family, to his work colleagues and essentially, to the victims for whom he is trying to find justice.

Driven by a need for justice

The Inspector Devlin series is thus essentially concerned with issues of morality and legitimacy; a clear sense of being driven by a need for justice lies at the heart of his

actions: ‘What I was doing was not for promotion but to catch someone who had to be caught. Because that was what justice demanded.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 184). In contrast to Patterson who manipulates a drugs-find in *Gallows Lane* to aid his own promotion prospects, Devlin plants evidence in Declan O’Kane’s car to enable further investigation. ‘I still felt a need for justice – for something.’ (*Borderlands*, p. 269). McGilloway’s representation of Devlin reflects the difficulties associated with these issues of legitimacy and morality in his presentation as a policeman who struggles with his own sense of morality, whilst trying to enforce the law against those who don’t; as a man who always wants to do what he believes is best for others, but often fails in doing so. McGilloway reinforces this contrast as Devlin repeatedly articulates to his wife: ‘I need to know I’ve done the right thing.’ (*Bleed A River Deep*, p. 48.) However, there is a clear focus on this sense of failure throughout the series as Devlin feels a personal sense of recrimination when justice is not achieved to the extent that he would like:

‘Quietly, I apologised to Angela Cashell and Terry Boyle; perhaps the wind would carry my words to them. Yet neither the thought nor the words brought any respite from my feeling of failure.’ (*Borderlands*, 271.)

His reaction above thus points to the way in which his moral purpose towards his job strongly linked with his sense of faith and need to protect his family and the wider community. His increasing sense of failure towards both is intertwined with his Catholicism: ‘The Catholic in me needed to be punished and, perhaps, now I could forgive myself.’ (*Borderlands*, p. 265.) In *Gallows Lane*, Devlin’s was the only

tribute to a man named James Kerr, for whom he felt partly responsible after failing to escort him out of the area as he had been instructed to do by his superintendent. After laying flowers at the base of the tree from which he had been crucified, Devlin ‘prayed quietly for the repose of James’s soul, and for forgiveness for the mess I had made of all the cases I had unsuccessfully juggled over the past weeks.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 208.) His ongoing sense of failure is repeatedly paralleled by his need to continue in his mission, thus exposing a never-ending cycle of futility, which is fuelled by a belief that what he does makes a difference. These notions of justice and forgiveness, both lawful and divine, are reflected in his conversation with Reverend Bardwell, after Bardwell confesses to murdering Danny McLaughlin to seek justice for James Kerr:

‘Are you a believer, Inspector?’ Bardwell asked.

‘I have to be, Reverend. I have to believe that what I do, somehow, makes things better.’

‘Fighting on the side of the angels,’ he said, laughing without humour. (*Gallows Lane*, p. 301.)

The intermediary space between the binarisms of morality and the harsh realities of everyday life

In essence, Devlin’s comments regarding his faith here underpin what lies at the heart of his ‘mission’. In some ways his faith acts as a cushion in the intermediary space between the binarisms of his morality and commitment to his family life at one

extreme and the legitimacies associated with the harsh realities of everyday life in the brutalities encountered in his professional life. In *Gallows Lane*, he comments to Reverend Bardwell that ‘My faith is private’, (*Gallows Lane*, p. 101) yet he frequently refers to the occasions that he attends mass and prays for the victims of the crimes he is investigating, and when occasion demands, for the perpetrators themselves. This is exemplified by his reaction to Danny McLaughlin’s murder in *Gallows Lane*, by his victim’s father: ‘And despite his crimes, I mourned his death, and both its manner and the man responsible for it.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 293.) Without thinking, Devlin also offers an Act of Contrition for the soul of a known drugs dealer, Lorcan Hutton, when he discovers his body in the Abbey graveyard in *The Rising*. Moreover, he openly admits to finding a sense of catharsis in speaking of his dilemmas to his wife Debbie. In *Borderlands*, Devlin makes this link explicit: ‘As I spoke I felt the familiar catharsis of confession and began to feel a little better – though aware that reconciliation requires penance and reparation as well as simple admission of guilt.’ (*Borderlands*, p. 142.) Devlin draws heavily upon his Catholicism throughout the series; it comforts him on a personal level and drives him on professionally. However McGilloway presents it very discreetly, utilising Jim Hendry’s jocular comments regarding ‘papist idolatry’ and incense at Martin Kielty’s funeral in *The Rising* (p. 237) to somewhat neutralise the representation of Devlin’s Catholicism throughout the series. In doing so, McGilloway is presenting his own political stance, akin to his protagonist, whose mission is encapsulated by Reverend Bardwell’s comments above; he is on many levels ‘Fighting on the side of the angels,’ albeit in a rather ambiguous manner on some occasions.

The moral ambiguity of his character is thus developed as the series progresses. Initially in *Borderlands*, Devlin feels torn between crossing the boundaries of his professional integrity in acting violently towards Whitey McKelvey after he bit his hand, in acknowledging that ‘my shame at hitting the boy had been equalled by the satisfaction I had felt in doing so.’ (*Borderlands*, 113.) However, despite his sense of guilt, when it comes to being told by his superintendent to ensure that the evidence available pointed towards implicating McKelvey, despite trying to ignore the moral implications of what he was doing, Devlin’s sense of right and wrong cannot be disputed when he realises that McKelvey cannot reasonably be incriminate for Angela Cashell’s murder: ‘Something cold shivered down my spine and settled deep inside me, causing me to shake involuntarily.’ (*Borderlands*, p. 150.) On another occasion he goes a step too far when remonstrating against Johnny Cashell in front of his wife Sadie and eldest daughter Christine, for his complicity in the murder of his daughter, Angela. He feels ashamed at speaking so forthrightly as soon as he has finished, and despite apologising immediately recognises that he cannot undo the damage and take his words back. Instead he engages in another internal monologue questioning his moral boundaries:

We may talk of equality and serving the community, but sometimes, despite ourselves, we treat people badly because we can, because we tell ourselves that we do it in the name of justice, or virtue, or whatever excuse we use to hide the fact that we want to hurt someone, or get at them in any way we can to compensate for their total lack of respect for our job and all that we have sacrificed to do it. (*Borderlands*, p. 235.)

Devlin frequently questions the futility of his job, increasing in parallel to the intensity with which he crosses his own professional boundaries. However, the positive reinforcement of his collaboration with his counterpart in the North, Inspector Jim Hendry allows McGilloway to explore issues of power sharing and jurisdictional queries in a more dispassionate manner through the recognition of the fact that it 'isn't about turf; it's about dealing with people like we're all part of the same species.'

(Bleed A River Deep, p. 181.)

Furthermore, frustrations associated with jurisdictional issues are examined in more depth as Devlin often approaches witnesses without authority - choosing to cross professional boundaries on many occasions to follow up leads. In *Bleed A River Deep* the usually harmonious relationship between the PSNI and the Gardaí is tarnished, again due to Devlin's personal failures rather than as representative of the Gardaí as an institution. In failing to seek permission to speak to witnesses in the North before approaching them and withholding information about the house of illegal immigrants where Natalia lives, leads to the house being burned and the immigrants disappearing. In presenting a realistic portrayal of relationships between the two with naturally inherent antagonisms between in terms of jurisdiction, the greater emphasis is on promoting the positive relationship between the two, as Devlin acknowledges in *Borderlands*:

Some policemen on both sides of the border could be sticky about it, but generally we all knew that we were chasing the same people. The bad old days,

when collusion and suspicion had prohibited any contact, were passing, if not yet past. (*Borderlands*, p. 80.)

The ‘absent presence’ of the Troubles

Through subtly examining the nature of the relationship between An Garda and the PSNI, McGilloway is constantly reminding us of the complexities of this region and the difficulties of open collaboration, as articulated by Jim Hendry: ‘Three years ago, I’d have got in real trouble for what I’m telling you; understand that.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 133.) Hendry’s comments here act as a covert reminder of what Neal Alexander has referred to as the ‘absent presence’ of the Troubles.¹⁸ Significantly, McGilloway draws attention indirectly to the importance of what is not said about the Troubles – it is never mentioned directly, yet wider narratives surrounding its implications are gestured at in each of the novels. In *Borderlands* Devlin refers to people ‘disappeared’ by the IRA; as part of his investigation he uncovers information about the way in which informers or people who spoke out against the IRA were tortured and their bodies dumped, (p. 200) while in *Gallows Lane*, Reverend Bardwell outlines how he was formerly imprisoned for committing a sectarian murder (p. 113).

In subtly referring to the ways in which events in the novels are inadvertently framed by the Troubles, McGilloway refers to what Alexander has outlined as an ‘unsettling awareness of the past’s insistence upon the present.’¹⁹ McGilloway reminds us of one of the threats ‘commonly associated with the paramilitaries during the height of the

Troubles’, when Elena McEvoy reveals that Martin Kielty was sent a mass card with a bullet in it. Devlin himself had also received a similar threat in *Gallows Lane*. (*The Rising*, p. 30). Hendry provides photographs and background information on the anti-drugs organization named The Rising, attempting to ‘deal’ with the drugs problem in communities through punishment beatings of local dealers, as well as one ‘failed’ shooting attempt: ‘All three are ex-paramilitaries. All three have done time for murder. All are hard-liners pissed at the political process. Fed up with being told they had to stand down, the war was over.’ (*The Rising*, p. 33). Significantly, there is a deliberate sense of neutrality surrounding McGilloway’s use of the term ‘paramilitaries’, creating an ambiguity around which ‘side’ the paramilitaries were from. Rory Nicell explains to Devlin that: ‘The borderlands have been left fairly much to their own devices. I think most of the big pushers didn’t want to piss off the paramilitaries who were running the trade in the North and over the border for years.’ (*The Rising*, p. 149-150). Similarly, while some subsidiary characters do reveal direct connections to political affiliations, they are presented negatively. Devlin repeatedly frames his introduction of the owner of the shop in Lifford, Christy Ward, by his Republican connections reflecting that he ‘had been on the Bloody Sunday march in Derry in 1972’. (*The Rising*, p. 172). Significantly, Christy’s remarks to Devlin in *The Rising* that the photographs sensationalising police brutality in the papers reminds him of ‘the bad old days’ reinforces his earlier framing of Christy’s involvement in the Republican movement in the seventies, but crucially emphasises that events surrounding Bloody Sunday ‘served to sicken Christy to the extent that he packed up and moved into Donegal.’ (*Gallows Lane*, p. 75.) Despite Devlin pointing out that the situations are not equivalent, Christy’s reply: ‘No, but the consequences are always the same [...] I’m surprised you don’t see that’, (*The Rising*, p. 174), resonates with

Danine Farquharson and Sean Farrell's comments in another context of the propensity for Northern Irish novels to 'speak about that which is deemed to be silent, or that which lingers in shadow.'²⁰ McGilloway's series of crime novels thus crucially interrogate notions of the inability of this locale to forget events which shaped its identity and are inextricably bound up with a consideration of the layering of history and the extent to which 'the imprint of the recent past, of "ancestral", communal and family memory, is still clearly visible'.²¹

Re-shaping the contours of literature: a preoccupation with domestic and family issues

Commenting in a different context with regard to the resilience of Northern Irish poets and their sustaining ability to move forwards into the new millennium in the light of the altered social and political conditions in this region since the ceasefires, Michael Parker is hopeful that:

A new generation of writers has emerged, one which is beginning to re-shape the contours of Northern Irish literature.²² It is such a determination to focus on domestic and family concerns which features so prominently in McGilloway's crime writing, which enables him to cross borders on another level and push the parameters of the genre progressively outwards. The extent to which this re-visioning of the position of the family within post-Troubles contemporary Irish writing is reflected in the Devlin series will thus be further explored.

The Irish Constitution of 1937 clearly outlines the importance of the family as a key stabilising unit in Irish society, as stated in Article 41.1.1° of the Constitution: "The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law", and guarantees its protection by the state.²³ Furthermore, Article 41.2 of the 1937 Constitution also includes the provision that: 'the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.' These provisions are central to McGilloway's exploration of morality and stability in the post-Troubles context of the borderland region. Crucially, the family is the lens through which he presents his model of stability as representative of the regions social consciousness. It is through exposing the inner concerns surrounding issues of morality and stability in Inspector Benedict Devlin that enables an examination of the impact of post-Troubles issues on family life. As Aaron Kelly has pointed out in his own exploration of the Northern Irish thriller, by projecting the non-representation of the Troubles onto the varying representations of the family in contemporary Ireland, he conducts a subtle interrogation of the 'fixities of the status quo' in Northern Ireland through the Inspector Devlin series.²⁴ Indeed, Kelly suggests that the family is a 'paradigmatic organizational unit in reproducing order, authority, and continuity.'²⁵ This resonates with McGilloway's presentation of Devlin as provider and protector – seeking to protect his family and community, 'making the world a safer place for my children' (*The Rising*, p. 352), which in turn is reflective of the Constitution's recognition of the family as a 'fundamental unit group of society. Throughout the series, Devlin's family is presented as a form of what Kelly refers to as an 'organic family'.

