

In Extremis: An Aesthetics of Excess in Fiction of the Troubles in
Northern Ireland

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ABSTRACT

IN EXTREMIS: AN AESTHETICS OF EXCESS IN FICTION OF THE TROUBLES IN NORTHERN IRELAND

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This dissertation examines a shared aesthetics of excess, and the reasons for its presence, in the works of five writers whose novels about the Troubles in Northern Ireland have been published since 1994: Seamus Deane (*Reading in the Dark*); Ann Burns (*No Bones*, *Little Constructions*, and *Milkman*); David Keenan (*For the Good Times*); Eoin McNamee (*Resurrection Man* and *The Ultras*); and Michael Hughes (*Country*). The novels under study express and reflect psychological trauma, present small-slice, phenomenological history to challenge and augment official records, confront the violent realities of war, and illustrate sociological aspects of identity tied to gender, class, politics, religion, and place. In this analysis of how and why these authors rely on excess—topical, thematic, and stylistic—to represent the lived experience of the Troubles, I bring together several theoretical threads. First, I consider the historic context of the works and the extreme violence, sectarianism, and ethno-nationalism that characterized the time period. Then, I build on Caruth's theory of trauma and literature, with its emphasis on gaps, redactions, and witness unreliability, as well as newer models for the representation of trauma which note corporeal and social dimensions of excessive traumatic affect in an age of mediatized terroristic experiences. Next, I examine exaggeration in these works in light of Stephen Ritter's theory on the tropological functions of hyperbole that allow us to discover new truths and Christopher Johnson's heuristic continuum of expressibility and contention that linguistic extremes

(exaggeration, understatement, and silences) are used when the writer must express something extraordinary or incredible, because straightforward language is insufficient. Finally, I examine the poetics of excess found in these novels, i.e., patterns of excess in the writing itself, particularly in narrative structures, syntax, diction, and the use of exaggerated forms of humor such as parody and absurdity. They encompass a range of styles, employing linguistic and syntactical techniques rooted in medieval Irish poetry and/or inherently hyperbolic genres such as the Gothic and noir. Overall, this project seeks to explain how excessive elements of style and content work together to create fiction that captures the complexity of the Troubles.

DEDICATION

To my mother, who gifted me with a love of reading and writing, a reverence for learning, her belief in my ability to engage in intellectual work—and an Irish heritage that led me to cross the ocean and find myself at home.

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ABBREVIATIONS

<i>CTY</i>	<i>Country</i>
<i>FTGT</i>	<i>For the Good Times</i>
IRA	Irish Republican Army
<i>LC</i>	<i>Little Constructions</i>
<i>MM</i>	<i>Milkman</i>
<i>NB</i>	<i>No Bones</i>
PIRA	Provisional Irish Republican Army
<i>RITD</i>	<i>Reading in the Dark</i>
<i>RM</i>	<i>Resurrection Man</i>
RUC	Royal Ulster Constabulary
SAS	Special Air Services
SDLP	Social Democratic and Labor Party
<i>TU</i>	<i>The Ultras</i>
UDA	Ulster Defense Association
UFF	Ulster Freedom Fighters
UVF	Ulster Volunteer Force

INTRODUCTION

“The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.”

– William Blake, “*Proverbs from Hell*”
in *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*

The past three decades, and especially the last ten years, have seen an outpouring of literature about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. In poems, plays, and works of fiction and nonfiction prose, a culture of storytellers has tried to capture and communicate the experiences of living through the civil unrest that tore apart a tiny province on the tip of an island off the west coast of Europe at the end of the twentieth century. This dissertation examines a shared aesthetics of excess, and the reasons for its presence, in the works of five writers whose novels about the Troubles have been published since 1994, when the ceasefire that led to the end of the armed conflict went into effect: Seamus Deane (*Reading in the Dark*); Ann Burns (*No Bones*, *Little Constructions*, and *Milkman*); David Keenan (*For the Good Times*); Eoin McNamee (*Resurrection Man* and *The Ultras*); and Michael Hughes (*Country*).

***IN EXTREMIS* – LIFE IN THE LONG WAR**

The Troubles in Northern Ireland raged on for three decades, from the late 1960s until the millennium. The population of Northern Ireland had been divided into two traditions since the state was established, through partition, in 1920: (generally Protestant) unionists, who wished to keep Northern Ireland united with Great Britain, and (generally Catholic) nationalists, who longed to reunite the North of Ireland with the rest of the island in one Irish nation. In 1968, in response to a civil rights movement, sectarian violence erupted in the cities of Derry and Belfast, then spread to the rest of the statelet.

A year later, Great Britain sent in troops to try to restore order, but the violence escalated as a deadly, triangulated power struggle involving paramilitary groups from the two sectarian factions and government forces played out in urban and rural areas alike.

Violence became a defining feature of everyday life for those living in the north—if it was not directly impacting them on any given day, it was always in the air, on the radio and television, around the corner, or in the next town over. The presence of British soldiers at checkpoints along country roads, at the caged entrances of city department stores, or walking along one's garden wall, were reminders of constant surveillance and the ever-present potential for danger, as were hovering helicopters, exploding car bombs, and burning buses. In a country of 1.5 million people, no one was far removed from the dead or maimed.

The normalization of violence lent a surreal quality to life in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Life necessarily, and determinedly, went on over the thirty-year course of political upheaval. Everyday routines, while punctuated or temporarily disrupted by violence, were maintained as much as possible. In her 1997 essay, "Nine Snapshots from living and working in Belfast," journalist Hilary Robinson quotes a friend whose neighborhood had, days earlier, been the site of a confrontation between the RUC and young men throwing petrol bombs: "We go out to the local shops once or twice a day for a pint of milk or a newspaper, just to make the point that we will get through" (50). People continued to work, celebrate holidays, go to the pub, and send their children to school. Those children experienced violence as the backdrop to everyday existence and learned to live with it, but not without a psychological and emotional cost. Author Martina Devlin, who grew up in the North during the Troubles, writes: "Children adapt to

anything. To the sight of army foot patrols by the bottom of their garden. To the blaze of sirens interrupting their sleep. To roadblocks springing up without warning—identities checked, car boots searched” (110). In his memoir about growing up in Derry, Darran Anderson adds, “A childhood, however abnormal to others, is always normal to those living it” (4). Journalist Shauneen Armstrong, who spent her 1970s and 1980s childhood in Andersonstown, a beleaguered Catholic neighborhood in west Belfast, reflects a similar sentiment: “Life happened, a normal life, until at times . . . something happened and you were hit with how it’s not normal and how people, not so far away, didn’t live with this” (“Growing Up in the Troubles”).

Psychologists tell us that as people become habituated to violence, their emotions are “dampened, resulting in less emotional distress” (Mrug 76); that traumatic response, a numbing of heart and mind, was at least as pervasive to the experience of living through the Troubles as was the violence that precipitated it. Robinson writes:

Just a couple of days after the last scenes of protest and riot would have been broadcast worldwide, local areas were 'back to normal'. In the city centre teenagers were just hanging out during their school vacations, and the shops started their annual summer sales, their only concession being to cancel the weekly late-night shopping on Thursday July 11. The only visual reminders a week later were the remaining scars on the road surfaces where vehicles had been burned and petrol bombs thrown, and the newly boarded-up houses (between 300 and 600, depending which newspaper you read) indicating where families have been intimidated out - mainly Catholics living in predominantly Protestant areas; some Protestants in Catholic areas: some mixed marriage families. (50)

A numbed response is one element of what Michael Richardson calls the “excess of affect” that acts of terror—whether perpetuated by paramilitaries or state forces—engender. The damage that results from acts of spectacular violence such as bomb blasts, people being burnt out of their homes, or security forces shooting into crowds of unarmed civilians is contagious. It traumatizes not only those directly impacted, but “those

touched by its rippling consequences and mediatized representations” (Richardson, “Terrorism” 320). Civilians in the North experienced many years of their lives as unpredictable and dangerous, and for children growing up during the Troubles, it was the only way of life they knew. Their days were characterized by the sort of juxtaposition of the banal and the horrific that soldiers refer to when describing combat tours. Even when the patterns of daily life were uninterrupted, a continuous potential for violence eroded any sense of personal security.

Northern Irish literature of the past several decades has naturally been preoccupied with the impacts of this prolonged period of civil unrest. Violence, desensitization, paranoia, trauma, questions of identity, militarization, and the weight of history all feature prominently in novels about the Troubles. The intensity in this fiction emanates from its portrayal of a world in which characters must be simultaneously concerned with the daily affairs of family and work life, terrorist activity, and state apparatuses that become increasingly intrusive, oppressive, and violent. The only certainty for those living in such a “deeply militarized and violent society” (McAleese xvi) is the knowledge that the ordinariness of daily life is fragile and may, at any moment, be replaced with catastrophe. Fiction of the Troubles seeks to represent trauma that is both individual and collective, conscious that damage to the individual cannot be separated from the context of a damaged society.

The nationalist trauma narrative in Northern Ireland is intertwined with the formation and governance of the statelet. The history of violence in Ulster¹ in the years

¹ The term Ulster is often used to refer to Northern Ireland, although in fact only six of the nine counties of the province of Ulster were actually partitioned off from Ireland. References to Northern Ireland as “the six counties” reflect this fact.

leading up to the 1916 Easter Rising and through the process of partition, the internment of dissidents, and the continuous debasements of disenfranchisement, discriminatory employment and housing practices, heavy-handed policing, and civil rights abuses experienced by nationalists in the north of Ireland “scarred the Catholic psyche in the North” (Munck 213). The Ulster Unionist leader David Trimble, in accepting the 1998 Nobel Peace Prize (shared with the nationalist politician, John Hume) acknowledged that the Stormont government had “built a cold house for Catholics” in Northern Ireland (“Nobel Lecture”). Intergenerational trauma has recently become the subject of much research in Northern Ireland, spurred in part by a spike in suicide rates among not just the generation that experienced the Troubles, but also their children. Such trauma occurs when “what human beings cannot contain of their experience—what has been traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable—falls out of social discourse, but very often on to and into the next generation” (Fromm xvi).² It seems reasonable to assume that intergenerational trauma was also experienced after Partition by those Catholics living in a segregated Northern Ireland under the rule of what James Craig called “a Protestant parliament and a Protestant state” (“On ‘A Protestant Parliament’”). Munck’s oral histories reveal that during the 1950s, for instance, “[t]he sectarian divide was ... expressed in a physical way through the various affirmations of Protestant superiority and through an assertion of what was seen as territorial rights... There is an overwhelming impression of physical force being used to maintain segregation and contain any Catholic spark of rebellion” (212). In 1950, Deane’s narrator in *Reading in*

² There may also be a biological component in intergenerational trauma. Epigenetics is a growing field in famine studies.

the Dark, at age ten, is haunted by the image of his dying aunt Ena, which evokes in him a “sensation that there was a deeper sorrow in the family that I could not yet know ... asking me to acknowledge the sharpness of a grief that could so pierce the heart” (51). Trauma is already present in the world of the narrator, evinced by the constant sense of uncertainty, the silences, and the slippery nature of truth that permeate the private and public milieus which he inhabits. As his contemporary and collaborator at *Field Day*, Brian Friel, famously did in *Translations*, Deane illustrates for his readers the ways in which continuous and accumulated oppression or exploitation traumatize no less than a catastrophic event (He 127).

TRAUMA AND TRAUMATIC AFFECT

During the decades when the Troubles were taking place, the study of psychological trauma was advancing. Contemporary conceptions of trauma recognize that often, rather than being the product of a single catastrophic event, trauma is the result of “a constellation of experiences” or “a *persisting condition*” (Erikson 185).³ Growing recognition of the effects on people of living through a thirty-year period of civil unrest intersected with an outpouring of poetry and fiction from Northern Ireland, and unsurprisingly, the literature written during or about the Troubles depicted traumatized characters. Novels *about* trauma, where “the depiction of trauma and traumatic experience is . . . essentially objective” gave way in the early twenty-first century to *trauma novels* that strive to “represent traumatic experience directly through innovative style” (Garratt 124-25).

³ Emphasis in the original.

In *Milkman*, Burns's narrator, speaking from a vantage point of twenty years after the Troubles ended, and thus a least half of a century after Deane's narrator's story, makes explicit reference to trauma in explaining why people tried to maintain some forms of civility even in the midst of an explosively violent society; "[U]nderneath the trauma and the darkness," she says, there was "a normality trying to happen" (112). Claire Wills points out that the psychological concept of trauma is not known to or recognized by the characters living in the 1970s world of *Milkman*. She argues that these tiny insertions of later reflection by the narrator, expressed in "a twenty-first century therapeutic language of self-expression" actually set up a contrast that implies that, "without an appropriate language in which to express their feelings," Burns's 1970s "characters can't really feel. Emotions such as shame or sorrow (or fear, pity, and compassion) have to wait until there are words for them" ("The Unnameable"). It is worth noting here that Wills's review shares its title, "The Unnamable," with a short story by Beckett, another northern Irish writer whose work is marked by deeply significant silences.

Certainly, the trauma experienced by the narrators of these novels is caused by events in their lives that are at once personal and rooted in the historical-political situation in which they lived because, as Deane noted in an interview following the publication of *Reading in the Dark*, "the border between the private and the public is narrower there than it would be in a larger society or a less oppressed one" ("Interview" *Weekly Wire*). Silence can seem to be a state of refuge for trauma victims, and many of the characters in the novels work hard to maintain their silence. Trauma theory pioneer Judith Herman contends, however, that while the natural response to atrocities is make

every attempt to ignore them, they simply will not be ignored; this “conflict between the will to deny horrible events and the will to proclaim them aloud is the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (Herman 1). This central dilemma—whether, or when a traumatized individual can remain silent or can find a way to speak—becomes an overriding concern in novels about the Troubles.

Cathy Caruth’s groundbreaking work on trauma in the 1990s inspired an entire field of trauma studies in the humanities. In particular, she links literature with the understanding of trauma, arguing that the effort “to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that simultaneously is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways in which it defies and demands our witness” must be pursued using “a language that is always somehow literary; a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding” (*Unclaimed* 5). Caruth also raises questions about the ethical dilemma of trauma victims who grapple with the sense that the act of telling is in and of itself a betrayal of the past, that sharing is a betrayal of the one(s) who died by the survivor (*Unclaimed* 27-28). Further, the reliability of witness accounts is called into question by the deferred nature of experienced trauma. Trauma includes an inherent gap between the precipitating event that is not processed as it occurs and its reemergence from memory, leaving its accuracy open to doubt.

More recent studies of the poetics of trauma literature have argued that unspeakability alone is insufficient to explain the ways in which trauma can be and is represented in contemporary fiction. For instance, Katharina Donn and Michael Richardson, in (separately) analyzing the literary response to the trauma experienced after the destruction of New York City’s World Trade Center in 2001, argue that while the

paradigm of unspeakability remains salient in literary representations of trauma, it is an incomplete, even reductive, model for literature about trauma. Because “the body marks the presence of trauma as words fail,” there has been a growing interest recently among trauma scholars in how the corporeal aspect of trauma may challenge the inevitability of unspeakability and indicate a path for representation (Donn 14-15). Richardson, too, argues that trauma is affective, rather than simply psychological; literature that depicts it must account for its “impacts on the body and its relations to the world” (“Terrorism” 121). While Donn links her argument for a reconsideration of the limits of literary representations of trauma to developments in mediatization and digitization after 9/11 (1), Richardson moves the impacts of mediatization back to the widespread television coverage of the last few decades of the twentieth century (“Terrorism” 323). Also, it should be noted that Donn traces the corporeal and affective elements of trauma on which she rests her poetics to the twentieth century memory studies of Walter Benjamin and Langer (14). Certainly, literary corporeal representations of trauma predate novels about 9/11. In *Reading in the Dark* (1996), for instance, the protagonist’s mother refuses to speak of the terrible knowledge of a family secret she has discovered; eventually, in an embodied inhibition of telling, she suffers a stroke that renders her permanently unable to speak at all and eliminates any hope of repairing her damaged relationship with her son. Such materiality in relation to affect illustrates the simultaneously individual and communal aspects of trauma – that is, embodiment is at once a uniquely individual experience and a “universal condition of existence” (Donn 15).

Richardson’s expanded framework for considering trauma associated with terrorism is extremely pertinent to why and how authors use elements of excess to

represent trauma in many novels of the Troubles. Because terrorism is very much concerned with spectacle, and because modern media broadcasts spectacular acts of terrorism over and over again, the trauma of terrorism in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries is “as cultural as it is personal, as collective as it is individual” (Richardson, “Terrorism” 326). A psychological model of trauma, then, is insufficient to fully explain the trauma of terrorism and its “rippling consequences.” Trauma associated with terrorism impacts not just the psychology of the individual, but “bodies, societies, and their relations to one another and the world” (Richardson, “Terrorism” 321).

Richardson uses as his illustration the events of 9/11. Even those who were not present at an original event become (vicarious) witnesses to it through the media. Hundreds of millions of people have watched, multiple times, airplanes fly into the sides of World Trade Center towers in New York City. Further, the response of the state to acts of terror impacts all members of society. Millions must remove their shoes to pass through airport security because one man tried to detonate an explosive device in his sneaker on an airplane shortly after the WTC attack. Richardson’s examination of fiction related to 9/11 terrorism focuses on the *contagious affectivity* of the attack, i.e., the idea that trauma results not just from the physical violence of the act itself, but from the ongoing terror which it instills about what might happen next and about how the sources of trauma expand to include the response of the state. Novelists writing about the events and impacts of 9/11 were confronted with the question of how to portray the complexity of “trauma that is at once individual and collective, about an event that occurred and has yet to arrive, impossible to narrate and yet everywhere as a spectacle” (Richardson, “Terrorism” 327). What are the implications, then, for literature concerned with a thirty-

year period of terrorizing political violence? According to the CAIN project at Ulster University, there were more than 10,000 bomb attacks in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. Tens of thousands of British troops were deployed to the streets of Northern Ireland in 1969 and remained there until 2007. This dissertation will consider various ways in which novelists writing about the Troubles represent an “excess of affect” of this magnitude.

THE AESTHETICS AND POETICS OF EXCESS

I propose an *aesthetics of excess* has emerged in many novels about the Troubles. This aesthetics reflects the protracted nature of the conflict, the relentless presence of violence, and the resulting trauma. This trauma is not restricted to individual experience but permeates the community as a whole, manifesting in a range of phenomena that includes paranoia, rage, reenactment, a normalization of the intolerable, and psychological dissociation. Many aspects of these novels, from structure, to symbolism, to graphic violence, *re-present* the extreme disruptions and psychological wounds—pragmatic, societal, and personal—suffered by those living through the war. As a group, they incorporate many of the characteristics of trauma as portrayed in the greater body of Irish literature, including temporal fluidity (interrupted chronology), narrative dualism (adults reconstructing memories later), and questions related to the subjective nature of experience and the unreliability of memory (Garrett). Yet these works are also distinguished by a sense of the surreal that is achieved by one form or another of the hyperbolic. They incorporate excess topically, thematically, and stylistically. This study will examine the multifarious ways in which the paradigm of excess is reflected in the work of five novelists writing about the Troubles, and how the use of obvious excess

paradoxically supports the understanding of these novels as realistic, historical fiction. Further, it will show that, as part of this larger aesthetics, a *poetics of excess* has emerged, incorporating a number of linguistic techniques in support of thematic concerns relating to living with extremes.

Expressibility

C. D. Johnson has theorized that all linguistic acts fall somewhere on a spectrum of the “*quantity of expressibility*.” The heuristic continuum he proposes moves from silence, to understatement, to verisimilitude, to hyperbole, and then to back to what may be an altered silence. In such a conception, exaggeration, understatement, and silences are used when the speaker (or writer) must express something extraordinary or incredible, precisely because simple, straightforward language (or, in the case of silence, *any* language) is insufficient to express the *res* (Johnson 8-9).