This is reinforced at the beginning of *Borderlands* as Devlin foregrounds the importance of family life. This is done primarily *through* drawing parallels between his own form of ‘organic’ family life in which he is protector of his wife and children securely within his private domestic sphere, and the somewhat futile attempts he makes to protect those of the wider community in the public sphere. A large amount of narrative throughout series is spent on outlining daily intricacies of Devlin’s family life – deliberately evoking a sense of normality through minutiae of everyday life in conversations with his wife, putting children to bed, watching television – in contrast to larger issues of immigration, drugs, greed and violence encountered through work. In *Borderlands* this contrast is primarily presented through the Cashell family and his attempts to seek justice for the death of their daughter Angela. Devlin attempts to reconcile the duality of these two models of family life to some degree by relating to Johnny Cashell ‘as a father’, but his inarticulacy reflects the futility of his attempts: ‘I could not deprive him of his assumption that his daughter had retained some vestige of dignity in death. I opened my mouth to speak, but the air between us was brittle and sharp with the scent of decaying leaves and I could think of nothing adequate to say.’ (*Borderlands*, p. 16-17). The stark contrast in Devlin’s family life and that of the ruptured family life of the Cashell’s is highlighted as Devlin and his family pray for the safety of their basset-hound, alongside prayers from the entire congregation for the ‘repose of the soul of Angela Cashell and for comfort for her family in their tragedy.’ (*Borderlands*, p. 23).

Indeed, throughout the novel, Frank the basset-hound becomes a metaphor for Devlin's desire to protect his family and the wider community from the wild cat which has begun to terrorize livestock around the borderlands. As he contemplates the possibility of having to put Frank down to calm claims that he is to blame for wild cat's hunting, he comes face to face with it as it eats freely from his pets food bowl at the bottom of his garden. That the wild cat is not only invading his domestic sphere, but does so freely as it 'looked at me with disdain' marks Devlin's inability to reconcile the public and the private spheres of his quest to protect, subtly linked to the increasing futility that he feels towards his role as protector. At the end of the novel as he contemplates that the wild cat 'hunted freely both in the North and the Republic, eluding naturalist and hunter alike, slaughtering livestock with impunity, making the borderland its own.' (*Borderlands*, p. 300). Devlin's thoughts reflect his own inability to reconcile the varying tensions within his own life which elude his control. This tendency to reflect upon his feelings towards his family life is repeated at the end of each of his novels with an increasing sense of his inability to protect them fully from the wider world outside the domestic sphere within which he believes he is in control, or from the passing of time as they grow up and their relationship changes as they become more susceptible to influences from the public domain outside his control. Indeed he closes *Gallows Lane* with a more positive reflection on the notion that his children are growing up, revelling in his son's first words being 'Daddy': 'On such small victories must the future be built.' (*Gallows Lane*, p. 321). However, earlier in this novel marks Devlin's pre-occupation with his daughter Penny growing up, a melancholy precipitated by the nature of the case he is investigating being centred around the assault of young women and teenage girls. The realisation that Penny is half the age of one of the victim's, Rebecca Purdy, forces him to acknowledge the

reality of the society outside of the domestic sphere. In conversation with Rebecca's father, Devlin refers to his children as 'Still only infants, really', (*Gallows Lane*, p. 121), highlighting his reluctance to accept their growing up. Significantly, it is this parallel between his desire to protect and the acceptance of his inability to do so fully which fuels the dichotomy sustained between the mission he believes is at the centre of his job and the increasing sense of futility he feels towards his job. His speech to Mr Purdy after he confesses to killing the man who attacked his daughter encompasses Devlin's sentiments towards his daughter and the importance of family:

If it happened to her, I would hold her, and promise her that everything would be alright. I'd do everything in my power to let her know that it wasn't her fault and that, no matter what, I would always love her with my entire heart. And I would never leave her without my support and my love. (*Gallows Lane*, p. 295).

That this is such an emotive speech from a man who finds it very difficult to express his thoughts or emotions on other occasions points to the significance of the father-daughter relationship that is highlighted throughout the series.

This is explored further in *Bleed A River Deep*, as the novel continues to explore the importance of familial relationships in contemporary society through examining varying forms of rupturing or fractured families. In this novel McGilloway juxtaposes the necessity of justice instigated upon a character involved in various forms of criminal activity, against the effects of his imprisonment upon his family. In finally seeing Vincent Morrison brought to justice for the use of illegal fuel in his

transportation business, Devlin attends his court case. Despite his involvement in people-trafficking from Europe, Morrison could only be successfully prosecuted for fuel-smuggling and evasion of duty. McGilloway juxtaposes the notion of Devlin witnessing Morrison being brought to justice alongside Morrison being surrounded by his family:

The youngest child, a girl, was sobbing uncontrollably. Her father squatted down to her level and I could hear him speaking to her in a placatory manner [...]

He said something to his wife then broke away from his family to approach me. His daughter hugged his leg, but he disentangled himself from her and walked over.

‘Here to gloat?’ he asked, lighting a smoke.

‘Here to see you get what you deserve,’ I said. I was aware of his wife watching me with open hostility. The elder child, a boy, scraped the toe of his shoe along the edge of the kerb, his hands in his pockets. (*Bleed A River Deep*, p. 288-289.)

As Morrison is led away, his son turns to stare angrily at Devlin before starting to cry for his father. At the point of justice, Devlin focuses on the importance of family. His own family are the reason he ultimately pursues criminals such as Morrison to seek justice and make his community a safer place for them, yet he obviously considers the effects of Morrison’s forced absence on his family, particularly his son. In paralleling the effects of upholding justice, against those who defy it, the consequences upon how easily family unity is fractured becomes clear.

In *The Rising*, the varying nature of familial relationships is interrogated through the way in which McGilloway parallels the relationship he has with his daughter Penny with that of his adversary Vincent Morrison and his own son John. The growing friendship between the two teenagers John and Penny provides a platform from which McGilloway can present varying forms of familial relationship. Another of these forms is explored in *The Rising*, based on Devlin's response to Patterson's comments regarding Martin Kielty being a 'scumbag'. While Devlin believes that he didn't deserve to die, his sympathies lie more with Kielty's young daughter: 'He may well have been, Harry, but his daughter will grow up without her father. Someone needs to answer for that.' (*The Rising*, p. 93). Furthermore, when attending his funeral it is the priest's comments relating to the loss that will be felt by Kielty's mother, and the love that Kielty had for his own child which frames the significance of family in this context. Indeed, the impact of the Kielty case affects Devlin quite significantly as it reinforces the importance of the stable family life that he has, in contrast to the fractured sense of family he observes in the lives of so many of the criminals he encounters. In making an effort to spend some time with them he realizes how important they are to him, but also: 'It struck me again that my family, even my dog, had grown older without my noticing. The intervening time was composed of moments I knew I had lost and could never reclaim.' (*The Rising*, p. 209).

In essence, at the heart of Devlin's moral purpose lies the integrity with which he must face his family: 'it was all that the man might need to return to his family, to face his children with a sense of dignity. That is, perhaps, the best for which any of us

may aim.’ (*Bleed A River Deep*, p. 295.) In this sense, McGilloway utilises his narrative to present what Elmer Kennedy-Andrews refers to in a different context as a ‘realistic reaffirmation of traditional humanistic values’, carefully focused on ‘the ties of family and community’.²⁶ Devlin is defined by his identity as a family man in juxtaposition to his role as community policeman. In both roles he seeks to protect and ‘restore’, but the most profound determinate of his character is the manner in which he utilises the platform of his family life to reinterpret what Kennedy-Andrews refers to as the ‘private, feminised realm of domesticity.’²⁷

In foregrounding the importance and necessity of his wife’s opinion in parallel to his repeated indecision, Devlin references what Kennedy-Andrews refers to as a ‘reworking of the traditional nationalist trope, which understands the root of the Troubles in terms of a struggle between a mythic motherland and a historical, imperial masculinity.’²⁸ Throughout the series women are presented as strong individuals beyond the confines of their maternal function, carrying the burden of the inadequacies of their husbands and having to deal with the problems which arise out of their inadequacies. Devlin’s wife Debbie is central to this presentation of the role of women within the family, as well as proving key to the development of Devlin’s character as a whole. Clearly McGilloway does situate her in a traditional manner at the heart of her family as referenced by the provision in the Irish Constitution as previously mentioned. Debbie is framed by her role within the family, very rarely referred to outside its boundaries and then only with reference to activities central to her familial role as wife and mother. She is repeatedly referred to only in tandem with the domestic duties she carries out: washing up, cooking and attending to her

children's needs. However, alongside this she is projected as crucial to Devlin's role as she guides and informs his actions outside the boundaries of the domestic sphere, dismissing his indecision and challenging his bad decisions, and in this sense affords a contemporary deviation from the manner in which her own role within the home positively supports the common good of the wider community as referenced in the Constitution.

In a broader exploration of this issue, McGilloway parallels the seemingly 'organic' nature of Devlin's family with various models of rupturing family such as the Cashell's and McKelvey's in *Borderlands*, and Vincent Morrison's family in *Bleed A River Deep* and *The Rising*. Within each of these family representations there is an element of criminality, but at the heart of each lies a strong emphasis on the effects of this criminality on family. Significantly, it is the strong female mother figures who continue to hold their families together in attempting shield their children from bearing the brunt of their father's crimes: 'It's not my daddy's fault either,' he said, his face smeared with tears. 'Please don't put my daddy in jail again.' (*The Rising*, p. 315). Moreover, other key female characters in the novel are presented as individuals with established, legitimate roles outside the home in the community. Councillor Miriam Powell, Garda Helen Gorman and Sergeant Caroline Williams are projected as alternatives to conventional female roles and reductive versions of identity, intimating another form of 'border crossing' which envisions what Kennedy-Andrews refers to as 'new Northern identities construed in terms of hybridity and transformation.'²⁹

Crossing borders: the regenerative capacity of contemporary narratives of place

Significantly then, the reinterpretation of the realm of domesticity is intertwined with the central premise of the Devlin series: can places forget their history? Situating his narrative in the locale of an important geographical border crossing is symbolically suggestive of other boundaries being crossed in the domestic sphere. In re-mapping the traditional detective role in such a multi-levelled manner personally, professionally and morally, McGilloway explores new forms of violence and its detection within this specific locale and its effects on small communities and their families. Therefore in focusing on the position of the family within a post-Troubles context allows, as Neal Alexander points out, the ‘political and historical ramifications of his context to inform, but not obscure, the central concerns of the narrative.’³⁰ In re-working the traditional representation of families by projecting both conventional and alternative family structures, alongside an interrogation of the roles of women implicit within this, McGilloway significantly offers an antidote to the dominant tendency to present the family with traditional personifications of motherhood at the centre as ‘emblematic of the nation’.³¹ As an alternative, McGilloway’s unconventional focus for his police procedural series is testament to the regenerative capacity of contemporary narratives of place to ‘re-inscribe the family as a legitimate site for exploration of conflict as well as stability.’³² Contemporary narratives which address family issues as dramatic concerns can therefore address the layering of history and the political struggle at the core of such locales as the borderland region. Re-centring the focus on people and communities and their potential for multi-levelled regeneration is essential.

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PART THREE

TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY IRISH DIASPORIC FICTION

CHAPTER SEVEN

Brooklyn by Colm Tóibín

Introduction

Colm Tóibín's novel *Brooklyn* offers another exploration of the position of the family in contemporary writing, in addition to ideas already discussed in relation to Brian McGilloway's novels in the previous chapter. As with McGilloway's work, Tóibín clearly recognises the importance of family and emphasises its stabilising effect in the community and the wider Irish society, albeit from a heteronormative approach. Similar to McGilloway, Tóibín also explores notions of morality and stability, with a clear gendered focus on the role of women as the stabilising force in Irish community life in 1950s Ireland. This gendered presentation of the role of women as the stabilising force in the community and wider notions of home and the relationship with ideas of work and family is the platform from which Tóibín's novel will be examined. While such a heteronormative approach may be considered problematic, and a wider feminist critical framework could have been utilised to analyse Tóibín's work, this approach does not fall within the scope of this thesis.

Crucially, Tóibín situates his novel in the 1950s; at a point at which 'home' was a very prominent concern in almost every Irish community. As Diarmaid Ferriter points out, 'home life' was central to the social-welfare system and pivoted on the 'idea of the dependent wife and the breadwinner husband.'¹ This ideology is firmly rooted in the Irish Constitution of 1937, which clearly outlines the importance of the family as a key stabilising unit in Irish

society. Article 41.1.1° of the Constitution outlines that: ‘The State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society, and as a moral institution possessing inalienable and imprescriptible rights, antecedent and superior to all positive law’, and guarantees its protection by the state.² Furthermore, Article 41.2 of the 1937 Constitution also includes the provision that: ‘the State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved.’ It is the disparity between the importance which the state places upon the role of women in society, and the social and economic conditions within Ireland which prevented them from fulfilling this role, which Tóibín directly references in contextualising *Brooklyn* in 1950s Ireland. Migration at this time was not only perceived as a threat to this conservative notion of the family, but reduced many Irish families comprised only of women as the ones left behind at home to carry on, whilst male siblings emigrated to England or America to find work and send money home. Significantly, Ferriter points out that only 2.5 per cent of married Irish women were classified as employed, whereas in Britain the figure was 25 per cent.³ Through focusing the novel’s concerns on the relationships and experiences of these women left behind, their experiences in the workplace, as well as in Eilis’s case, imagining the experience of a single migrant’s experience, Tóibín uses these communities of women, both in Ireland and their diasporic counterparts in Brooklyn, to explore notions of gender, silence and liberty as he contests expected models of the Irish diaspora.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Home and Return in Colm Tóibín's *Brooklyn*⁴

"I will feel lost/unhappy and at home".⁵

Contesting traditional notions of diaspora

In his essay, 'Tóibín and Irish History', Roy Foster comments on Tóibín's propensity towards reflecting changes in Irish history in an unconventional manner, pointing to the manner in which his writing is 'fractured through the prisms of locale and memory.'⁶ In pivoting his novel around Eilis Lacey's home town of Enniscorthy and intertwining it with her migrant's experience of Brooklyn, Tóibín twists the expectations of a traditional novel of emigration by presenting a narrative which, at its core, does not maintain its primary focus on the Irish diaspora. Eilis Lacey leaves Enniscorthy as an individual with expectations of finding a home community in Brooklyn. However, rather than finding diaspora, she finds Brooklyn. Through deliberately juxtaposing her experiences and expectations of both 'home' and Brooklyn, and by presenting Eilis as a marginal character who chooses her individualism above the community, and ultimately her own freedom rather than her obligations at home, Tóibín is thus contesting traditional notions of diaspora.

The exploration of home in the novel is thus a multi-levelled one. It is dissected primarily through Eilis and her varying experience of what home means. The concept of ‘home’ primarily connotes the notion of belonging to a particular place: of comfort, shelter and protection. However, the word ‘home’ also points towards those abstract spaces wherein the idea of having a place to belong to is internally negotiated and intrinsically bound up with notions of self-identity. Rosemary Marangoly George states while ‘home’ is usually represented in the literary imagination as ‘fixed, rooted, stable’, as a concept it actually ‘moves along several axes’.⁷ Thus, in situating itself in between the ‘realities and the idealizations’ of the varying dimensions around which notions of home are established, George suggests that the politics of location are intrinsically bound up with attempting to determine ‘home’, indicating that location:

suggests the variable nature of both “the home” and “the self,” for both are negotiated stances whose shapes are entirely ruled by the site from which they are defined.

Locations are positions from which distance and difference are formulated and homes are made snug.⁸

Negotiating the ambiguity between rhetoric and reality

In this manner, it is in the locational intersection between the sense of belonging to a physical place, and the more abstract notion of space which is intrinsically bound up with notions of ‘the self’, in which Tóibín situates Eilis Lacey and her struggle to negotiate what or where

‘home’ means to her in *Brooklyn*. From the outset, her concept of home is established as a continuing negotiation between her sense of belonging to her home town and her sense of self-identity, neither of which is settled. When at home in Enniscorthy, she is presented in between her mother as a matriarchal figure and her sister Rose as the dominant breadwinner in their home. Indeed, her presentation in the novel is framed through these two women and her experiences are repeatedly connected back to them as she is positioned in between them, both physically and in an abstract sense, reflecting the centrality of her own configuration of ‘home’. As the novel opens, one of the first things Eilis comments on is Rose crossing the street ‘from sunlight into shade’ (p. 3). With this comment, Tóibín is very subtly marking another of his primary themes – Eilis’s own moral trajectory throughout the novel, in parallel to that of her sister. Tóibín presents this through intertwining these rather grand concerns with the more superficial preoccupation with physical appearance. Straight away, Eilis’s preoccupation with her sister’s appearance is established as she ‘looked on silently’ as Rose checked her appearance in the hallway before going out. Tóibín notes that ‘Eilis was proud of her sister, of how much care she put into her appearance and how much care she put into whom she mixed with in the town and the golf club.’ (p. 11). Tóibín contrasts the values of Eilis with the values that Rose holds in providing for Eilis and her mother. Furthermore, she is constantly concerned about Rose’s perception of her own appearance and her own lack of glamour compared to Rose. Indeed, in repeatedly allowing Eilis to give voice to her observations regarding appearance, whilst ensuring that she keeps her deeper, more morally-focused thoughts to herself, Tóibín positions Eilis in between these superficial notions of appearance and the reality of her moral concerns. Much of what is presented about Eilis is projected through her own negotiation of her sense of self in comparison to Rose, against the background of her home in Enniscorthy. In each of these respects, Tóibín presents Eilis as unsettled. He subtly presents her as a superficial character, in terms of her status in the house

in comparison to her older sister who provides financial stability for the family, her lack of glamour in comparison to Rose, as well as her lack of ambition, again in comparison to Rose, who has a very respectable blue collar job. While Eilis does have aspirations to improve her employment prospects by completing a Bookkeeping course, the fact that her only chance of employment in Enniscorthy is to work one day a week on a Sunday in a grocery shop reveals the reality of her prospects for social mobility. In contrasting the varying experiences of employment opportunities which these two women have available to them in their home town, alongside the economic dependency placed on them by their mother with whom they still live, Tóibín very subtly highlights the ambiguity in the government's ideology of establishing women as the stabilising force in Irish society. Referencing this in the constitution, yet not accepting that they have to sell their labour abroad through emigration, predominantly male emigration, prevents women from fulfilling their prescribed role 'within the home' through their need to work. Tóibín links concerns regarding the contradiction between the ideological and the economic in his presentation of the manner in which these women negotiate this intrinsic ambiguity between rhetoric and reality.

Tóibín presents Rose as a woman who does negotiate the ambiguous role of women in Irish society, by bridging the gap between the ideological and the economic. Represented as heading towards middle class, she maintains a white collar occupation in a respected establishment in Enniscorthy. In the absence of any male presence in the family due primarily to her brothers' emigration to England, she is presented as the male of the family in holding down a job and financially supporting Eilis and her mother: 'As their mother's pension was small, they depended on Rose, who worked in the office of Davis's Mills; her wages paid for

most of their needs.’ (p. 10) Rose is presented as clearly working against the social prejudice of the role of women as legislated in the Irish Constitution. Furthermore, Rose adopts a protective and supportive role as head of the family, leaving Eilis money to go out, advising her on her appearance, and being economical with her money and frugal with her spending in the sales as she goes to Dublin to shop for clothes each January and August. Eilis comments how at thirty, most of Rose’s friends were now married, but that Rose remained single: ‘she often remarked that she had a much better life than many of her former schoolmates who were to be seen pushing prams through the streets.’ (p.11.) In presenting Rose as having such a dominant role in the running of the family, reflects the importance Tóibín places upon alternative roles. Rose in essence occupies the space that one of her brothers would; in this off-centre position Tóibín highlights the social prejudices that women faced at this point. His presentation of Rose as hard-working and generous, as well as glamorous and unselfish reflects the fondness he retains for marginalised characters. In recognising the unselfish way in which she provides for the family and how she sacrifices her life to stay in Enniscorthy and look after their mother to allow Eilis a new life in America, highlights the varying ways in which women had to negotiate their pivotal role in Irish society in the context of economic and ideological ambiguity.

An unsettled experience of home

In contrast to Rose, Tóibín presents Eilis’s negotiation of the gap between ideology and reality as more unsuccessful. She is presented in a completely different manner to Rose and framed by different contexts: as she becomes a part of the working community in her home

town of Enniscorthy; on a wider social level through her interaction with her close friends and indirectly, her perceptions of home. None of these contexts provides a happy resolution for Eilis in terms of fitting in or fulfilling the role that is expected of her. Eilis is presented as a loyal friend, particularly when she is concerned about Nancy at the dance, reluctant to leave her until she has danced with George and in a position to slip out quietly when Nancy is happy. The fact that Eilis has little regard for what she wears to the dance, unlike Nancy, reinforces her ambivalence towards external appearances. Tóibín presents her as intelligent on a much more subtle level underneath her outwardly ambivalent appearance. Thus, through her ambivalence, Tóibín imagines the experiences of a prospective migrant through her off-centred approach which is not negative or positive. Tóibín marks her sense of ambivalence with silence as she walks towards the dancehall with Nancy.(p. 16) Eilis's silence is indicative of the juxtaposition between her own intelligence and a state which Tóibín has described as 'not fully conscious'.⁹ She chooses her own silence at times when she feels placed between an external event or experience she feels uncomfortable with, yet in which she lacks the inner assertiveness to give voice to her thoughts. She is unable to match the standards which Rose has set for herself, and unable to commit to being like Nancy, therefore in struggling to understand her own situation chooses instead to remain silent.

Clearly Eilis is presented as a young woman struggling to conceptualise exactly what her role in society is or where she belongs. Just before this event as she is having dinner with Rose and her mother, who recalls what Mrs Kelly was like when she was young, Eilis seems unable to synthesise the different image of Mrs Kelly she is presenting, and again 'There was silence for a while as Rose and Eilis took this in.' (p. 15) The possibility of this not fitting in

with her perception of Mrs Kelly is replaced by silence until she finds a way to deal with it by mocking Miss Kelly's voice to make her mother and Rose laugh. Her mockery of Mrs Kelly is suggestive of her awkwardness; she does not know how to react, so attempts to imagine herself in an alternative role which is not filled by that of her mother or Rose, and one of the ways in which she can attempt to assert herself.

The manipulation of silence

Ultimately, it is as Eilis leaves Enniscorthy to emigrate to America that her economic role in society and her social perceptions of home are most clearly examined. Indeed, through Eilis's relocation to Brooklyn and in the trauma surrounding her return to Ireland, Tóibín projects what George refers to as 'The search for the location in which the self is "at home".'¹⁰ In this sense, Tóibín essentially locates her through her unsettled experience of home, family and community, then relocates her through her individuated experiences of emigration to America. Tóibín therefore examines the silence of the spaces in between the experiences of home and diaspora. The notion of silence is very prominent in the representation of Eilis and the way in which she negotiates notions of her own identity, which is also intrinsically bound up with ideas of liberty.

Eilis manipulates silence; she is both passive and active in her own silence, and at other times quite manipulative of the silence of others. Tóibín utilises the silence which Eilis

intermittently occupies as a platform from which to subtly draw attention to key issues in the novel, thus leading the reader to focus on what is not being said, but implied through these silences. The most significant of these is the gendered representation of migration in 1950s Ireland. The issue of her brothers' emigration to England is never openly discussed by the women left behind in the novel, and only fleetingly discussed between Eilis and Jack. Indeed, throughout the novel migration is considered 'part of the life of the town' (p. 24). Eilis is aware of the absence of her brothers at key moments and feels that her sister and her mother must be too, but none of them acknowledge it verbally. It is only through the silences that the magnitude of their absence is acknowledged:

...this was the first time they had laughed at this table since Jack had followed the others to Birmingham. She would have loved to say something about him, but she knew that it would make her mother too sad. Even when a letter came from him it was passed around in silence. (p. 15)

Significantly male migration is presented as a traditional diasporic experience, as a struggle, primarily for those left at home to deal with their absence, but also for the migrants themselves.¹¹ We learn of the difficulties of her brother Jack's experience of diaspora, of the difficulties he encountered settling in Birmingham, his homesickness and desperate feelings to return home. Jack subtly refers to some of the negative aspects of diaspora, through his comments about getting shouted at on the street, 'you learn to pay no attention and we have our own pubs so anything that would happen would be just on the way home', (p. 34) yet the expectation of continuing to work and live in another country in order to send money home, even sporadically as her brothers do, is implicit.

However, whereas Eilis's brothers' migration to England was considered a part of what was expected in Enniscorthy, in the sense that 'people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy' and who went to England to do 'ordinary work for ordinary money', (p. 24) the notion of Eilis's reluctant migration from Ireland to Brooklyn is distinguished as being brought about not out of necessity or desperation, but because she was given an opportunity to do so. Moreover, an opportunity that her mother and sister had manufactured on her part and had decided between themselves that she should not pass up. Again, an important decision relating to her future had been decided in a form of silence:

The silence that descended made it clear to Eilis what the others were thinking. She looked across at her mother, who deliberately, it seemed to her, did not return her glance, but kept her gaze fixed on the floor. Rose, normally so good at moving the conversation along if they had a visitor, also said nothing [...] In the silence that had lingered, she realized, it had somehow been tacitly arranged that Eilis would go to America. [...] In the days that followed no mention was made of Father Flood's visit or his raising the possibility of her going to Brooklyn, and it was the silence itself that led Eilis to believe that Rose and her mother had discussed it and were in favour of it. She had never considered going to America. (p. 23-4)

In contrast to her brothers' experience however, the fact that Eilis migrates to America rather than England, where you did 'ordinary work for ordinary money', Tóibín differentiates her experience in migrating to America, as Eilis considers that:

People who went to America could become rich. She tried to work out how she had come to believe also that, while people from the town who lived in England missed Enniscorthy, no one who went to America missed home. Instead they were happy there and proud. (p. 24)

Thus, in establishing the expectation for her to do so, she does find liberty and freedom, yet ironically is not allowed to enjoy it. Eilis is represented as growing in independence and confidence, her experience working in the department store allowing her to 'be brave and decisive' (p. 113). The obligation for her to return despite her settled non-diasporic life in Brooklyn is made explicit, unlike her brothers' more traditional experience of diaspora and upon whom there is no expectation to return home. Through these contrasting experiences of male and female migration, Tóibín clearly pinpoints the varying positions of diasporic experience. Rather than marking it as a single process, he draws attention to the variety of experiences through these off-centre representations which occupy multiple positions in the in-between spaces of Irish migration.