There exists a good deal of literary scholarship around silences in modern Irish literature. Post-colonial interpretations of Irish literature examine the role of silencing in order to establish hegemony of British rule (and the English language). Michael McAteer, editor of a recent volume of essays about silence in nineteenth and twentieth century Irish literature, suggests that silences in Irish literary works are tied in complex and ambiguous ways to “a broken Gaelic tradition and an unsettled Anglo-Irish history of settlement in Ireland,” and, as such, they are associated with both political violence and psychological disturbance (*Silence* 3-4). Given the community trauma experienced by the Northern population, there is a special urgency and intensity to the silences we encounter in the literature of the Troubles. In one of his best-known poems, “Whatever You Say, Say Nothing,” Seamus Heaney writes of “the famous Northern reticence,” tying

it directly to Troubles, “the tight gag of place and times.” He turns to hyperbole and metaphor to express the excessive nature of this reticence, noting, “Smoke-signals are loud-mouthed compared to us.” At least some silences during the Troubles were tied to survival—indeed, silence can be an essential tool for those negotiating the violence of ethnic conflict (McCormack 50). Sectarian violence was a real danger, and saying the wrong thing the wrong way to the wrong person could have dire consequences. The narrator of *Ripley Bogle* asserts, “Aspirate your aitches in the wrong place in Belfast and you end up with a rope round your neck” (Wilson, 42). From an anthropological standpoint, silences are seen to serve the cultural censorship within and between communities; thus, important silences may underlie the “sociability [that] masks adversarial positions in both public and private life” (McCormack 52). In his poem, Heaney describes how this kind of deliberate silencing that exists beneath conversation is maintained by relying on a set of familiar, expected, and acceptable responses to violent events:

Expertly civil-tongued with civil neighbours
On the high wires of first wireless reports,
Sucking the fake taste, the stony flavours
Of those sanctioned, old, elaborate retorts

The title of Heaney’s poem replicates, with intentional irony, a folk saw that was coopted by the Irish Republican Army (IRA) during the Troubles as a warning to the nationalist community to beware of any conversation which might serve as—or be interpreted as—an instance of informing (S. Smith, 132). James Joyce famously wrote that the nineteenth-century Fenian uprising failed because “in Ireland, just at the crucial moment, an informer appears” (138). The problem of political betrayals by “grasses” who were feeding information to the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) and the British

military loomed large for the late twentieth-century IRA, as well. The specter of the informer inhabits literature of the Troubles. It haunts the narrator's extended family in Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, hovers ominously in Burns's *Milkman*, and pervades McNamee's *The Ultras*; an informer destroys the cohesion of the small cell of desperate IRA men in Hughes's *Country* and obliterates any lingering illusions about ideological purity in Keenan's *For the Good Times*. The IRA slogan served not only to caution that a careless word might bring harm to members of the Catholic community at the hands of British forces or unionist paramilitaries—it was also a reminder that cooperating with the authorities would result in swift retribution from the nationalist paramilitaries themselves.

However, external threats are only one motivation for the silences of characters in Troubles novels. Silences in literature of the Troubles must also be considered through the lens of trauma studies, in which silence is part of what Freud termed a “willful forgetting” or a compartmentalizing of painful memories for the protection of the psyche, and there is a growing body of scholarship that focuses on this function of silence in Northern Irish literature. This study will examine these various uses of silence insofar as they manifest as forms of excess in the novels under consideration.

At the other end of the expressibility spectrum, Irish literature has a long legacy of using exaggeration, hyperbole, and other forms of literary extravagance to represent realities that seem beyond the capacity of strictly realistic accounts to accurately convey. Two critics of Irish literature in particular, Maria Tymoczko and Michael McAteer, have informed this aspect of the dissertation.

In her examination of the “hyperbolic fantastic” in early Irish poetry and folklore, Maria Tymoczko points to representations of the extreme such as the gigantism, perfect

symmetry, and perfect beauty that pervade early Irish texts. Building on her examination of hyperbolic content, she proposes the presence of a correlative poetics of excess in early Irish works, noting a number of excessive aspects of medieval Irish compositions such as lists and accumulations, iterative episodes, alliteration and a focus on sound for its own sake, i.e., irrespective of meaning. While her primary concern is the link between a “fundamental drift toward intensity and extravagance” and the fantastic or supernatural in Irish literature, she also notes in passing that some elements of a poetics of excess are present in the early twentieth century works of Joyce, Yeats, and Synge (“Hyperbolic” 111-116).

I will demonstrate that such a poetics is also present in writers of the Irish tradition who strive to express the extraordinary nature of life in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, and that this poetics serves a purpose similar to that in ancient Irish texts: it attempts to express what might otherwise be beyond the capacity of language to articulate (although the source of the inexpressibility is quite different). Realized in distinct ways by each writer, an aesthetics and poetics of excess are nonetheless common to the works of Seamus Deane, Anna Burns, David Keenan, Eoin McNamee, and Michael Hughes. Various modes of excess allow these writers to “transcend epistemological and ontological boundaries in order to describe the magnitude of an extraordinary perspective or situation” (Ritter, *Re-imagining* 4). The plight of those living through the Troubles was the shared extraordinary experience of surviving for decades in a society rent in two by political violence, an existence characterized by a range of extreme emotions encompassing grief, anger, and terror, and one which resulted in widespread psychological trauma, paranoia, and desensitization. To adequately re-present life in a

such a context of extremes demands a corollary amplification in the work of the writer. Thus, Deane presents us with Gothic tropes of overwrought emotion and supernatural intrusions; his narrator is trapped, boxed in by the silences around him. In Burns, we find a strong poetics of excess which incorporates lists, long digressions, exaggerations, ironic understatement, and grandiose diction. Keenan writes sentences that go on for pages, pages that are rife with graphic violence, hilarity, narrative disruptions, and a plethora of heavily symbolic devices including mirrors and doppelgängers. McNamee duplicates the duplicity of the “dirty war” of espionage with labyrinthian narrative structure and noir atmosphere; he uses hyperrealism to present violence and affect in a self-consciously highly-stylized manner. Hughes conflates the strife and rage in a rural South Armagh IRA cell with that among the Achaean heroes in Homer’s epic story of the Trojan War. The excesses of style and metaphor in these works depend on the entire range of Johnson’s spectrum of expressibility—the reader encounters silences, ironic understatement, (hyper)realism, and exaggeration. All are central to expression of the calamitous nature of the Troubles, and all are, in some sense, *hyperbolic*, using linguistic forms of excess as a vehicle for communicating the psychological and affective impacts of living with a sustained threat of unpredictable violence.

In his recent book about excess in modern Irish literature, McAteer reviews a number of other theories about why excess is so often present in Irish writing, ranging from nineteenth century English stereotyping of the “Celt” as a naturally excessive race (who must learn moderation from their British rulers) to a twenty-first century interpretation of excess as an expression of the rise of corporate capitalism in Ireland during the “Celtic Tiger” years of the 1990s. McAteer positions his own discussion of

excess in twentieth century Irish literature at the “intersection between the idea of excess as a characteristic of the Celtic temperament and excess as a constitutive feature of modern thought” (*Excess* 24). He, like Tymoczko, traces the beginnings of the tradition of excess in Irish literature back to ancient Irish texts. While the modernist lens he uses to examine the phenomenon of excess is quite different than the one I employ in this dissertation, his discussion of several literary works about the Troubles (none of those under study here) includes some elements that I build upon here, particularly “linguistic excess” and, in the work of Keenan, the treatment of humans as disposable trash.

Hyperbole: The Trope of Excess

Use of the term ‘hyperbole’ to denote exaggeration dates back to the ancient Greeks. An understanding of how hyperbole works is foundational to understanding why it is so effective in the context of novels about the Troubles. A handful of modern scholars have reexamined the place of hyperbole as a trope in literature and rhetoric—a trope that has been ignored because it has long been considered “morally suspect” for its reputation as a “a sly and yet easily discernible attempt to say more than what the situation allows” (Webb 4). This aversion to hyperbole is most often traced to Aristotle’s *Ethics*, wherein the philosopher praises moderation as virtue and condemns excess, noting that “all exaggeration is offensive” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, IV. 7, 9). Yet, some Roman orators, most notably Quintilian and Longinus, acknowledged that hyperbole is justified in some circumstances—specifically, when the speaker is moved in an extraordinary way or the subject being expressed is in some way outrageous or extraordinary (Johnson 1-44). A strong defense of hyperbole’s imaginative uses also appears during the Renaissance when writers suggested the proper employment of

hyperbole as an “attempt to communicate the extraordinary ‘beyond’ of thought and language—to make the transcendent immanent and to express the ineffable” (Ritter, “Rethinking” 410). Samuel Johnson noted that the metaphysical poets turned to hyperbole to describe the sublime: “[T]heir amplification had no limits; they left not only reason but fancy behind them” and thereby “struck out unexpected truth” (“Life of Cowley”). Perhaps nowhere is hyperbole used to more effect than in Baroque art, literature and philosophy, where “the art of exaggeration ... is most ordinary and extraordinary” (C. Johnson 2). In current times, hyperbole is widely dismissed as a trope that is simplistic and lacking in subtlety, yet Webb, Ritter, and Johnson argue against a premature dismissal of the hyperbolic. They ask us to reconsider how, through its overstatement, or “saying more,” hyperbole has the capacity to help us discover epistemological and ontological truths not immediately available to us through literal descriptions. Their (and my) attention to hyperbole is focused not primarily with the figure of speech but with hyperbole as a “sophisticated, discursive figure of thought” (C. Johnson 44), i.e., they are concerned with the embodied hyperbole, or the “hyperbolic.” Claudia Claridge notes that there is a wide range of possible instantiations for hyperbole, from an overstatement contained in a single word, to phrases of varying lengths, complete sentences, whole texts, and entire discourses (5). This study is concerned with this broader concept of hyperbole, that is, as a linguistic expression of excess, in this case being used intentionally to convey the ineffable.

My examination of the use of excess in the literature of the Troubles builds on but diverges from the work of Tymoczko, McAteer, Webb, Ritter, and Johnson. Webb’s study of hyperbole, like Tymoczko’s, is focused on its role in portraying the supernatural,

although in Webb's case, the emphasis is on the functions of hyperbole in religious texts rather than legends and folklore. Ritter is interested in the role of hyperbole in theological thinking and texts, but he also argues for a reinterpretation of hyperbole in the analysis of the arts, offering as an example a discussion of the use of excess in the Grotesque.