The in-between spaces of Irish migration

While Eilis's experience of migration in some respects touches upon more expected models of diaspora such as those outlined by theorists such as Robin Cohen,¹² *Brooklyn* is clearly and deliberately not a novel of diaspora. In essence, it is a novel which

attempts to articulate the things not said surrounding the notion of diaspora, relating to the difficulties which typical migrants experience when leaving their homeland. Thus it offers a non-traditional representation of diaspora. While some of Cohen's terms apply to Eilis's experience of migration from Ireland to Brooklyn, they do so loosely and superficially, but are not developed as part of Eilis's experience. The community Christmas dinner is the only thing developed with any real feeling or emotion, possibly because it is linked to memories of her father and thus notions of home. As noted, to use Cohen's terms, her 'dispersal' from her homeland is decided for her by her mother and sister, essentially as a means to pursue an opportunity to work. Eilis is fortunate in the sense that she migrates knowing that she has a job waiting for her, all arranged for her by Father Flood in collaboration with Rose, who also provides all the documentation that she will need, along with finding suitable accommodation in a boarding house with other Irish women. Brooklyn is presented to her from the outset by Father Flood as 'Just like Ireland.' (p. 23) Her landlady is Irish; some of the other girls in the house are Irish; Christmas dinner in the church is organised for the migrant Irish community. However, despite being in the unique situation of having all of these things provided for her, a rarity noted by Georgina on the ship as she comments: 'I don't know how you got that stamp on your passport' (p. 50), Eilis remains ambivalent towards her emigration. Having realised that a decision has been made for her to leave her family, her friends and her home, she simply comments that: 'It was a long journey across the Atlantic [...] at least a week on a ship, and it must be expensive.' (p. 24) Once again, Tóibín situates Eilis in an ambivalent space between her home and her future as an emigrant in America. This somniferous attitude towards these life-changing events is reinforced primarily through the fact that everything has been arranged for her. Eilis is presented as a thoughtful, capable young woman in many respects, yet

plays no part whatsoever in either deciding to emigrate, or pro-actively taking part in the plans necessary for her leaving. She immediately distances herself from the experience, pondering this life-changing event from the perspective of other people. The only thing she purposely acts upon is ensuring that she visits Miss Kelly in person as soon as possible to inform her that she will be leaving, so that she does not hear the news from anyone else. Tóibín draws upon her working attachment to the grocery store as a means to represent Eilis's sense of belonging in the town, and to silently articulate her concerns about leaving through the medium of her employment in the store and not wanting to let Miss Kelly down. Tóibín therefore presents Eilis as capable and conscientious, yet passively unwilling to act. She is willing to leave her home, where she belongs, yet reluctant to either question her leaving or actively participate in the plans to do so. While Eilis is clearly ambivalent towards the idea of emigrating to America, it is more involuntary rather than assumed. It is only when the reality of her departure is imminent that she allows herself to acknowledge the enormity of the situation:

Even when she woke in the night and thought about it, she did not allow herself to conclude that she did not want to go [...] Even though she let these thoughts run as fast as they would, she still stopped when her mind moved towards real fear or dread or, worse, towards the thought that she was going to lose this world forever, that she would never have an ordinary day again in this ordinary place, that the rest of her life would be a struggle with the unfamiliar. (p. 30)

Eilis acknowledges not only the enormity of her leaving and the impact this will have on her own life, but is concerned about the reality of what life will be like for her family left behind. Tóibín interestingly juxtaposes the two extremes of the consequences of Eilis's emigration through the notion of the superficial and the real. As Rose invites Eilis to select some of her jewellery to take to America, it becomes clear to Eilis 'with force and clarity' the sacrifice that Rose has made in organising her emigration, that she 'had decided to let Eilis go'. (p.30) She realises that in ensuring Eilis is the one to leave, that Rose will have to give up any prospects of marrying or having her own family in order to look after their mother. The superficiality of choosing some of Rose's jewellery to take with her in her new life is reinforced as the contrasting reality of the sacrifice Rose is making becomes clear. It is in this moment of epiphany that Eilis decides to assert her silence:

They knew so much, each one of them, she thought, that they could do everything except say out loud what it was they were thinking. She resolved as she went back to her room that she would do everything she could for them by pretending at all times [...] She would make them believe [...] She promised herself that not for one moment would she give them the smallest hint of how she felt [...] What she would need to do in the days before she left and on the morning of her departure was smile, so that they would remember her smiling. (p. 31)

Hereafter, her ambivalence becomes intertwined with concerns of how she appears to others, and the 'compensating glamour' attached to her emigration to America. (p. 32)

The off-centre experiences of characters on the margins and the utilisation of place

Once there, Eilis attempts to re-fashion herself. Through quietly observing others both in the boarding house and primarily in the department store where she works, Eilis steadily assimilates into life in Brooklyn. In drawing upon the shop as a mechanism through which to measure experiences of Eilis's life at home and those of a young emigrant, his evocation of life in a peripheral small town in Ireland is mirrored through his choice of Brooklyn as Eilis's destination, a place which is also geographically on the periphery of New York. Joep Leerssen's description of the chronotope in relation to the formative representation of Ireland in the literary and historical imagination is that of 'a place with an uneven distribution of time-passage, where time is apt to slow down and come to a standstill at the periphery'.¹³ The notion of the periphery is very significant throughout Tóibín's work, as he repeatedly examines the off-centre experiences of characters on the margins. However, in *Brooklyn* he utilises the peripheral notion of the physical places which Eilis occupies to explore ideas of silence and liberty. It is through utilising the shop as a stylistic device in each of these peripheral locations through which he can mirror the 'surreal quality' of Ireland's historical narrative and reimagine place and time in Ireland as experienced in the novel. Indeed, he has commented on the importance of 'shopkeeping culture' in small town life in Ireland,¹⁴ and draws upon Bakhtin's notion of the chronotope,¹⁵ of imagined time across imagined space, to explore ideas of transformation. As a discursive mechanism, the life of young Irish women such as Eilis can be presented through the chronotope of the shop, suggesting that the spatial location of both Enniscorthy and Brooklyn reinforce what Gerry Smyth refers to as a 'qualitative difference in knowledge and experience'¹⁶ in each of these places, as measured through her experiences in the shop in each location. Both locations reflect different senses of liberty, played out on a small scale in the shops, rather than on the grand scale of Ireland and

America. The two shops are reflective of different ways of belonging and are indicative not just of binarisms of behaviour, but of the varying ways of behaving within each of these physical locations.

When at work in Mrs Kelly's grocery store in Enniscorthy, Eilis is presented in the middle space. She is caught between the over-bearing Mrs Kelly and her assistant Mary, whom it appears Eilis has superseded in the shop. Mary stands uneasily listening as Miss Kelly describes her as 'less than no use' (p. 10), while Miss Kelly condescendingly talks her through the running of the shop. Indeed, Eilis gives voice to the superficiality that is scattered throughout the experiences of life in Enniscorthy, most notably in the distinctions that Mrs Kelly assumes between the customers in her shop and her behaviour towards them based on her assumptions of their rank in the community, or their wealth. Eilis notices the way that Mrs Kelly allows the stale bread from the day before to be sold to the majority of her customers, while putting aside the fresh bread for certain privileged customers whom she believes are more deserving based on superficial notions of their wealth. She observes how Miss Kelly varies her tone of voice to openly assert her disapproval towards customers who she believes are inferior to her or the quality of customer which she believes her shop is worthy of:

Sometimes she said nothing at all, merely clenched her jaw and stood behind the counter in a pose that suggested deep disapproval of the customer's presence in her shop and an impatience for that customer to go. For others she smiled drily and studied

them with grim forbearance, taking the money as though offering an immense favour.

And then there were customers whom she greeted warmly and by name'. (p. 9.)

The fact that Miss Kelly is clearly making judgements upon the social status of her customers is perceived as negative by Eilis, yet she is unaware that she is making her own judgement upon working in a shop like Miss Kelly's, despite it being made clear that there is no work available in Ireland at all, when she comments that she knew her mother would be happy that she had a job and a means to earn money of her own, but that Rose would think that 'working behind the counter of a grocery shop was not good enough for her.' (p. 6) However, with regards to what Rose might think, as well as to Mrs Kelly's unashamed snobbery, Eilis remains outwardly silent, choosing not to challenge Mrs Kelly directly. Indirectly, the way she deals with her disapproval of Mrs Kelly's behaviour is through her mockery of her to her mother and Rose.

Tóibín mirrors the tension surrounding the notion of class difference in the small town of Enniscorthy as a reflection of social issues in Ireland in the 1950s. Juxtaposing these issues are reflections of racial issues in the store in Brooklyn, through the introduction of Red Fox stockings. The hesitant anticipation surrounding the sale of them in the store is the medium through which he explores the introduction of black women as customers in the store. Again, in parallel to the way in which she is placed in between Mrs Kelly and Mary in the grocery store, Eilis is placed in the forefront above Miss Delano in Bartocci's to serve them and seen as the intermediary between Miss Fortini and the new customers: 'Each time the new customers approached, Miss Delano stood back and let Eilis serve them', (p. 112) and like

Mrs Kelly ‘Miss Fortini, however, never lifted her eyes from the scene at the counter.’ (p. 112) Significantly, Eilis notices every detail of the women, but they do not even look at Eilis or notice the way she is staring at them so intently. Their indifference is clear. Interestingly, Tóibín asserts that it is Eilis who is new to Brooklyn, not them. This point is reinforced in a comment about Eilis being Irish: ‘You’re Irish, that makes you different.’ (p. 110)

By placing Eilis and Mary as well as Mrs Kelly and Miss Fortini in parallel juxtaposition through the chronotope of the shop in each location, Tóibín is pointing towards these tensions within the store as a reflection of the wider tensions in Brooklyn at this time. The silent tension of the black women buying stockings in Bartocci’s and the man voicing his concerns over not being served when it was his turn in preference for one of Miss Kelly’s preferred customers, highlights differing social tensions. Interestingly, he articulates his concerns, yet is ignored by Miss Kelly. Conversely, the black women in the department store in Brooklyn remain completely silent, yet every attention is given to ensure that they are served immediately and every need catered to: ‘When she handed them the change and the nylon stockings wrapped carefully in brown paper, she thanked them but they did not reply, merely took the change and the receipt and the package and moved elegantly towards the door’ (p. 112). Tóibín reverses the attention they are given within each shop, and in doing so emphasises the conservative nature of the social tension in Ireland in contrast to the more progressive attitude towards the racial tension in Brooklyn.

Furthermore, each store serves to reflect the economic differences between Ireland and America at this time. The fact that Eilis takes the job in Miss Kelly's in the first place, despite her concern that Rose may think it is beneath her, communicates the difficulties in finding suitable work and therefore the poor economic conditions in Ireland at this point, as articulated in Eilis's comment that: '...she knew also that there was, at least for the moment, no work for anyone in Enniscorthy, no matter what their qualifications.' (p. 11) In contrast, Eilis's job in Bartocci's department store in Brooklyn is utilised to reflect a very different economic climate in America. Eilis earns enough money to be able to buy her lunch at a 'counter', rather than having to make sandwiches at the boarding house. She is also able to purchase gifts in an impromptu manner, knowing that she has enough money to buy a watch for her brother and ...for Rose and send them home for Christmas. Tóibín makes clear the more secure financial position that Eilis is now in in Brooklyn, as opposed to the lower standard of living which she would have to tolerate at home in Ireland. In doing so he is indirectly referencing the reasons why emigration from Ireland to America was so prevalent at this time. In parallel to this he also points towards the more fulfilling conditions of living which Eilis, as a typical migrant, could experience. Indeed, Eilis's freedom to purchase more or less whatever she wants within the parameters of her modest lifestyle in Brooklyn are a result of her employment in Bartocci's, and a representation of what Cohen referred to above as 'the possibility of a distinctive creative, enriching life in tolerant host countries', essentially developed through the chronotope of the store.

Thus, in the same manner in which Tóibín draws upon her working attachment to the grocery store as a means to represent Eilis's sense of belonging to a peripheral Irish town like

Enniscorthy, he uses the medium of her employment in the department store to subtly explore how she develops an increasing sense of belonging and a sense of freedom that living an independent life in Brooklyn brings. Through working in Bartocci's, attending Brooklyn College three evenings a week, and dating Tony, Eilis acknowledges that the prospect of thinking about home has become more of a ritual than an emotional reliance on 'home':

...sometimes she actually believed that she was looking forward to thinking about home, letting images of home roam freely in her mind but it came to her now with a jolt that, no, the feeling she had was only about Friday night and being collected from the house by a man and going to the dance. (p. 131)

Indeed, her non-diasporic experience of life in Brooklyn is reinforced by her growing independence. After she meets Tony, she actively chooses not to socialise with the other girls in the house, commenting that 'this was a huge relief to her.' (p. 140) The boarding house acts more as a non-diasporic space for Eilis. Rather than finding a sense of community and belonging there, she finds it restrictive to the point where she values her solitude.

This is reinforced through the time that Tóibín takes to portray Tony's family home, the way he interacts with his family and the way they behave towards each other as a family unit. Also the manner in which his mother takes an interest in his personal life, and advises him what to wear on his date with Eilis reveals the close bond that they have, in contrast to the tension in Mrs Kehoe's boarding house. Ironically, Eilis feels more comfortable indirectly

experiencing Tony's model of diaspora rather than her own. The fact that Tony feels comfortable enough to share the small details of his family life with Eilis also exposes a side of family life that is never revealed between Eilis and her mother, or even Eilis and Rose. While they are close, their relationship is presented in paternal terms; Rose advises Eilis, she expresses concerns over her employment prospects, and is ultimately the one who secures Eilis's future by sacrificing her own. Tony offers her a vision of freedom, and the possibility of being rooted and free.

Negotiating a sense of self

Moreover, this growing sense of belonging is developed in the classes which Eilis attends for Bookkeeping. In having the potential to move from working in the department store to working in an office, Eilis is exposed to a sense of personal freedom through the possibilities of social mobility. Significantly, the sense of success and achievement which Eilis experiences after receiving the letter from Brooklyn College to officially inform her that she had passed her first-year exams and hoping that she would be returning the following year, fostered a sense of personal liberation and pride in her achievements, revealed in her thoughts as she is on her way to visit Father Flood and show him the letter:

...she began to observe how beautiful everything was: the trees in leaf, the people in the street, the children playing, the light on the buildings. She had never felt like this before in Brooklyn. The letter had lifted her spirits, given

her a new freedom, she realized, and it was something she had not expected. (p. 155-6.)

The letter operates both as an external indicator of her success and as an affirmation of the way in which she has assimilated into her new life in Brooklyn. Furthermore, while she is keen to write home and share the news of her success, her primary focus is on celebrating with Tony, as she implicitly connects him to her happiness and her connection to Brooklyn:

And in all of her dreams, as she walked along, of how this year would be, she imagined Tony's smiling presence, his attention, his funny stories [...] and now, with this letter, it was much more than she imagined she would have when she arrived in Brooklyn first. She had to stop herself smiling as she moved along in case people thought that she was mad. (p. 156.)

It is through this vision of liberty that Eilis realises that she can be both rooted and free. In accepting her own happiness, and through negotiating her sense of self and accepting her own ambiguities, she is also able to embrace the freedom that Brooklyn offers. On these terms home is made for Eilis in Brooklyn.

In the same epiphanic manner in which she deliberately decided to close herself up and keep silent about how she felt the night before she left Enniscorthy in order to protect her mother and sister, conversely, the letter from Brooklyn College liberates her. In finally allowing some self-realization to break through regarding the possibilities that her life in Brooklyn

holds, Eilis also breaks through her own silence through the letters that she writes. When she first arrives in Brooklyn, Eilis maintains an ambivalent attitude towards her new life in Brooklyn. When writing home she only writes about superficial concerns, revealing nothing about the things her mother and Rose will want to hear about how she is feeling and how she is settling in. Instead she comments on the ritual of the poker game which Mrs Kehoe hosts on a Sunday evening, that another lodger named Miss McAdam was very prim, that Patty McGuire was ‘man-mad’ (p. 55). In other letters home Eilis describes the rules of the boarding house, the system Mrs Kehoe had for organising the washing of laundry and how the Italian women who ironed her clothes ‘put starch into her dresses and blouses, which she loved’ (p. 56). In closing herself off from her family in this way, Eilis is sub-consciously mimicking the actions of her brother Jack. After meeting with him in Dublin before she embarked for America, she reflects upon the comments that Jack had made about feeling terribly lonely, yet how he had said nothing about it in his letters. On the boat hoped she would be ready and able to cope with however she was going to feel when she arrived in Brooklyn, yet was not prepared for the extent of her homesickness. Ironically, when she receives letters from her mother, Rose and Jack, they are filled with the same silence as her letters to them: ‘The letters told Eilis little; there was hardly anything personal in them and nothing that sounded like anyone’s own voice.’ (p. 66.) Receiving a version of her own silence in the letters moves Eilis from ambivalent to despondent as she questions her new life: ‘She was nobody here. It was not just that she had no friends and family; it was rather that she was a ghost in this room, in the streets, on the way to work, on the shop floor.’ (p. 67.) At the point where she is most homesick, feeling as though she was ‘trapped in a place where there was nothing’, (p. 70) she makes a deliberate decision to remain silent about it in her letters home:

None of them could help her. She had lost all of them. They would not find out about this; she would not put it into a letter. And because of this she understood that they would never know her now. (p. 70-1)

In making this decision, Eilis adopts the same diasporic relationship to home that her brothers did when they migrated to England. In distancing herself from home emotionally as they did, she follows a similar pattern of settlement. While she realises that her brothers found it difficult at first settling in, what they had not written about was the way in which they did settle: how they enjoyed meeting on a Saturday night to go to the pub and the dancehall; how they met new people and had girlfriends; how they became used to having regular wages and their own independence. Similarly, Eilis realises that the only way she can move forward with her new life is to put her feelings of homesickness out of her mind and get on with her work, revealing nothing about how she felt to those at home:

It would be like covering a table with a tablecloth, or closing curtains on a window; and maybe the need would lessen as time went on, as Jack hinted

it would [...] In any case, that was what she would have to do. As soon as

Mrs Kehoe appeared with tea things on a tray, Eilis clenched her fist when

she felt that she was ready to begin. (p. 76.)

This forced silence from home is the platform from which Eilis ultimately allows herself to open up to the opportunities that Brooklyn offers: the evening classes in Bookkeeping, and eventually her relationship with Tony.

Once she becomes more in control of her life in Brooklyn and more confident in her growing relationship with Tony, she actively chooses to break her silence. She writes to tell Rose about Tony, and in imagining Rose's response to finding out he is a plumber, pre-emptively her own response to Rose in defence of him: 'in Brooklyn it was not always as easy to guess someone's character by their job as it was in Enniscorthy.' (p. 140) As more of a defensive response to her life in Brooklyn over her life in Ireland, Eilis covertly acknowledges the freedom from social barriers which were so much more an accepted part of life in a small town in Ireland. Intent on portraying this to Rose she writes that 'this was a different world and in this world Tony shone despite the fact that his family lived in two rooms or that he worked with his hands.' (p. 168.) Acknowledging this then allows her to break the silence surrounding her lack of clarity to envisage any real attachment to home. In defending Tony in her letters, she is overtly accepting the possibilities of what he is offering her: an attachment to something more tangible; the possibility of forging a more real sense of home and belonging.

It is the notes and letters which Eilis writes throughout the novel that allow Eilis to liberate herself. In writing she can imagine what she cannot articulate in words. As she realises that she will never be able to speak of being married to Jim, she decided that 'she would tell him nothing now [...] It could not be said; his response to her deception could not be imagined.' (p. 242.) Tóibín comments that 'words liberate us'¹⁷; in ending the novel with Eilis writing a letter to Tony to tell him that she was returning, and a final note that she leaves silently for

Jim Farrell, her written words allow her to say the ‘unsayable’, so that she can close her eyes and ‘imagine nothing more.’ (p. 252.)

Rejecting locational imprisonment

The ambiguities surrounding the presentation of Eilis’s character represent the varying positions of silence surrounding Ireland’s historical memory of emigration and the Irish diaspora. Attempting to confine her to a singular experience of migration is blinkered and restrictive. Instead, she confines herself to a life of duality – feeling neither at home or settled in Brooklyn, or ‘home’ when she returns to Enniscorthy. This epitomises her rejection of singular definitions of both, alongside a recognition of her sense of ambiguity and ‘incompletion’, to use Foster’s word from a different context. (p.39). In doing so, as Foster suggests, Tóibín extends the boundaries of contemporary Irish fiction in acknowledging ‘an Ireland whose cultural and psychological boundaries are continuously widening.’¹⁸ Foster points towards the way in which his work is complex and challenging in his ambiguous relationship to Irish history through ‘the liberation of saying the unsayable.’¹⁹ In *Brooklyn*, this is reflected in the manner in which ambiguity infuses the novel, particularly through Tóibín’s presentation of Eilis and her final liberation of leaving Ireland and her mother to return to Brooklyn. In ultimately rejecting the sense of locational imprisonment which she finds upon her return to Enniscorthy, her detachment allows Tóibín to explore the themes of repression and liberty through articulating the ambiguity that lies at the heart of the novel.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

Let the Great World Spin by Colum McCann

Introduction

In the room where Colum McCann writes there is a message pinned on the wall which reads: ‘What is the source of our first suffering? It lies in the fact that we hesitated to speak. It was born in the moment when we accumulated silent things within us.’¹

McCann’s seventh novel, *Let the Great World Spin*, for which he received the National Book Award in 2009, in essence attempts to break some of the silences and hesitations to cross boundaries associated with notions of contemporary migrancy.

The novel is based in New York in 1974 and centres around Philippe Petit’s high wire walk between the newly built Twin Towers of the World Trade Center. Through this event McCann intertwines the stories of several characters, weaving together their varying perspectives and interpretations of identity and the ways in which they find hopeful ways of living alongside each other in a twenty-first-century global city such as New York.

Let the Great World Spin focuses on the connections made between a diverse range of characters, united by the fact that they are all away from home and have settled in New York. The manner in which their lives become connected is the key way in

which McCann articulates their attempts to break free from the hesitations to speak noted above. At its core, the novel is concerned with connections, with capturing moments which reveal fragments of people's lives, moments which connect the story of one person's life to another through unexpected collisions and intersections. These are the terms through which contemporary diaspora is explored in *Let the Great World Spin* – where notions of diaspora are perceived as a node of connecting, of linking people together.

The novel reveals a representation of a more contemporary experience surrounding notions of Irish diaspora than that touched upon in *Brooklyn*. In the same way that *Brooklyn* is clearly and deliberately not a novel of diaspora, *Let the Great World Spin* deliberately touches upon some of the traditional elements concerning diasporic experience and the difficulties which migrants face, but then uses this as a platform to examine the more non-traditional realities of contemporary diaspora. *Let the Great World Spin* is therefore not concerned with leaving a homeland and recreating a new one, in the traditional sense. The novel does not conform to expected notions of diasporic experience as outlined by Robin Cohen in the previous chapter, which suggests key features which most diaspora's exhibit, to include experiences based upon collective memories and myths relating to an original homeland, or a strong, sustained ethnic consciousness or sense of solidarity within an ethnic group.²

In shifting away from examining this model of diaspora, McCann's novel presents another in-between space within the rhetoric surrounding traditional diaspora – in essence *Let the Great World Spin* moves away from nostalgic notions of diaspora and presents an alternative model of contemporary migratory experience.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*'He had seen something beautiful.'*³³

An alternative model of contemporary migratory experience

Indeed, McCann does draw upon some of the more traditional motifs of diaspora as outlined by Cohen, but then inverts them. He establishes very quickly that his primary narrator, Ciaran, makes the decision to migrate as a result of his involvement in a traumatic event: after being caught up in a terrorist bomb explosion in Dublin, where he loses part of his ear, he decides to leave his homeland to escape the violence and buys his ticket out of Ireland to New York to stay with his brother. However, any nostalgic pre-conceptions about life in America are immediately disestablished as he realises the gritty reality of the Bronx where his brother Corrigan lives: high-rise tenements bordered by a fence topped with razor wire on one side; a busy expressway on the other side, with lines of prostitutes in the shadows of the underpass below; heroin needles lying among the weeds on the inside of the fence; spray painted signs near the entrance to the projects. Corrigan describes the location where he has settled as 'The edge of the world' (p. 37) and is happy in his acceptance of this, whereas Ciaran only perceives the reality of Corrigan's world as seedy and violent:

Hours and hours of insanity and escape. The projects were a victim of theft and wind [...] Kids on the tenth floor aimed television sets at the housing cops who

patrolled below. Air mail. The police came in, clubbing. Shots rang out from the rooftop [...] Arson on the streets. It was a city with its fingers in the garbage, a city that ate off dirty dishes [...] this was not the America I had expected. (p. 32)

McCann makes it clear here that while Ciaran did not emigrate to find a 'home from home' the reality is that this may actually be an inverted version of what he has found in the violence he is confronted with. He holds no 'idealization of the supposed ancestral home' or wish to participate in collective memories or myths about his homeland as Cohen refers to in his model of traditional experiences of diaspora.⁴ These are the very things he seeks to escape, yet ironically, what he becomes witness to in the Bronx is what he was trying to leave behind in Ireland – violence and brutality, but in another form and under a different guise.