Johnson explores literary use of the hyperbolic in Baroque literature and thought.

McAteer views excess in Irish literature through a lens of modernist thought. My own analysis will focus on the ways in which several Northern Irish novelists depend on various forms of excess, including the hyperbolic, to effectively portray the reality of living *in extremis* during the thirty-year period of the Troubles.

The word hyperbole comes from the Latin, and means, literally, "to throw" (bole) "over, beyond" (hyper). Hyperbole, by "overthrowing" the truth, disrupts our thinking to offer us new insights, a "reorientation out of disorientation;" this "practice of excess" works to transform our thinking through "an intense heightening and an exaggeration of the literal with the intent of undermining and/or throwing beyond it" (Ritter, "Rethinking" 408). Hyperbole is *required* in order to express ideas that are so complex that literal language will not suffice to express and maintain the irresolvable opposition of the real and the impossible that reside within them. The hyperbolic challenges and destabilizes our notions of reality in order to unlock our thinking about a situation which is so far outside normal experience that it threatens to elude understanding. When we experience the undermining of rationality that evokes in us astonishment — what Baudelaire considered the affective "*vertige de l'hyperbole*" (Chao, 255) — we are open to new ways of seeing things. This transformative quality of hyperbole is at the core of Ritter's definition of the two tropological functions of hyperbole: "1) problematizing

impossibility and possibility and 2) disrupting hermeneutical boundaries, that is, serving as a lie on the side of truth(s)” (408). In short, by disturbing or perplexing us with exaggeration, hyperbole disorients us — and this prepares us for a necessary reorientation of perspective. It is through our movement between the possible and the impossible — as we pass the realm of possibility and return to it — that hyperbole leads us to insight and new comprehension.

In addition to hyperbole, other closely related forms of exaggeration feature prominently in the novels of the Troubles under study here. For instance, the use of verbal irony, which frequently incorporates excess—whether in the form of hyperbole or understatement—runs through these novels. Like hyperbole, irony plays with meaning, compelling us “to question the fundamental concepts of our language” because it works by saying what is *not* meant (Colebrook 2). In fact, irony reveals truths by presenting the opposite of what is meant or expected, either through speech or action. It may either overstate or understate what is actually meant. Paul De Man claims that irony often begins as litotes (understatement), but, driven by an “inherent momentum,” tends to move toward dizzying hyperbole; irony, then, becomes the unrelieved vertigo of Baudelaire’s *vertige de l’hyperbole* (De Man, 215).

Understatement, euphemism, and lacunae (which function, essentially, as silences) are significant elements in the poetics of these works and, like other forms of excess, serve to disrupt literal interpretation. Claridge identifies understatement and hyperbole as part of a larger phenomenon of intensification, where intensification is defined as “placement of a predication on a scale of intensity, or degree of realisation of the predication, reaching from extremely/very low to very/extremely high” (9). Socrates

considered understatement to be a negative form of excess related to, although slightly less objectionable than, exaggeration. Understatement functions, in terms of excess, as the mirror image of hyperbole. Like hyperbole, it is the linguistic act of a speaker charged with expressing the extraordinary, a method of communication that, by the fact of its use, speaks to the inability of language to express (C. Johnson 9). Euphemism can be seen as a variety of understatement, one which involves excessively “downsizing” the truth with the specific purpose of making it more palatable, i.e., less painful or distressing.

The paradoxical nature of a poetics that reveals truth by meaning something different than what is said is peculiarly suited to literature about the embattled north of Ireland. Alcobia-Murphy describes Northern Irish literary and visual art that concerns itself with the Troubles as “[s]elf-reflexive, obliquely political, aware of its audience, alive both to the possibilities and limitations” of its medium, “an art that relays its personal responses in guarded, often coded ways” (*Governing* vii). The literature under study is characterized by self-consciousness and an awareness of itself as an artistic expression of that which it strains the ability of language to express. This is “historiographic metafiction,” a term Linda Hutcheon assigns to “novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (5). The employment of excess in representations of the Troubles invites the reader to recognize more complicated truths revealed by the patently outrageous or ridiculous exaggerations or diminutions in these novels. It is the grounding in shared reality that allows the hyperbolic to transcend mere affectation or the pitfalls of bombast—it “solicits complicity rather than mockery” (C. Johnson 2). When the

hyperbolic is used successfully, as it is in the novels under discussion in this study, the attentive reader is able to recognize the excess as “the lie on the side of the truth.”

CORPUS AND STRUCTURE

The witness testimony of trauma victims has frequently been referred to in terms of unspeakability and irrepresentability, but recent emphases on the corporeal and affective elements of trauma open up new considerations of how literary representations of trauma operate at the level of narrative, theme, and style (Richardson, “Terrorism” 327). I propose that hyperbole, as “the most effective trope for expressing the inexpressible and describing what is beyond description” (Ritter, *Re-imagining 2*), functions as an important mode of representation in literature that must account for the excess of affect experienced by people living in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. As the embodiment of excess, hyperbole is well-suited to novels about the Troubles which are, by nature, focused on myriad forms of excess in the lived experiences of their characters. Narratives about the Troubles often flood our senses and strain our sensibilities; they threaten to overwhelm us in a manner that replicates the all-consuming, profoundly oppressive atmosphere of the times in which they are set. I will examine this aesthetics of excess in several novels published between 1994 and 2019 in which the authors employ immoderation to convey the horror and inescapability of the Troubles.⁴ In novels by Seamus Deane, Anna Burns, David Keenan, Eoin McNamee, and Michael Hughes, an “over-the-top” quality manifests in a variety of ways including: hyperbole

⁴ 1994 was the beginning of the cease-fire that preceded the peace talks that led to the Good Friday Agreement in 1998. The year marks the start of a new era in Northern Ireland as the country slowly emerged from the Troubles and people began to look towards the possibility of a different future.

and grandiosity; extreme fragmentation and disruption of narrative progress; an overabundance of silences, redactions, and hallucinations; the presence of the spectral; horrifically graphic, even gratuitous, violence; a glut of symbols and meaning-laden images; and parody, the absurd, and other incongruous humor that leads to an experience of the grotesque.

Chapter one will examine Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* which was published in 1996 to wide acclaim.⁵ The concept of the unspeakable, a key element of trauma theory, is at the core of this novel in which the adult narrator gives an account of his boyhood in 1940s and 1950s Derry and his struggle to uncover the mystery of what is haunting his family. At the center of all that transpires are tragic, excessive silences — secrets, deceptions, censorings, denials, and alienations destroy the fabric of family and community. The tension between maintaining silence and speaking out, which Judith Herman calls “the central dialectic of psychological trauma” (1), torments the narrator throughout the novel; it is further complicated by the perils of breaking one's silence in a political environment where speaking out runs the risk of being seen as “informing.” Terry Eagleton has called Deane's novel a “version of Irish Gothic” (“Bogside” 46), linking it to a genre known for its excesses of atmosphere and overwrought emotion, heightened by a looming presence of the supernatural. Deane uses the Gothic mode in conjunction with eerie tales of Irish folklore to portray the surreal nature of living in a mid-twentieth century Northern Irish city where the social fabric is badly frayed and about to be torn to shreds. The narrator's search for answers leads him back to the

⁵ In 1996 the book won the *Guardian* Fiction Prize, the South Bank Show Annual Award for Literature, and it was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize; in 1997, it won the Irish Literature Prize.

political violence that accompanied the founding of Northern Ireland in the early twentieth century; the novel ends in the early years of the Troubles, connecting the later conflict with the earlier one. Thus, while *Reading in the Dark* is not ostensibly a novel of the Troubles, which begin after the main action of the story and take place in the narrator's early adulthood, by illustrating the conditions out of which the civil strife arose, Deane is writing about the current conflict while telling a story of the past. *Reading in the Dark* was published two years into an IRA ceasefire, as the Troubles were beginning to wind down, and in the year that began the peace talks which would eventually lead to the peace accord that would end the Troubles.

The signing of the Good Friday Agreement in 1998 was a watershed moment in Northern Ireland, and the literature that has emerged since reflects some of the implications of the newfound "peace"—a peace that to a discouraging extent comprises an absence of extreme violence rather than a unification of opposing factions. The early euphoria that accompanied the agreement has waned; optimistic goals of a new Northern Ireland have proven to be more elusive than originally imagined, as evidenced by, among other things, the continued presence of "peace walls" that divide sectarian areas in Belfast. The gates that separate these neighborhoods continue to be closed and locked each evening, at the behest of citizens who still believe this is necessary to ensure safety from "the other side" more than two decades after the agreement was signed. Despite post-Agreement government efforts to put the past behind, a fundamental divergence of visions of the future remains; part of the population of the north of Ireland continues to aspire to a united Ireland, while the other sees itself as inextricably British. Ironically, the attempt to repress memories of the bitter thirty-year conflict and make a fresh start at the

national level is reminiscent of the behavior of the traumatized individual who avoids the past. In 2021, the British Secretary of State for Northern Ireland presented a Command Paper to the British Parliament stating the government's intention to institute a statute of limitations on holding parties responsible for crimes committed during the Troubles, including abuses of power by state forces ("Addressing the Legacy"). Their view that "a divisive cycle of criminal investigations and prosecutions . . . is not working for anyone and has kept Northern Ireland hamstrung by its past" did not ring true to the people of Northern Ireland. In an extraordinary show of unity, members from all parties in the Northern Ireland Assembly unanimously voted to reject the plan, saying it ignored the needs of victims and families for justice and truth ("Stormont Politicians"). Despite continued Northern Irish objections, the bill became law on 6 September 2023 ("British Parliament"). Likewise, among the central concerns of the body of work dubbed "post-Agreement" literature is the need to acknowledge and "process" what happened during the Troubles, rather than to try to push it under the carpet (Heidemann; Lehner; McCann; Alcobia-Murphy). The impacts of the Troubles on the people who survived them has been in danger of being suppressed again in the aftermath of the Good Friday agreement, which is "notably marked by the repeated entreaty to leave what has happened behind" (Lehner 273). Caruth identifies such "social or political dimensions of collective denial that are aimed at erasing the uniqueness or truth of events" as a key factor in trauma; it is this "dispossession of experience that binds the psyche and the political and social realms to each other" (*Unclaimed* 122-123). But the memory of violent events in Northern Ireland, as in every other place, will not be held down; instead, these silent wounds "cry out" to be heard, and the novels of the Troubles are among the works of art that bear

witness to history through the perspective of survivors. This dissertation examines how, in rejecting “prescriptive forgetting [that] utterly fails to salve the mind’s wounds” (Alcobia-Murphy, “Lest We Forget” 88), Northern Irish novelists have instead employed the hyperbolic, enlarging rather than suppressing memories, in order to help readers “discover alternative, reinterpreted truth(s)” (Ritter, *Re-imagining* 5) about life during the conflict.