The notion that that the place he emigrates to is potentially another version of the home he was trying to leave behind is intrinsic to the concept of diaspora. However whereas the more traditional experience of Irish migrants might be based upon trying to actively seek out a community based upon a 'home from home', Ciaran holds no 'idealization of the supposed ancestral home' or wish to participate in collective memories or myths about his homeland as Cohen refers to.⁵ Moreover, Ciaran instinctively rejects what this model represents and tries to avoid getting a predictable migrant job as a waiter or a bartender, with every intention of trying to avoid the Irish stereotype of 'flat hats and micks in shirtsleeves' (p. 32). He does however eventually resort to getting a job 'in one of the shamrock bars I dreaded', (p.58) out of the

necessity of finding employment. The desire to seek out such collective memories about homeland and be with other migrants is referenced in the way in which Ciaran comments upon the behaviour of the customers in the bar: ‘Theirs was a loneliness pasted upon loneliness. It struck me that distant cities are designed precisely so you can know where you came from. We bring home with us when we leave. Sometimes it becomes more acute for the fact of having left.’ (p. 59.) In recognising the loneliness that comes with being away from home which Ciaran observes in the bar, he is referencing a classically nostalgic image of Irish emigration. Aidan Arrowsmith comments that ‘the Irish diaspora appears to be captive to this painful longing for belonging among one’s own.’⁶ However, while McCann seemingly presents a longing among the customers in the bar to be amongst ‘their own’, he then swiftly exposes the superficiality of this feeling by mocking the lawyer who tries to prove he has achieved success through the elaborate gesture of buying the others drinks. In doing so McCann intricately inverts one of Cohen’s key features of diaspora in the ‘sense of solidarity with co-ethnic members in other countries’⁷ and draws attention to the more fragmented identities and behaviours of contemporary diasporic experience:

My accent deepened. I took on different rhythms. I pretended I was from Carlow. Most of the customers were from Kerry and Limerick. One was a lawyer, a tall, fat sandy-haired man. He lorded it over the others by buying them drinks. They clinked glasses with him and called him a “motherfucking ambulance chaser” when he went to the bathroom [...] With great hilarity they injected it into songs when the lawyer left. One of the songs had an ambulance chaser going over the Cork and Kerry mountains. Another had an ambulance chaser in the green fields of France. (p. 58)

Here McCann is making reference to what Arrowsmith refers to in a different context, as ‘ubiquitous nostalgia’, as well as the sense of loneliness implicit within the classic nostalgic image of the Irish migrant gathering together as a community in a superficial Irish bar. However in drawing the migrants together, but then mocking the way that they behave towards each other, captures the pretence of the forced ‘home from home’ implicit in this idealized notion of collective myth about home. Moreover, in framing the mockery of the lawyer through the language of Irish diasporic music, from iconic Irish bands traditionally associated with the diasporic experience such as Thin Lizzy and The Furys, McCann critiques the superficiality of their ‘community’ created in the bar, but critiques it in its own terms.⁸ This is suggestive of the idea that even in recognising the problematic nature of the enforced superficiality of nostalgic diaspora, there is still no escaping it. Thus, Ciaran is both acknowledging their need for connection as migrants, yet clearly rejecting such a nostalgic version of diaspora.

Re-interpreting diaspora: examining the local and the global in a new direction

Significantly, McCann supersedes the traditional model of diaspora with a more fluid presentation of the ways in which characters assimilate into new locations. In essence he re-interprets diaspora, utilising its concepts, but drawing upon them to examine issues of the local and the global in a new direction. These models of the global are significant for framing McCann’s treatment of diaspora, as he draws upon the confusions and fragmentations of identity and the ways in which they are intertwined

with a desire for connection in new forms. As Arrowsmith points out: ‘Globalization revamps the diasporic confusion of home and abroad, past and future.’⁹ These globalized fragmentations of identity and the ways in which they are balanced through new forms of connection are the concepts upon which diaspora is revisited in *Let the Great World Spin* - through moving away from clinging onto nostalgic visions of finding a new version of home abroad, and towards a more forward-thinking mode of analysis.

It is primarily through Corrigan that McCann energises these new forms of ‘connectedness’.¹⁰ Corrigan’s experience of diaspora is forged through his spirituality. His non-traditional perspective as a monk belonging to a small order allows him to practice his beliefs in a more unconventional way, affording him the space he needed to find God ‘in the grime of the everyday’:

The comfort he got from the hard, cold truth - the filth, the war, the poverty – was that life could be capable of small beauties. He wasn’t interested in the glorious tales of the afterlife or the notions of a honey-soaked heaven. To him that was a dressing room for hell. Rather he consoled himself with the fact that, in the real world, when he looked closely into the darkness he might find the presence of a light, damaged and bruised, but a little light all the same. (p. 20.)

His posting to the Bronx therefore provides him with a darker section of the real world through which he can live his vision of trying to make the lives of others better. It is through connecting with others on his own terms that he forges his own model of

diaspora. For Corrigan, connection is grounded in his need to make the lives of others a little more beautiful. It is in finding light and beauty in the hard reality of everyday life that allows him to move forward. His migration to New York was never intended to be based upon seeking or finding a community of other Irish people among whom to practice his faith or help him settle. Whereas his brother does not manage to find a way to move away from comforting notions of diaspora like those found in the safe diasporic spaces such as the Irish bar as noted above, Corrigan does find a way of moving beyond this. The tension between accepting and rejecting the conventional migrant experience of diaspora is exposed through the manner in which Ciaran accepts the safe spaces this model provides and the way in which Corrigan rejects the comfort they offer through finding new modes of connection. From the outset, Corrigan wanted ‘somewhere with a rougher plot’ (p.20), and it is through immersing himself in the very real, gritty lives of ‘the whores, the hustlers, the hopeless’ (p.15) in the Bronx that he chooses to refuse the comfort of safe spaces and through which he makes new connections which enables this place to become his own.

In this way, McCann examines the ways in which different groups of people assimilate and forge their own version of community through exploring different experiences of diaspora. Corrigan finds his own form of community – his own niche – the nursing home where he is employed as a van driver provides the perfect platform from which to explore these varying perspectives. The patients he takes on outings from the nursing home form a diverse cross-section of emigrants – they are mostly Italian, Irish, and Jewish – allowing McCann to reinforce his exploration of the tensions and the shift from the nostalgic towards new forms of diasporic experience

beyond that of Ciaran and Corrigan. On the morning that Ciaran accompanies Corrigan in taking the patients from the nursing home to the park, he observes closely the way that Corrigan behaves with them, and the way that he takes care of them. In noticing how he wipes the brow of one of the patients, Ciaran comments on the mannerisms of this particular patient, Sheila, and how she behaves towards Corrigan, and in doing so acknowledges what he perceives as her subtle longing for home: ‘She had that emigrant’s sadness—she would never go back to her old country—it was gone in more senses than one—but she was forever gazing homewards anyway.’ (p. 46.)

Significantly, McCann frames this tentative existence of nostalgia and a longing for the past noticed by Ciaran, but then displaces it immediately afterwards with details of Corrigan’s connection with the present. Ciaran observes the simple pleasures of children playing and laughing in the water from a fire hydrant, and the way in which a group of basketball players are immersed in their game. The way that Ciaran observes his brother watching them is significant, as it alerts him to the ease with which Corrigan is able to connect not only with these people, but with the moment: ‘All he cared about was the moment that he was in, the absolute now.’ (p. 45.) He is clearly at ease among them; he is comfortable in their dependence upon him as he wheels them about in their wheelchairs laughing and joking, as they are with him. His brother comments that ‘This was his world and he plainly loved it.’ (p. 33.) Corrigan has made this place his own through connection. These connections have enabled him to help the patients he is taking care of find a little light in their own lives, through the laughter and the joking, and in doing so have also provided him with the sense of fulfilment he was searching for. The progressive nature of such new forms of connectedness is implicitly intertwined with McCann’s presentation of the contrasts between Ciaran and Corrigan, particularly defined in the tension between accepting

and rejecting the possibilities of moving beyond the 'safe spaces' and choosing to live in the moment, rather than trying to re-create a nostalgic vision of the past.

New forms of connection

McCann therefore focuses on new forms of connection which represent the ways in which new modes of diaspora allow for more realistic interpretations of the realities of contemporary migration. Because the focus is always on the prior, rather than the becoming community, notions of diaspora and migrancy have rarely been examined outside national terms in this way. McCann, however, illuminates the idea that with connection at the heart of the issue, contemporary diaspora is not necessarily about leaving the nation, but that migrating to other parts of the same nation still imbues a similar sense of 'newness', of being away from home. For these migrants, diaspora is clearly focused around connections. It is more concerned with crossing personal boundaries, not national ones; about connections between people, not necessarily nations. In this sense the premise that connection is replacing homeland as central to the concept of contemporary diaspora is portrayed throughout *Let the Great World Spin*.

Corrigan is at the centre of McCann's presentation of connections between people, and the ways in which these connections can facilitate the crossing of personal boundaries to enable new ways of living alongside one another in global cities such as New York. The reality of his personal commitment to those in the community he has

assimilated into unfolds through the connections that he has made. These connections not only ground him, but essentially provide a sense of fulfilment which drives his faith. For McCann, Corrigan's story is the embodiment of the human instinct for empathy, driven by the need to connect. Connections allow Corrigan to transcend physical existence, yet they are also what define him as human. Sympathetically captured 'in the cramped space of his own prayer' (p. 71), he is caught in the binarisms of his life: of his strong spiritual faith and his feelings for Adelita. It is in attempting to move outside his own spiritually cramped space through immersing himself in the gritty reality of the lives of the prostitutes to whom he opens up his home, the manner in which he relates to them and attempts to view the world from their perspective, and the empathic manner in which he treats the patients at the nursing home – that his own daily life is made more beautiful. In easing the struggle of others in small ways through relating to their situation and immersing himself in their stories, he feels that he is fulfilling his faith by making a difference 'on the little ledge of reality he had left'. (p. 42.) In this vein Ciaran likens him to the myth of the forgotten hidden saint: 'The forgotten one was left to struggle on his own, with no line of communication to that which he so hugely needed. Corrigan had lost his line with God: he bore the sorrows on his own, the story of stories.' (p. 44.) It is through bearing the stories of others that Corrigan thus attempts to open up this line of communication, and which allow him to connect with his faith and with those around him. If connection is replacing notions of homeland in this way, in helping people and in trying to see things differently from another's perspective, then empathy is at the heart of this. McCann elucidates the point that through empathy connection becomes possible.

The power of empathy

In essence, our connections with each other are forged through empathy. Our ability to empathise is what makes us human. Former Irish President, Mary Robinson, has recently commented on the importance of empathy in what she refers to as today's 'interconnected world' in its capacity to connect us 'one to the other', stating that 'Empathy is extraordinarily important in family, community, in the country at so many different levels now in our interconnected world.'¹¹ This notion of the power of empathy is also very important to McCann. Indeed it lies at the heart of a charity which he has established in collaboration with a group of authors, musicians, artists, teachers and students. The organization they have established is called Narrative 4 – founded upon the belief that the world can be changed through the exchange and sharing of stories. The Chicago-based globally franchised organization is dedicated to creating social change through the mutual trust that is created through story exchanges. In creating a space for people all over the world to tell their stories in a powerful way, Narrative 4 aims to identify with those whose stories may not have been heard, and bring about transformation through the understanding and re-telling of another's story. Their vision is 'Fearless Hope Through Radical Empathy' – based on the premise that when we inhabit each other's vision and see the world through each other's eyes, we are forever changed:

Whether it be teens from the south side of Chicago or on the streets of Dublin, or under represented youth in Kabul or in the Barrio [...] The key to transformation lies in the sharing: when you hear someone else's story deeply enough to inhabit it and re-tell it as if you have lived it, you become "the other"

and see the world through her eyes. The power is in the active act of receiving and caring for another's story. It is Radical Empathy.¹²

Thus in breaking down the barriers often imposed upon society around issues of race, religion, gender or class and focusing on hope instead of despair, Narrative 4 believe that new narratives are created and new communities are formed. Developing empathy in this way – through seeing the world through another's eyes – is integral to the stories that each of his characters possess in *Let the Great World Spin*, and intrinsically, the way in which the telling of each story changes the characters themselves as the events unfold, as the way in which they begin to inhabit the other's story and feel their pain or joy, allows them to become 'the other'.