Chapters two and three will consider the aesthetics and poetics of excess in the work of Anna Burns and David Keenan, respectively. Two of the most ambitious and innovative writers of retrospective literary fiction about the Troubles, both authors set their novels in Ardoyne, a working-class Catholic neighborhood in north Belfast that was a maelstrom of the conflict. Burns, who grew up in Ardoyne during the height of the Troubles, has gained international recognition for *Milkman* (2018), which won, among other awards, the Man Booker Prize. She also wrote two earlier Troubles novels, *No Bones* (2001) and *Little Constructions* (2007). All three of these novels will be included in my discussion. Keenan, whose father grew up in Ardoyne and left Northern Ireland just before the Troubles began, was raised in Airdrie, Scotland, where weekly phone calls and frequent visits from Ardoyne relatives provided him with intimate knowledge of the Troubles as they unfolded. His complicated, experimental novel, *For the Good Times*, won the 2019 Gordon Burn Prize and the 2020 Royal Society of Literature Encore Award.

The wildly unconventional novels of Burns and Keenan stretch and reshape literary expression with what feels like gleeful abandon. Their narrators are paradoxically garrulous in juxtaposition to persistent thematic concerns about what remains

unspeakable. Burns and Keenan write in prose that is unusually fast-paced, often startlingly funny, sometimes horrifyingly graphic, and ultimately, devastatingly honest about unrelenting violence and its ruinous impacts on the individuals it creates and deforms. The combination of fury, energy, and humor in their writing communicates the lived experiences of those growing up in the midst of mayhem. Both build on and subvert conventions of writing about trauma. They have carved out a new space in fiction about the Troubles, where “honed narratives are coming apart under their own necrotic weight, the well-made making way for the fractals of broken consciousness” (McNamee, “Troubling”). They reproduce the act of remembering, and the disorder of daily life in the midst of the Troubles by taking trauma novel tropes of non-linear chronologies and shifting narrative perspectives to the extreme. Both writers draw on Irish literary traditions of Joyce’s stream of consciousness, word play, allusion and wit, and Beckett’s use of silences and gaps to communicate the unspeakable, but in the writing of Burns and Keenan, it is the principle of excess that is constant. Syntax that features precarious piles of adjectives, imagery, phrases, and clauses, sentences that go on for pages, lengthy digressions, and a prodigious use of symbolism leave the reader breathless. At times, Burns and Keenan extend the tropes of trauma fiction to the point of parody, using ghosts, doubles, and hallucinations with extravagance. Keenan’s novel is also filled with disconcerting scenes in which cringe-inducing graphic violence is juxtaposed with cheerful banter and humorous absurdity.

Chapter four will examine two novels by Eoin McNamee. McNamee, a native of Kilkeel, County Down in Northern Ireland, has published several highly acclaimed novels dealing with the Troubles. In *Resurrection Man* (1994) and *The Ultras* (2004), he

presents a dark vision of Belfast as he recreates highly controversial historical figures of the Troubles— extreme cases, so to speak—as fictionalized characters. Here we see excess on a number of levels. Topically, we are introduced to the actions of a serial killer and loyalist gang leader who tortured and murdered dozens of people, and to a shadowy military intelligence operative, reputed to have been involved in unsanctioned acts of killing, who disappeared in 1977, presumably murdered himself. Thematically, excess can be found in the hyper-masculinity of the protagonists of these novels, as well as in the bleak portrait of a modern society in deep decline. Stylistically, McNamee uses hyperrealism to create deeply disturbing, self-consciously cinematic depictions of sadistic acts of torture, murder, and desecration. He employs conventions of *noir* fiction to establish an oppressive atmosphere of ubiquitous decay, despair and paranoia. In *Resurrection Man*, his relentless portrayals of the rot and rankness of the urban landscape are paralleled by the corruption, malevolence and mental instability of the characters that people it. In *The Ultras*, McNamee turns to another *cause célèbre* of the Troubles — the controversial case of the British intelligence agent, Robert Nairac. The labyrinthian plot twists mirror the tangled lines of the multiple intelligent agencies at work in Northern Ireland during the Troubles in what Martin Dillon labeled “the dirty wars.” The duplicities of the intelligence community depicted in *The Ultras* are mirrored in an environment the narrator repeatedly refers to as “baroque,” a word that carries connotations of the extravagant, overly complicated, and misshapen. In both novels, setting as the site of communal traumatic affect is elevated to foreground.

Chapter five concerns *Country*, published in 2018 and awarded that year’s London Hellenic Prize. An aesthetics of exaggeration underlies Michael Hughes’s

reimagination of Homer's *Iliad* as a story of the Troubles set in 1996 in the South Armagh borderland where Hughes grew up.⁶ South Armagh was popularly referred to during the Troubles as "bandit country" because it was a stronghold of the IRA, the site of many murders and other acts of violence, and an area where the British had little hope of control, despite their deployment of elaborate surveillance technology. In 1996, a ceasefire was in effect, the Good Friday Agreement was two years in the future, and there was both skepticism and bitterness within the ranks of the IRA over abandoning the armed struggle. Hughes superimposes onto the *Iliad* the story of the internal strife in a small IRA unit along the border engaged in the last throes of a desperate fight for their cause. *Country* adheres closely to the *Iliad*, with one-to-one character counterparts and a correspondence of scenes. Such a grandiose reconceptualization—comparing a small band of farmers-turned-warriors to the great amassed armies of Troy and the Achaean kings—is in itself an example of excess which in turn engenders a number of exaggerated representations. Hughes's allegiance to Homer's account of the quarrel between Agamemnon and Achilles entails many elements that the modern reader experiences as excessive. His language, too, features multiples forms of linguistic excess, from his use of the extremely coarse vernacular of hard men at war to the witty wordplay that invests his prose with a multiplicity of meanings; the novel's pacing is heart-poundingly fast. Like the *Iliad*, the plot is driven by the overpowering, unreasonable rage of a warrior who loses his humanity in the frenzy of battle. Hughes's work, like Keenan's, is imbued with humor that rises to the level of parody and with graphic violence; it, too, juxtaposes

⁶ Hughes lived in the village of Keady, Co. Armagh.

romantic notions of heroism and honor with human frailties, murky motivations and the prosaic savagery of men murdering each other in the name of a cause.

The body of literature about the Troubles has grown slowly over time, and more criticism is emerging in response. The novelists and works represented here express and reflect psychological trauma, present small-slice, phenomenological history to challenge and augment official records, confront the violent realities of war, and illustrate sociological aspects of identity tied to gender, class, politics, religion, and place. I interrogate how those excesses function to represent history at both the personal and the political levels. In literature that strives to explain the human experience of living through a 30-year armed conflict, we might expect to encounter recurring themes of violence, trauma, and betrayal. Motifs of silence and the use of humor are familiar to a reader of Irish literature, as is an emphasis on poetic language and wordplay. However, what began to stand out to me as I immersed myself in the literature of the Troubles was the idea of extremes: crippling silences that permeated every aspect of family and society; paranoia and the constricting religious geography in Belfast; juxtaposition of the quotidian with ruthless violence; the presence of the supernatural; and the disintegration of the psyche. In examining the ways writers represent this, what begins to emerge is a pattern of excess in the writing itself, particularly in narrative structures, syntax, diction, and the use of exaggerated forms of humor such as parody and absurdity. My work is an analysis of how excessive elements of style and content work together to create fiction that captures the complexity of the Troubles. This critical theory of an aesthetics and poetics of excess in novels of the Troubles, is, to my knowledge, an original approach.

CHAPTER ONE: *READING IN THE DARK* BY SEAMUS DEANE

“The North is a Gothic place. Fire, bonfire, violence, ritual, marches, drums, that’s part of the ritual of a very enclosed and a very explosive society.”

— Seamus Deane, interview in English & Media

One starting point for a discussion of the concept of excess in *Reading in the Dark*, Seamus Deane’s only novel (his greater body of work comprises literary criticism and poetry) is what has been called its “generic hybridism” (del Rio 105). The novel has shown itself amenable to multiple genre classifications and interpretative stances. Since its 1996 publication, various critics focusing on the narrator’s search to uncover secrets have described it as a (metaphysical) mystery, a detective novel, or a political thriller. It has been read as a bildungsroman in which the young narrator struggles to establish his identity and independence against a backdrop of poverty, political oppression, and family dysfunction. Certainly a form of historical fiction, each chapter is firmly anchored in a month and year in mid-twentieth century Derry, even as the story reaches back past the narrator’s boyhood to the troubled founding of Northern Ireland and stretches forward to the beginning of the more recent Troubles. *Reading in the Dark* also has a place in postcolonial discourse, as it is very much concerned with what Deane considered the past and present effects of colonialism on Ireland and, especially, the north of Ireland (Harte). More recently, it has earned recognition as an early entry in the body of post cease-fire works dealing with the traumatized children of Northern Ireland; denial, repression, and the concept of the unspeakable—hallmarks of trauma—are all central to the novel (Herman 1-2).