Indeed, the effect of stories is pivotal to the premise of this novel. McCann comments on the possibility of finding hope through an alternative reading, a change of perspective: 'stories are there to be told, and each story changes with the telling. Time changes them [...] each story is shifted sideways by each day that unfolds.'¹³

This principle is reflected clearly in the way in which Ciaran changes his perspective on Corrigan once he begins to view his brother's life from his perspective. From the moment Ciaran believes that Corrigan is addicted to heroin and needs his help to 'bring him on the long walk back towards a sensible life', (p. 43) he stops to look at his life in a completely different way. By reading his brother's life in an alternative manner Corrigan's life becomes much clearer to Ciaran as he begins to inhabit his world and see things as he does: 'Outside, we crossed the small patch of grass in front of the projects, among the broken bottles. All of a sudden, being around him felt right

for the first time in years.’ (p. 42.) His connection with his brother is re-established as he focuses on the hope instead of what he previously perceived as the despair in Corrigan’s life and those among whom he has chosen to live. As he begins to inhabit his brother’s ‘story’, Ciaran becomes much more at ease around the prostitutes, he feels less embarrassed by their bodies and sees them differently. He views them in a softer light and he notices the coy attempts Jazzlyn makes to cover herself up; he notices their beauty, alongside the affectionate way in which they call to Corrigan:

Among the early-morning hookers I felt strangely charmed. Corr-gan. Corr-i-gun. Corry-gan. It was, after all, my last name too. It was a strange taking of ease [...] It seemed for a moment that Corrigan was right, that there was something here, something to be recognized and rescued, some joy. I wanted to tell him that I was beginning to understand it. (p. 43-6.)

McCann is asserting the point that through finding and realising emphatic moments in another’s life it becomes possible to make connections. It is only when Ciaran moves outside of his own perspective that he can connect with his brother, even with himself. Through intertwining the varying stories of his characters’ lives and allowing them to hear each other’s stories, he enables them to empathise with these positive connections as moments of beauty – precisely as empathetic connections.

Empathy is thus what McCann is concerned about in local and global terms – the ways in which people care about each other and make positive connections whilst not being tied to a single place – in developing ways to coexist in what Kwame Anthony

Appiah refers to as ‘the human community’ rather than in national communities.¹⁴ It is in being ‘a citizen of the world’ that McCann’s narrative can be interpreted through Appiah’s concept of Worldliness/Cosmopolitanism, primarily represented through Corrigan’s definite ability to move outside those boundaries which are traditionally fixed. These modes of connecting through empathy become the new modes of connecting through diaspora. The sense of worldliness upon which each of his characters’ stories are based is focused around new modes of association and living together, what Appiah calls ‘conversation in its older meaning’ as well as in its modern sense.¹⁵ *Let the Great World Spin* presents a vision of contemporary migration based upon a new globalized movement of diaspora, which is rooted in new, more temporary modes of connecting, rather than long-term familial based notions of diaspora linked to nostalgia. In McCann’s global city of New York, the most unlikely of connections are made in unexpected ways. They are new, but they become long term; their fluidity is what is important in a post-migratory world, even migration within the boundaries of one’s own country. Notions of diaspora in *Let the Great World Spin* are therefore revisioned as being a cosmopolitan post-migratory body, based upon the associations of a diverse range of characters who essentially connect through the empathy contained within the other’s story.

Cosmopolitan post-migratory diaspora

One of the most significant connections powered by empathy to exemplify this new mode of cosmopolitan post-migratory diaspora is reflected in the friendship which develops between Clare and Gloria. These disparate women become connected

through the loss of their sons in war. Originally from Florida, Claire lives in a penthouse apartment on Park Avenue in Manhattan, while Gloria who migrated to New York from Missouri, lives in a high-rise apartment in the Bronx; they come together as part of a group with three other women to share their stories about losing their sons. In empathising with each other in this way, their connection allows them to interrupt the silence of their own grief. The link between them is tenuous, they are all very different with little in common, yet their empathic connection allows each of them to release their own silence through becoming ‘the other’ – as disparate as they are they have all lived each other’s experiences, albeit in slightly different ways. As Claire comments, between them there is ‘a sort of deep understanding. She sees it in their faces. Quieter than rain. Quieter than leaves.’ (p. 109.) Claire recognizes that the need to share their stories with each other about how their sons lived, and died, is what has brought them together, but she also acknowledges the power of the empathy that is created through their connection:

Let’s pull back the curtains and allow light through. Let this be the first of many more. No one else will intrude. We have our boys. They are brought together. Even here. On Park Avenue. We hurt, and have one another for the healing. (p. 114.)

In finding such sanctuary in sharing each other’s stories, this group of women therefore clearly embodies the transformative power of McCann’s vision of Radical Empathy. It is the deeper level of friendship which develops between Claire and Gloria though, which demonstrates a more intricate reflection of the way in which the telling of each other’s story changes the characters themselves as the novel unfolds.

As they begin to understand each other, their connection allows them to move outside traditionally fixed boundaries. Gloria is aware of Claire's need to connect with her and keep her talking at the apartment while the others are waiting for her to leave with them, but initially she puts it aside and leaves. However, she instinctively returns to Claire's apartment after she has been mugged; at this point the two women begin to inhabit the other's perspective. As they sit into the afternoon drinking and talking, any boundaries between them based on race or class become void. Gloria comments on the ease that develops between them: 'What drifted across my mind was how unusual it must have been, if anyone could have watched us from the outside, sitting with the light dimming outside, letting simple talk drift over us.' (p.315.) Their positive connection allows them to find ways to coexist in a manner which neither of them had expected, and reminiscent of Appiah's 'worldliness'. In essence, they have found in each other's perspective a more cosmopolitan mode of connecting which defines them clearly as part of Appiah's 'human community', wherein the local and the global become synonymous in the ways that people care about each other and find ways of living alongside each other, in trying to find the light in dark places.

The intersection of these two disparate characters and the ways in which their diasporic experiences connect is mirrored in the complex linked structure of the novel. Phillipe Petit's tightrope walk between the two towers of the World Trade Centre lies at the centre of the novel, both as a real event taking place, and an event which links each of the characters' stories. His walk therefore becomes a metaphor for the act of connecting. While the women are at her apartment, Claire muses on the walker and what he is attempting to achieve: 'an attempt at beauty. The intersection of

a man with the city, the abruptly reformed, the newly appropriated public space, the city as art. Walk up there and make it new. Making it a different space.’ (p.103.) This is reflective of the intersection of Claire and Gloria – as an act of connection, of the linking together of things that might otherwise be deemed impossible. The walker is appropriating a new space, making it different, reforming it for his purpose. In a wider sense, the seeming impossibility of the walk parallels the improbability of the collisions between each of the characters in a similar way, reflecting an interweaving or reforming of traditional and non-traditional elements of diaspora to produce new and unexpected points of intersection, which then become positive connections. Significantly, the walk is the event which connects the varying stories of each of the characters throughout the novel, and more importantly, influences the outcome of some of these points of intersection. In this manner Petit’s tightrope walk is the pivot from which all of the characters lives spin towards each other. Petit’s walk therefore becomes an emblem for connection.

Moments of beauty through connection

For Petit, walking the wire was ultimately a moment of beauty – a moment of beauty presented through connection cosmopolitan post-migratory diaspora. Walking between the two towers presented Petit with the opportunity to create a work of art, an act of audacious bravery on the one hand, but one which also exudes what Martin Randall has termed in a different context a sense of ‘innocence’ in its ‘intrinsic beauty’.¹⁶ In his study on Petit’s walk and its representation in the film *Man on Wire*,¹⁷ Randall reinforces the walk as a moment of beauty through connection:

The 'spectacle' of Petit's walk between the towers is an 'artwork' that celebrates human ingenuity and imaginative/physical daring whilst also celebrating the solidity and structural aesthetics of the WTC Towers. His successful feat inspires awe and a sense of the unimaginable.¹⁸

In perceiving the tightrope walk as an unexpected and celebratory intersection of art and life he refers to the sense of wonder and joy of the onlookers staring up at Petit on the wire. This reinforces McCann's central premise of the link between empathy and connection: the sense of both fear and awe from the crowd below creates a sense of empathy as a beautiful moment in itself, in parallel to this empathic connection allowing an appreciation of the beauty of the event. The walk symbolically provides the platform from which McCann explores his concept of beauty in connection, and beauty through connection. Petit's walk between the two towers is a spectacular moment of beauty to serve as a reminder of the possibility of making the impossible happen:

The core reason for it all was beauty. Walking was a divine delight. Everything was rewritten when he was up in the air. New things were possible with the human form. It went beyond equilibrium. He felt for a moment uncreated. Another kind of awake. (p. 164.)

The impossibility of walking a wire between the two towers creates a 'space of wonder', not only for Petit but for all the onlookers who watch in awe. The success of the walk thus intrinsically signifies walking from the darkness into the light,

unearthing the possibility of finding hidden moments of wonder amidst the grim reality of daily life – both on a grand scale as represented in the spectacle of the walk, and in everyday moments as reflected in the lives of each of the characters in the novel, whose stories connect and collide around this event as it is taking place. In pivoting their connection around Petit’s walk, and the duality of its perfection and its impossibility, McCann reminds us that each of these characters is flawed, but that flaws are necessary in balancing the ways in which beauty can be appreciated: ‘A single flaw was necessary anyway. In any work of beauty there had to be one small thread left hanging.’ (p. 160-1.) This reiterates the belief that each of the characters is flawed in some way, but they are all connected in attempting to move from darkness into light, with the impossibility of the walk reminding us that ‘It had to work as a kind of faith that he would get to the other side.’ (p. 160.) Essentially, the notion of walking from the darkness into the light is linked to finding moments of beauty. McCann focuses his exploration of beauty in connection and beauty through connection in the parallels between Petit and Corrigan. For Petit, beauty is presented as a grand spectacle; whereas Corrigan wishes to find similar moments of beauty in the everyday. Corrigan’s quest for finding the ‘light’ in dark places is both driven by his faith and what roots him in the everyday. The ultimate beauty of Corrigan lies not only in his wish to make the lives of others a little better in these small ways, but also in the perceptions that the people Corrigan has surrounded himself with – who he has connected with – have of him. Corrigan exudes a sense of beauty which is realised in the simplicity of the things he does; he creates the moments of beauty which brings a light into their own ‘everyday’. Ciaran comments that: ‘He was at the origin of things and I now had a meaning for my brother – he was a crack of light under the door.’ (p.67.) In the same way that the walk represented the possibility of new things, of re-

writing the impossible, Ciaran recognises the possibilities for transformation in his brother: 'he made people become what they didn't think they could become. He twisted something in their hearts. Gave them new places to go.' (p. 154.) In this manner, Corrigan is the embodiment of Petit's reflection that 'Everything had purpose, signal, meaning.' (p. 162.) This is the faith which propels Petit spectacularly across the wire and which is the foundation for the simplicity by which Corrigan lives his life.

Possibilities for transformation through finding beauty

Corrigan's life is thus the epiphany of simplicity and beauty. McCann allows us to experience the varying beauties of his life – his simplicity, the beauty of the small moments; his faith; his struggle with his feelings for Adelita; his relationship with the prostitutes. All of these are beautiful in their unity as well as in their plurality. They are all the more beautiful in their juxtaposition to the harshness and struggle of his life in the Bronx, because he does not see the horror of the drugs, violence and poverty like his brother does, he focuses only on the ways that he can make their lives better in some small way: in letting the prostitutes use his bathroom; in taking the locks off his door so that his apartment is always open to them; in spontaneously buying them a coke. What demonstrates the real value of these small moments is the beauty that others find in him through them. Unknowingly, it is the simplest of moments created through his varying connections through which these small moments are manifested, and which become the moments which bring a little light into the darkness of others' lives. McCann best illuminates this in the way he juxtaposes Tillie's most despairing

thoughts when she is in prison, about how she came to be there and her thoughts regarding her life and failings as a mother, with flashes of everyday moments of simplicity relating to Corrigan:

“Say fuhgeddboudit, Corrie.”

“Fergetaboutit.”

“No no no, say fuhgeddboudit.”

“Fergedboutit.”

“Oh, man, fuhgeddboudit!”

“Okay, Tillie,” he said, “I’ll fuh-get-bout-it.” (p. 225.)

The way in which these moments of light are presented with no introduction or follow up, amidst her contemplations of suicide, metaphorically represents the way in which Corrigan acts as a small light in the darkness for her. Indeed, she recalls not just how he has made her life a little better, but the effect he had on her daughter: ‘Jazzlyn used to say she loved him like chocolate.’ (p. 226.) Corrigan’s presence in their lives was an antidote to the despair and harshness which surrounded them, and is the pivot from which their symbiotic relationship is based. Through him, they are perceived in a much better light; he illuminates the beauty in them, whilst they drive his faith and his belief that through them, and in them, ‘He had seen something beautiful’. (p. 78.) McCann is suggesting that moments like these are what make the world spin, pivoting on the juxtaposition of the frailty and the harshness implicit in each fragment of life.

The novel is intrinsically built upon finding and uncovering hidden beauty; capturing moments which reveal fragments of people's lives, moments which through the tightrope walk, connect the story of one person's life to another through unexpected collisions and intersections, reminding us that beauty can be found in the simplest of things, in those uncluttered moments which capture the simplicity of another's story. It is these moments of purity and realisation which remind us of the intersections in our lives and the ways in which we connect to others. Within these moments McCann implies that we 'bring a little noise into the silence, find in others the ongoing of ourselves.' (p. 349.) As such they are a reminder of continuance, of finding beauty in the tragic, of bringing noise into the silence, of connecting an ending to a beginning. McCann reminds us that we are all 'pilots of the purple twilight'; we are all arbiters of the darkness, but we all have the propensity to move from the darkness into the light, to find something of Corrigan in our own lives as we endeavour to feel: 'the light now pressing the dark out of things. We stumble on, now, we drain the light from the dark, to make it last.' (p. 349.) We find the hope. We look past the flaws. We fill the silence.

Through this exploration of the ways in which Corrigan searches for light – as moments of beauty – McCann also examines connection that has a purpose. At the centre of the novel are two mini-stories of characters that find beauty. While these chapters clearly tie in to the theme of connections with and through beauty, they are also clearly separate from the connections which each of the other stories in the novel tangentially possess, but nevertheless highlight moments upon which the key themes of the novel pivot. Each story illustrates the importance of networks: the physical

network of the subway running beneath New York City and the electronic networks linked to the development of the internet. Both are intrinsically focused around finding moments of beauty – as a personal quest for bringing hidden beauty into the light in ‘Tag’: ‘A beautiful thing, all caught in shadow’, (p. 171) and the possibilities of multiple connections through the beginnings of the internet in ‘Etherwest’: ‘You’re trying to tell me I’m talking to a computer?’ (p. 180). In *Tag*, Fernando Marcano is a teenage boy who rides the subway trains attempting to photograph the work of taggers. In trying to uncover works of hidden beauty by photographing them and bringing them to light, these are the moments in which he finds his own kind of connection. In capturing the beauty in a new tag, ‘The way the light came through’, (p. 173) was the thrill which he fuelled his task. The camera for Fernando was the object which allowed him to connect with others, operating as the ‘unspoken thing between him and the others.’ (p. 160) Capturing hidden art was also full of possibility, the image providing a chance for him to change the way others see things: ‘Making people see differently. Making them think twice.’ (p. 160). Each image has the potential to move from darkness into light, and in doing so sheds new light on other people’s perceptions, changing them in some some way; helping them to connect. In a similar way, in ‘Etherwest’, forming connections between people are at the heart of the story, filling the silences, completing the disconnect between people. The hackers in ‘Etherwest’ articulate their intrinsic understanding of the possibilities of multiple unknown connections via computer programming: ‘You’ve got the whole country onboard. This is America. You hit the frontier. You can go anywhere. It’s about being connected, access, gateways...’, (p. 197.) thus linking things together that might otherwise be deemed impossible. These chapters point towards the creation of new possibilities through unexpected and tenuous collisions, wherein each character

realises the possibilities of their own creativity and ambition. As Fernando calls it in ‘Tag’: ‘a brand new space’; (p. 174) discovering a new tag on the roof of a subway tunnel; connecting with people on the other side of the country through a computer generated telephone line – it is the faith with which each of these tasks are undertaken which makes each a positive collision. They are connected through Petit’s tightrope walk – as an act of faith in its illustration of ways in which events which might previously have be perceived as ridiculous, such as walking a wire between the two towers of the World Trade Centre – can instead be deemed possible. In essence, they are acts of collision which affirm Gloria’s thoughts towards the end of the novel that ‘life is lived in many ways – so many unopened envelopes.’ (p. 339.) These two seemingly disconnected to the other stories and characters in the novel reiterate McCann’s premise surrounding the positive effects of unexpected connections and collisions.

However, collisions in the novel are not always good. McCann manipulates the trope of collision to expose the ways in which some collisions do not always result in the creation of a positive space, and can actually prove to be destructive. Jazzlyn and Corrigan both lose their life because of the physical hit and run collision between their car and that of the artist couple, Blaine and Lara. As a further consequence of this collision Tillie despairingly decides to take her own life while in prison, to disconnect the perpetuation of the path her life has taken in prostitution to her grandchildren, after Jazzlyn’s death. These destructive elements of collision are ultimately the echo of the most significant collision around which the novel silently balances – the destruction caused by the collision of the planes and the towers of the World Trade

Center on 9/11. What is most significant throughout the novel is the definite movement towards transforming these negative collisions into life affirming moments of beauty, from out of the darkness into the light. To this end, McCann remarks that ‘two human towers [Corrie and Jazzlyn] had fallen early on in the novel, and we spend the rest of the time trying to build them back up again.’¹⁹ McCann transforms the tragedy of Corrigan’s death into a new beginning for his brother Ciaran and Lara as they begin a new relationship and eventually get married. Through Tillie’s decision to remove herself from her grandchildren’s life, it becomes possible for them to live a new life with Gloria, thereby creating a positive new beginning for the three of them. The way in which the ending of two lives creates a beginning for many others reflects the restorative qualities surrounding the balance that McCann creates throughout *Let the Great World Spin*. In her article on McCann’s New York novels, Sinead Moynihan suggests that McCann’s novels emphasize the ‘beauty of balance’ but also ‘hint paradoxically at the restorative possibilities of imbalance.’²⁰ Developing on from her comments it can therefore be asserted that this paradox of imbalance and balance is the axis upon which events in the novel pivot, metaphorically represented through the balancing act of Petit walking across the wire between the two towers.

Restorative symbolism

Most significantly, shadowing each of these life affirming balancing acts is the restorative symbolism that lies behind the fact that Petit made the impossible a reality by completing his walk without falling. This is what ultimately overwrites the echo of 9/11. Martin Randall reinforces this through his remarks regarding Petit’s walk: ‘the

very real possibility of his death hangs over proceedings but its eventual success (and intrinsic beauty) reverses the memory of those who fell or jumped from the towers on September 11.²¹ Through this echo, the novel may be perceived as very much a post-9/11 novel, wherein it re-claims the World Trade Center as a positive space. In drawing together all the threads in each of the stories in the novel, the voices of what McCann refers to as ‘the ordinary people on the street, the ones who walked a tightrope just one inch off the ground,’²² the tightrope walk in McCann’s novel points towards recovery in the recreation of the walk as an act of hope that stands in ‘direct defiance to the act of destruction’ which took place on 9/11.²³ The success of Petit’s walk between the towers reverses the fundamental lack of empathy that caused 9/11. The space between the towers becomes emblematic of a space of positive transformation and instead presents a vision of empathy based on positive connections.

In his article written just a few days after the events of 9/11, Ian McEwan comments on our capacity to imagine ourselves into those moments of tragedy experienced by the victims; thinking oneself into the minds of others, he suggests, is the very nature of empathy: ‘Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality.’²⁴ It is this human instinct for compassion that compels McCann to point the way forward in articulating the need for a sense of connection in the metaphoric space left by the towers. Instead of remaining a place reminiscent of the unspeakable, his presentation of twenty-first-century New York, and the divisions between cultures and people that the city represents, becomes a site of 9/11. He reminds us of the desire

to rebalance, of the need to speak, to articulate a sense of connection, to ‘bring a little noise into the silence,’ (p. 349), and in doing so, to release the silence surrounding the suffering. The importance of not only speaking, but listening to each other’s stories, is not only the continuing inspiration for his work, but is also the legacy that lies at the heart of *Let The Great World Spin*, as his final words in the Author’s Note at the end of the novel reveal: ‘*Literature can remind us that not all life is already written down. There are still so many stories to be told.*’ There are still so many connections to be made; so many beautiful moments to be realised.

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- ¹ Joel Lovell, 'Colum McCann's Radical Empathy' in *The New York Times*, 30 May 2013, para. 1 <www.nytimes.com/2013/06/02/magazine/colum-mccanns-radical-empathy.html> [accessed 22.07.13].
- ² Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: UCL Press Limited, 1997), p. 180.
- ³ Colum McCann, *Let the Great World Spin* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009), p. 72; further references to *Let the Great World Spin* refer to this edition and are given in parentheses after quotations in the text.
- ⁴ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. 180.
- ⁵ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. 180.
- ⁶ Aidan Arrowsmith, 'Photographic Memories: Nostalgia and Irish Diaspora Writing' in *Textual Practice* 19 (2), 2005, 297-322, p. 297.
- ⁷ Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas*, p. 180.
- ⁸ Reference songs?
- ⁹ Aidan Arrowsmith, 'Photographic Memories', p.300.
- ¹⁰ Aidan Arrowsmith, 'Photographic Memories', p.300.
- ¹¹ Mary Robinson, 'What makes Us Human', Radio 2 interview.
- ¹² Narrative 4: <<http://narrative4.com/about>> [accessed 22/07/2013], para 2.
- ¹³ Colm McCann, 'Author, Author: Stories are there to be told', in *The Guardian*, 5th September 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/sep/05/colum-mccann-author>> [accessed 22/07/2013].
- ¹⁴ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2006), p. xix.
- ¹⁵ Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism*, p. xix.
- ¹⁶ Martin Randall, "'A Certain Blurring of the Facts': *Man on Wire* and 9/11" in *9/11 and the Literature of Terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), p. 90.
- ¹⁷ *Man on Wire*, Dir. James Marsh. Discovery Films, 2008.
- ¹⁸ Martin Randall, 'A Certain Blurring of the Facts', p. 95.
- ¹⁹ Colum McCann, '2009 National Book Award Winner Fiction: Interview with Colum McCann' by Bret Anthony Johnston <http://www.nationalbook.org/nba2009_f_mccann_interv.html> [accessed 14/01/14].
- ²⁰ Sinead Moynihan, "'Upground and Belowground Topographies": The Chronotopes of Skyscraper and Subway on Colum McCann's New York Novels Before and After 9/11', in *Studies in American Fiction*, 39.2 (2012), 269-290, p. 286.
- ²¹ Martin Randall, 'A Certain Blurring of the Facts', p. 98.
- ²² Colum McCann, 'Author, Author: Stories are there to be told', in *The Guardian*, 5th September 2009, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/sep/05/colum-mccann-author>> [accessed 22/07/2013].
- ²³ Colum McCann, 'Author, Author: Stories are there to be told',
- ²⁴ Ian McEwan, 'Only Love and then Oblivion', in *The Guardian*, 15th September 2001, <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/sep/15/september11.politicsphilosphyandsocial>> [accessed 22/07/2013].

CONCLUSION

In 'Outside History'¹, Eavan Boland remarks that Irish literature is irreducibly infused with the concept of the nation, of 'the idea of an Ireland, resolved and healed of its wounds.'¹ This is evident in each of the works of contemporary Irish literature which have been explored throughout this thesis. Each chapter has analysed the ways in which celebrated contemporary writers in the first decade of the twenty-first-century have attempted to express the desire for healing and recovery bound within the central premise of their work. Infused throughout each text across the varying genres examined ideas of subversion and silence, marginality and isolation, have been presented in opposition to increasingly restorative concepts of identity. Reflective of notions of fluidity and the possibilities of change through new forms of connection, each writer has expressed a tendency towards healing and breaking the silence of defeat and grief which has surrounded the idea of the Irish experience.

Of key significance to new and emerging forms of identity in contemporary Ireland from this particular juncture of Irish writing, is the importance of delicately balancing both the comfort and corruption of literary amnesia with regards to the past, alongside both the weakness and enlightenment of the truth. Boland asserts the primacy of human connection, from the past into the present:

Our present will become the past of other men and women. We depend on them to remember it with the complexity with which it was suffered. As others, once, depended on us.²

These ideas of the importance of focusing on the fluidity of our connection to each other across time, through conflict, and within our own voices resonate with all of the works of fiction across each genre explored in this thesis. Human connection exceeding boundaries of space and place, both physical and spiritual, is what will articulate the silences of the past; human connection forged on the healing wounds of the past is the foundation of a more progressive vision of identity in the future - both on a national and on an individual platform. The ideas of Colum McCann expressed in the final chapter are of particular importance here. As previously stated, McCann foregrounds the primacy of our connections with each other based on empathy, asserting that our ability to empathise is what makes us human. He comments on the possibility of finding hope through alternative readings of experience, and through subtle changes of perspective across time and through different voices: ‘each story changes with the telling. Time changes them [...] each story is shifted sideways by each day that unfolds.’² Empathy is thus what binds together each of the writers whose work has been explored within this thesis; the ways in which people care about each other and make positive connections outside those boundaries which are traditionally fixed is the key premise that subtly fuses each of these works of contemporary fiction together. Connecting through empathy reminds us of the desire to acknowledge the complexities of the past, of the need to rebalance the grief of suffering, to articulate a sense of connection through the fluidity of time. In doing so, as previously stated in the dedication at the beginning of this thesis, connections rooted in empathy allow us to ‘find in others the ongoing of ourselves’ (p. 349).

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¹ Eavan Boland, 'Outside History', in *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995), p.128.

² Boland, p.153.

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