Regardless of the paradigm in which one chooses to situate the novel, its Gothic sensibility is impossible to ignore. It is through the use of the inherently excessive Gothic aesthetics that Deane is able to explore themes related to people living under conditions of extreme alienation and oppression. This chapter will explore the various effects Deane achieves through the use of the Gothic, including the representation of the narrator's traumatic suffering as part of the larger intergenerational trauma of his family and community, a philosophical exploration of the nature of truth, and a postcolonial interpretation of the congenital disquietude and instability of twentieth-century Northern Ireland.

Reading in The Dark is considered a novel of the Troubles primarily because it depicts gestational conditions in Northern Ireland which, in retrospect, make the Troubles seem nearly inevitable. In the unnamed narrator's mid-twentieth century world, the past already sits heavily on the shoulders of the present. Deane offers a picture of a society in which sectarian divisions and nationalist resentments had long been simmering; the potential for things to break out in a full boil had been building for decades. This connection of the deep past with contemporary politics is part of the novel's "postcolonial Gothic historical sensibility" (Azzam v). The central conflict in *Reading in the Dark* is not between nationalists and unionists, yet the fact of Union itself is at the root of the problem. The duality introduced by partition—Northern Ireland is part of the island of Ireland, but separate from the country of Ireland; Northern Irish people are British citizens, but are also entitled to Irish citizenship—resulted in a sense of confused identity that is, in its apparently irreconcilable ambiguity, quintessentially Gothic. Even today, many inhabitants of Northern Ireland (or the north of Ireland, depending on one's

political views) call themselves Irish or British or both at once, while others see themselves as distinctly Northern Irish; the population remains divided over which of those identities ought to prevail in the long run or ought even to take precedence in the present.

Deane echoes, in concentrated form, the unresolved tensions and traumas of the community in the narrator's personal struggles to make sense of warring dualities of past and present, of emotion and reason, of the need to know and the cost of knowledge, and most poignantly, of what cannot be said but demands to be spoken. *Reading in the Dark* is a novel about a community living in a state of uncertainty, suspended in a psychological space that is inherently liminal. It opens with this deceptively simple sentence: "On the stairs, there was a clear, plain silence" (*RITD* 1). Ironically, nothing in this novel, including its silences, is really clear or plain. In fact, in the moments that follow this first sentence, the notion of clarity is cast aside as the narrator's mother senses the presence of that most Gothic of tropes, a ghost.

HISTORICAL TRAUMA

This is a story of a traumatized family, haunted by secrets, betrayals, and unspoken, often unbearable, sorrows. Both tenderness and violence are embedded in the ubiquitous, stifling silences of the narrator's world. He feels driven (at one point his mother accuses him of being *possessed*) to track down the truth behind a family secret, but his real dilemma will lie in what to do with it, once he finds it. If the silences are excessive, so are the events behind them. As he reconstructs the past, gleaning and weaving together multiple strands of suppressed knowledge about political and personal traumatic events, the tension between maintaining his own silence and telling the truth

grows. These competing compulsions to speak out and to remain silent—the struggle over which Judith Herman identifies as the central paradigm of traumatic experience—begin to torment the narrator, and he is far from the only one in this predicament. Indeed, he is surrounded by people who either cannot or will not speak the truth, or who speak it only indirectly, through stories, riddles, and insinuations. What is behind these silences? In the late nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud identified the repression of memories, or dissociation, as a psychological defense mechanism. When an intolerable idea presents itself, one response is to push it out of one’s consciousness—in effect, to silence it. Through the “intentional not-thinking of some target material,” human beings can protect themselves from knowledge and memories that are too painful to contemplate, or in some cases, even acknowledge (Erdyli 4). Trauma is defined, at least in part, by the condition of living with the silenced, unbearable memories that threaten to re-emerge.

In Deane’s novel, silences are sometimes directly linked to personal traumatic experiences, but just as often, the trauma is also intergenerational/multigenerational and communal. In the 1980s, as part of her work with the Lakota people in North America, Maria Yellow Horse Brave Heart introduced the concept of *historical trauma*, describing it as a cumulative trauma experience involving collective psychic and emotional wounding that compounds “over a life span and across generations” (288). Deane presents the reader with a community in which historical trauma is widespread and perpetuated by the conditions of life for Catholics in mid-twentieth century Northern Ireland.¹ Thus, the trauma in the narrator’s childhood Derry, like the trauma experienced

¹ In *Reading in the Dark*, Deane writes about life in a Catholic working-class neighborhood of Derry, where he grew up; this distinction is important for two reasons. First, the narrative of identity of Catholic nationalists, especially in Ulster, is centered on both the belief that the rights to its land had been usurped by planters in the seventeenth century and on the cycle of failed uprisings since then to reclaim it

by those living through the Troubles later in the century, is simultaneously individual and communal, and it is reflected in the suffocating, claustrophobic silences of the Bogside (Donn 15).

Silence also represents a very pragmatic method of self-preservation for the characters in the novel, protecting them not just from both difficult memories of the past but also from dangerous external forces in the present. In the context of nationalist Northern Ireland where, as his grandfather admonishes him, he is “to keep up the fight against the government, always, always,” speaking up is all too often conflated with informing (*RITD* 120). The informer’s lot is made clear to the narrator in his own early experiences with the police when, after throwing a rock at a police car in order to attract their attention and scatter the bullies who were about to beat him up, he is punished first by the policemen, then by the community. The cruel penalty that the Catholic policeman, Sergeant Burke, imposes on him is to very deliberately make it appear to his neighbors that he has informed on the other boys. Not only is the narrator personally ostracized by the other children after this, but his entire family suffers from suspicion, even to the extent that his father is questioned by coworkers over the incident. His parents show no sympathy for the boy but instead express their frustration with him. They impress upon

(Hancock 447). Furthermore, while mid-twentieth century conditions were also bleak for poor Protestants, the intense sectarian segregation of the period meant that the communities not only lived in different areas, “they also read different newspapers, frequented different shops and pubs, played in and supported different sporting teams. It was not only a case of Protestants purposefully shunning Catholics and vice versa; they simply did not encounter each other in their day to day lives. Each remained at arm’s length, ignorant of the politics, culture and values of the other” (<https://alphahistory.com/northernireland/northern-ireland-before-1968/>). Deane is writing from the perspective he knows best.

him that enduring a beating from the bullies would have been far preferable to having any truck with the police; in fact, his mother tells him that throwing the stone was equivalent to informing. The shame he has brought on the family is painfully obvious to him. In the aftermath of the incident, he instinctively refrains from telling his father what Burke has said to him about his Uncle Eddie. Thus, the story of Eddie links two repressive functions of silence: as a psychological coping mechanism and as a practical means to avoid trouble.

The mystery surrounding Uncle Eddie is at the core of the novel and of the narrator's struggle with his opposing needs to tell and not to tell. His father refuses to talk about his brother, Uncle Eddie, whose service to the IRA and subsequent disappearance are the topic of murky speculation by the narrator's uncles on his mother's side. Was Eddie killed in a shootout with the police during the "last minute protest at the founding of the new state" (*RITD* 35)? Or did he escape to Chicago? Melbourne? As a young boy, the narrator longs for an explanation from his father, who simply "would not speak of it at all," even when the boy's maternal uncles debate the issue, and despite the narrator's efforts "to drag some account from him" (*RITD* 9).

The community in which the boy lives is ruled by secrecy. He can have no doubt about the imperative to remain silent as he receives instruction in holding his tongue both through the examples of others and through explicit admonitions to "say nothing" throughout the story. His father is silent about Eddie. His mother is silent about a multitude of things. Witnesses to the lorry accident that killed Rory Hannaway "all turn their back on" the policemen who try to take statements about the accident. The narrator's sympathy for the young policeman who vomited at the scene is taboo—

policemen are bad, everyone says, “[s]o I said nothing”; he says nothing again when false accounts of the story are spread, and by doing so gets some relief from “the subtle sense of treachery” he feels for even considering the sensibilities of a policeman (*RITD* 11).

The shibboleth, “say nothing,” or some variation thereof, recurs frequently in his account of events. When he tells his brother that he’s seen the ghost of his dead sister at the cemetery and is uncertain whether to tell his mother, Liam warns him, “Anyway, you saw nothing. You say nothing” (*RITD* 18). When Crazy Joe takes him into the “Reserved for Adults” art room at the library, he tells the narrator, “Say nothing, for you can say nothing that will not be ridiculous” (*RITD* 72). In another scene, Joe says “You know whom I mean, of course, but we’ll name no names” (*RITD* 86). The bishop refers vaguely to his family’s troubles, saying, “But these are delicate matters, better not gone into” (*RITD* 111). Most importantly, his mother swears him to silence in the matter of Eddie before he even knows the secret he is not to tell, warning him not to pay any attention to what his dying grandfather might say, and enjoining, “don’t, whatever you do, don’t repeat it. Not even to me” (*RITD* 119). By the time his father does tell him what he (falsely) believes to be true about Eddie, the narrator has so assimilated the message of silence that he silently admonishes his father to “say nothing. Never say. Never say” (*RITD* 134).

On his deathbed, his grandfather confesses his terrible secret, first to the narrator’s mother, then to the narrator, passing on to them a devastating legacy. The grandfather has been living with and hiding a “traumatically overwhelming, unbearable, unthinkable” truth (Fromm xvi). Now, because he cannot die without getting it off his chest, because “it had to be told,” he hands the burden on to subsequent generations (*RITD* 126). M.

Gerard Fromm, in his study of intergenerational trauma, finds this to be the “almost inevitable outcome to traumatic experience cut out of social discourse; the next generation must deal with it and sometimes even represent it” (*xix*). The narrator learns that his maternal grandfather ordered the execution of his father’s brother Eddie as an informer, only to later discover that the man was innocent. This creates for the narrator a painful quandary that he is never able to fully resolve because now *he*, silenced by his mother’s directive, cannot speak of it—in this newfound knowledge, he experiences what Dermot Kelly calls an “epiphany of entrapment” (435). The secret poisons his relationships with other family members. When he witnesses his mother lying to his beloved Aunt Kate about why his grandfather finally stopped drinking (he knows that his mother knows, but won’t reveal to his aunt, that it was after their father learned the identity of the real informer), he complains, “I hated having to love her then, for it meant that I couldn’t say or ask anything” (*RITD* 128-29). Most painfully, the secret stands between him and his father, for, as he says, “[s]taying loyal to my mother made me disloyal to my father” (*RITD* 236).

Three months after his grandfather’s confession, his father, out of his own need to finally speak the unspeakable, blurts out to Liam and the narrator that Eddie, in fact, did not die in the battle at the distillery but was killed by his own people as an informer. The narrator is wracked with guilt. He wrestles with whether he ought to ease his father’s anguished shame by telling him the truth of Eddie’s innocence. He is stopped by the suspicion that this might make matters worse, since his mother’s father, and by extension, his mother herself, will be implicated in the wrongful execution. In clearing the name of Eddie as an informer, he would become an informer within his own family, betraying his

promise to his mother not to speak the truth about this. His mother suffers a nervous breakdown in response to the knowledge that her father had a hand in Eddie's death; she is "haunted and burning, audibly, inaudibly" (*RITD* 142).

The intergenerational trauma caused by the discovery of the events behind Eddie's death manifests as a very personal crisis in the narrator's mother's life, as well as in his own. These events have had other rippling effects, too. For instance, his mother's sister, Kate, has been traumatized by the disappearance of her husband, Tony McIlhenny, who abandoned her and her daughter. Once again, the narrator possesses a truth he cannot share. Telling his aunt what really happened (that McIlhenny was the traitor, that her father killed the wrong man in his place, that he was helped out of the country by the police) would only compound the pain and shame of the personal betrayal she suffered. The burden of the dreadful knowledge gnaws at the narrator, and he feels "blurred" and "astray for not knowing how to choose" until he must find a way to speak. He can no longer remain silent because, he laments, "I had to say I knew. The truth was swollen inside me" (*RITD* 194).

Significantly, Deane has the narrator turn to the language of his ancestors, a language neither of his parents can speak, to say what he must, but must not, say. Writing it all out in English, poorly translating it into Irish with the help of a dictionary (he later describes himself as having "mutilated" the language), the boy, now fifteen years old, burns the English version and reads the Irish out loud to his parents, telling his father it is an essay on local history for school. His father nods, oblivious to the truth the narrator is telling, pleased that the Irish language is being spoken in the house. The narrator waits for his father to leave the room, then burns the Irish version and weeps. He has told his

father the truth without telling him at all. He says something, but says nothing. His mother, despite not knowing Irish, somehow intuitively exactly what he is doing. She says nothing, but she turns against him after this, even when he promises her again that he will never tell his father. His presence in the house remains such a reproach to her that she finally asks him to leave. Years later, after she is silenced by a stroke, she continues to signal him to “seal it all in, too” (*RITD* 230). It should be noted that Deane weaves together two distinct modes of representation of trauma here: that of unspeakability, and that of corporeality. The corporeal representations of trauma Deane employs are two-fold. First, the physical presence of the narrator serves as the embodiment of the suppressed memory; later, his mother’s determination never to speak of the matter is transformed into a physical inability to do so.

The narrator’s psychological anguish over his excruciating dilemma is also, of course, a metaphor for the angst of the larger community that is caught in a clash of irreconcilable forces (Eagleton 46). The novel suggests that just as the past and present are inextricably entwined in the boy’s youth, the Troubles that will overshadow the last three decades of the twentieth century are inseparable from those that came before them. The pre-Troubles history of Northern Ireland was one of simmering political tensions marked by periodic outbreaks of violence. While the worst of these upheavals occurred at the formation of the state, lasting from 1920-23, there were others, including a brief burst of trouble in the 1935 Belfast Riots;² and the more sustained, but ultimately failed, Border Campaign waged by the IRA from 1956-1962. In the tragic story of the boy’s

² The Belfast Riots resulted in a small number of deaths, but caused the displacement of thousands of Catholics from their homes.

grandfather and uncles, and in the boy's own restless, often stymied, search for the cause of the underlying grief that haunts his family, the novel explores the destructive force of a history of violence, transgressions, and secrets on three generations of people. The personal and the political become indistinguishable—in an interview about the book, Deane says so explicitly: “In the story I’m telling here, the political and the personal are so intertwined that you can’t say where one leaves off and the other begins” (“Interview” *English & Media* 18). The novel is rooted in Deane’s own childhood in Derry, but the narrator’s family history serves a larger purpose as a representation of the general experience of his community. Edna Longley called *Reading in the Dark* “autobiography as history,” that constitutes an important contribution to the “collective autobiography” of the Troubles by “bring[ing] vividly to the surface the local and psychological intensity which Deane has sought to generalize as the state of Ireland” (34).

Reading in the Dark is, in this sense, a meditation from the nationalist perspective on the history of the northern Irish state—from the armed resistance at its 1921 founding, to the Troubles that have erupted by the close of the narration—and how that history traumatized the Catholics of Northern Ireland. Each chapter is set in a specific month and year in the nineteen forties and fifties in Derry’s Bogside, a grindingly poor working-class enclave where the city’s Catholic majority were long denied equal access to employment, education, housing, and enfranchisement. The plot plays out in the mid-twentieth-century geography of the area: the abandoned distillery, the steep, sloped streets leading down to Meenan’s Park, the Cathedral, the River Foyle. The narrator’s childhood and coming of age are sandwiched between the temporal bookends of “troubles” in Derry: the 1921 Saint Patrick’s Day riots and the early years (1968-1970) of

the Troubles during which Deane was writing. Deane's depiction of mid-century Derry reveals the ongoing and cyclical nature of low-level violence in the north of Ireland that preceded the eruption of more sustained conflict in the early 1970s. In a 2020 *New Yorker* memoir about his long relationship with Seamus Heaney, Deane recalls that during their adolescence: "the police were more aggressively sectarian than ever before, especially at night; unemployment in our area was running at nearly fifty percent; housing was appalling; discrimination, with a Sten gun behind it, was what we knew of British democracy" ("Famous Seamus" 62).

Small-scale violence is present in the novel's descriptions of burning effigies at the annual bonfires, the stone-throwing at the St. Patrick's Day parades, and the everyday brutality of police. In such a climate, Deane contends, there inevitably emerges a culture of solidarity against authority, including the existence of a guerilla army of resistance, which in turn produces the imperative for secrecy; at the other side of secrecy, its potential ever present, is betrayal (*English & Media* 19). The betrayals at the heart of this novel, like the secrets, fester in both the personal and the political realms.

THE GOTHIC

As editor of *The Field Day Anthology*, Deane poses this question about Irish literature: "How, in the light of what is happening now, can we re-present what was, then and since, believed to have been the significance of what 'really' happened?" ("General Introduction," xxi). It is immediately apparent that *Reading in the Dark* contains many of the Gothic paraphernalia of excess such as fires, ruins, hauntings, madness, curses, and fear; on a deeper level, Deane draws on the extreme angst that is endemic to the Gothic tradition. Deane incorporates the extravagant outer trappings of the Gothic, as well as its

recurrent themes of the tension between the individual and society, its representations of family, and its exploration of the conscious and unconscious mind (Hoeveler and Heller *xi*). The Gothic's ability to accommodate itself to the full range of Johnson's "quantity of expressibility" spectrum i.e., to encompass silence, understatement, verisimilitude, hyperbole, and altered silences, makes it well-suited to Deane's purposes. The concept of the altered silences of traumatic experiences is necessary to understand the paradoxical use of the hyperbolic to address the excessive reticence that characterizes the novel. In particular, anxiety about "the unspeakable," omnipresent in Deane's novel and central to trauma and its representation in literature, permeates Gothic fiction (A. Williams 67). The Gothic form is closely linked with both Freudian psychology and collective anxieties that are unspoken or unacknowledged (A. Joyce 462). Sedgwick notes that "the difficulty the story has in getting told" is inherent in Gothic structure, and the terms "unspeakable" and "unutterable" are prevalent "intensifying adjectives of choice" in Gothic fiction (13-14).

The Gothic form emerged in the mid-eighteenth century in counterpoint to the Enlightenment, which had established a new, rational, ordered way of perceiving the world. Known for its excesses of atmosphere and overwrought emotion, heightened by the looming presence of the supernatural, the Gothic mode "exaggerates its own fictionality" in a way that serves Deane's effort to reflect the "intense and important ambivalences" that reside both within and around the narrator (Hogle 14). From the start, Gothic texts were "overtly but ambiguously, not rational," incorporating mental instability, other-worldly beings, uncontrolled emotions, and flights of imagination that challenged the Enlightenment insistence that knowledge is derived through methodical

inquiry and understanding is attained based on natural, empirical realities (Botting, *Gothic* 1-2). The Gothic mode is essentially hyperbolic in that it operates, as Ritter suggests all hyperbole does, to reorient us by first disorienting us, and to reveal to us epistemological and ontological truths which are not immediately available to us through strictly literal representations (“Rethinking” 408). As Deane himself said, “there are some things that cannot be known at the level of fact” (*English & Media* 18). Anne Williams argues that the defining qualities of the Gothic are complexity and intricacy (23). These are also apt descriptors of the puzzle Deane’s narrator is trying to unravel, the process he undergoes in his attempt to do so, and the truth(s) he uncovers.

In *Reading in the Dark*, the constant, almost feverish tension the narrator experiences arises from his sense that he is stuck just on the verge of discovery, unable to satisfy his impatient desire to *know* with certainty. To convey the boy’s state of frantic disquiet, Deane leverages the “negative aesthetics” of the Gothic, which entail both “deficiency, the absence, exclusion or negation of knowledge, facts or things; and excess, an overflow of words, feelings, ideas, imagining” (Botting, *Gothic* 6-7). The duality of lacunae and excessive affect is internalized in the narrator, who is determined to discover the truth, despite the secrecy, silences, denials, and obfuscations. In this he is driven by the perceptions, suspicions, deep feelings of gloom, and active imagination of the Gothic hero whose hyperbolic and contradictory fears and desires are closely associated with death and are represented in his encounters with the supernatural (Hogle 5). He is secretive about his effort to get to the bottom of things—but once he (almost) does, he is bursting with the knowledge, overwhelmed by his emotions, and enflamed by a need to express himself in words.

One of the great advantages for the student of Deane is the depth and breadth of his critical writing, which provide insights into his artistic choices in *Reading in the Dark*. When Terry Eagleton labeled *Reading in the Dark* “nationalist Catholic Gothic” (46), he was using the term coined by Deane himself in his examination of the work of the early nineteenth century poet, James Clarence Mangan (*Strange Country* 126-129). In *Reading in the Dark*, Deane borrows heavily from the “mode of melodramatic excess” that he identified in the work of Mangan and which, he argued, “defends it from the requirements of realism, partly on the basis that realism as a mode of narration would be insufficient to deal with realities such as these” (*Strange Country*, 127). To call Deane’s novel a Gothic novel in the sense of Walpole’s genre-defining *The Castle of Otranto*, would be to mischaracterize it, but *Reading in the Dark* is inarguably infused with the aesthetics of “hyperbolic reality, even *surreality*” of Gothic fiction (Hogle 14). The Gothic provides Deane, like Mangan, with a vehicle to express what realism is inadequate to convey.

In proclaiming Mangan’s *Fragment of an Unfinished Autobiography* an Irish Catholic Gothic, Deane pointed out that while in some ways different than British Gothic, the “standard elements are all in place” (“Control” 127). This is also the case with *Reading in the Dark*. Within the first sixteen pages of the novel, the narrator encounters two ghosts, sees a magician disappear, and hears his uncles tell the story of a local exorcism; many more examples of encounters with the supernatural are related as the story unfolds. In the Gothic tradition, “[g]hostly recurrences manifest an unease and instability in the imagined unity of self, home or society” experienced by the narrator and hint at some unknown and vaguely threatening loss or guilt that underlies the silences

around him (Botting, *Gothic* 2). Deane employs further Gothic plot conventions as the protagonist, despite his unease, is pressed forward by curiosity that will not allow him to stop investigating. His search eventually reveals an ancestor's transgression—his maternal grandfather's hand in the wrongful execution of his paternal uncle—that haunts subsequent generations and “tarnishes [the] paternal respectability” of that grandfather (Botting, *Gothic* 3). He finds he must come to terms with his family's past in order to become himself (A. Williams 31). His mother, who aches over her hidden, unhappy romantic past with the betrayer, Tony McIlhenny, suffers periodically from mental illness, and both Crazy Joe and Larry McLaughlin exhibit forms of madness.

The ruins of Grianán of Aileach,³ the stone ring fort of the O'Neill clan dating back to the sixth or seventh century CE, are a key element of the novel's setting and symbolic of a temporal fluidity associated with the Gothic. When the narrator and his friends regularly walk over the border from Derry to Donegal, where the structure is perched on a hill, to play on the ancient grounds, they move between the past and the present and a wished-for future: between ancient and modern times; between pre-colonial times and post-colonial times; between pre-partition, partition, and imagined post-partition times. Deane creates a Gothic juxtaposition of the ancient order, rural, and more romantic, with the modern, oppressive, industrialized Derry where the mothers work in shirt factories and the fathers try to patch together a living. This contrast is emphasized when, in a fit of rage, the narrator destroys his father's roses, and his father, seemingly defeated, surrenders the natural beauty of the rose bed to the harsh and ugly efficiency of concrete (perhaps, as was argued by John O'Mahony in his September 21, 1996 review of

³ In Irish: *Grianán Ailigh*

the novel for the *Financial Times*, trying to bury the past altogether, sealing it in the earth).

Like Mangan, Deane replicates the essential dialectic of the Gothic novel in the mind of his young narrator. The duality of the boy's experience of the world—the forces of formal education, facts, and rationality versus his encounters with ghosts, stories of spirits, demons, and the coded babbling of the unreliable Crazy Joe and the muteness of Larry McLaughlin—is an expression of the tension between the limits imposed by reason and the unbound expanse of supernatural possibility. When the young narrator is locked by his friends, as a prank, in the passageway at Grianán, his musings illustrate the conflict between the romantic and the rational that typifies Gothic fiction: “I had never known such blackness. I could hear the wind, or maybe it was the far-off sea. That was the breathing Fianna. I could smell the heather and the gorse tinting the air; that was the Druid spells. I could hear the underground waters whispering; that was the women sighing” (*RITD* 58).

While at first glance it may appear that the narrator is verbalizing the empiricism of rational modernity to assert its dominance over on the unsettling possibilities of ancient tradition, steeling himself against his own fear by reciting a series of explanations to himself, a closer reading reveals something different. In fact, the narrator never claims that the rational explanations in this passage are more true or more comforting than the romantic ones—instead, both interpretations simply coexist, each contributing to the boy's understanding of reality as encompassing not only the world we see, but also another world that exists alongside it, never far removed. Napier describes the two major opposing forces in the Gothic novel as “a tendency towards moral and structural

stabilizing... and a contrary inclination towards fragmentation, instability, and moral ambivalence” and notes that “its authors finally neither ascribed convincingly to either extreme” (5). It is through the essentially Gothic sense of the uncanny and its suggestion of a “fundamental *indecision*, an obscurity or uncertainty, at the heart of our ontology,” that Deane is able to depict reality as the young boy experiences it, full of unresolved dualities (Collins and Jervis 2).

By using the Gothic’s ability to champion the affective in an “informal insurgence” against a hegemony of the empirical, Deane invites us to alter our concept of reality itself (Haggerty 3). His inclusion of folktales within the narrative adds another layer of the supernatural to the boy’s world and serves as Deane’s Irish version of the framed or embedded tales used in Gothic fiction to highlight “discontinuities, ambiguities, unreliabilities, [and] silences” (A. Williams 67). Throughout the novel, empirical knowledge and folklore overlap, blurring together, just as the two worlds do. Brother Regan tells his class the story of the man who murdered Billy Mahon. When his classmate McShane says to the narrator that the man in question was the narrator’s grandfather, the boy laughs and dismisses the story, which is not new to him, as “just folklore,” but it will later prove to be the truth (*RITD* 27). This is significant because folk stories in Ireland quite often act as repositories for terrible truths that cannot be spoken directly, “as coded stories for other things that are taboo” (*English & Media* 18). Larry McLaughlin’s muteness, which arrives in sudden onset on the eve of his wedding day, is known to the community to have been caused by his encounter with a fairy woman who seduced him and disappeared. The narrator eventually comes to understand that it was Larry (under the orders of the narrator’s grandfather) who executed Uncle Eddie, and that

he did it in the passageway at Grianán. Traumatized by the killing, Larry could not go through with the wedding and stopped speaking altogether. The insertion of folktales also points out another reality of mid-century Derry. Aunt Katie, who regularly regales her nephews with folktales, tells the story of one of Larry's ancestors, Brigid McLaughlin, who was also struck mute after an encounter with the fairies. This story dates back to the days just after the Irish Hunger. Katie's use of the oral tradition of folklore to pass down the history of the community bespeaks a continuity with the past that is quickly being lost in Derry at the time of the novel.

Ann Cahill suggests that Ireland's weather conditions, its mists, storms, and rain interspersed with stillness, make the island an ideal setting for "transitory materialisation of apparitions and wraiths" (307). Fairies are often linked with "the undead" and ancient burial places, and folktales tell of people entering the underground realm of the fairies through cairns (Cahill 308). Thus, that other world is linked with ours through the landscape. Like most ringforts, Grianán contains a cairn, and it is at this border between the two worlds that Larry McLaughlin met the fairy woman. The site of Eddie's murder, Grianán is also identified in folkloric history as the resting place of the Fianna, those legendary warriors who were waiting for the appearance of that "special person" to "rouse them from their thousand-year sleep to make final war on the English" and drive the occupiers out of Ireland at last (*RITD* 56). The Field of the Disappeared is another mysterious and liminal territory, a place where the souls of those who were lost at sea and never received a Christian burial linger. It holds the unspoken grief of many in the community and is so deeply haunted that the birds will not fly over it. The boy has been warned that lost souls gather together over the field and cry out on certain (Christian and

pre-Christian) feast days and that to enter the field is perilous because “[y]ou weren’t supposed to hear pain like that; just pray you would never suffer it” (*RITD* 54).

COLONIALISM, POSTCOLONIALISM, AND THE GOTHIC

It would be remiss to discuss *Reading in the Dark* without addressing Deane’s concerns with colonialism/postcolonialism, including what he saw as its lasting impacts on all of Ireland and its painful repercussions in Northern Ireland. He wrote extensively about these issues as part of his work with Field Day. Deane and the other directors of the Field Day Theatre Company shared the somewhat controversial conviction that the Troubles were, “above all, a colonial crisis” (*Nationalism* 6). They considered the conflict in the North to have arisen as a result of a “contemporary colonialism” practiced by Great Britain, a “Protestant country” by constitution, that maintained a model of dominance and subservience “within the readily available idiom of religious division” in Northern Ireland (*Nationalism* 8). Field Day rejected the revisionist histories of Ireland that had emerged mid-century as a corrective to nationalist mythology and which dismissed the notion of colonialism in Ireland as a creation of the romantic rhetoric of nationalist mythology, arguing that their own analyses of history revealed “such a degree of complexity in Anglo-Irish affairs that no systematic explanation is possible” (*Nationalism* 6-7). Deane found their conclusions to be lacking in self-reflection and blind to their own underlying ideology, according to which the only rational force in Irish history was that which fostered economic development, and as leading inexorably to the conclusion that the achievement of Irish nationhood in the early twentieth century was, therefore, irrational. In an essay published in 1997, he sharply criticized Irish historian F. S. L. Lyons’s discussion of the transformation of Ireland between 1916 and 1918 at the

end of the first chapter of Lyons's *Ireland Since the Famine*. Deane accused Lyons of defining tradition or "spirit" as "an irrational element within a rational discourse" and thereby feeding into the colonial vision of the Irish as a people of weak character who were in need of the corrective influences of the Empire (*Strange Country* 196). He called Lyons's analysis "a series of sliding prevarications" which ascribed "all the mythologies" to the Irish, "while the British, although prone to infirmity and error, are nevertheless safely within the precincts of the rational" (*Strange Country* 196). In his essay, then, published a year after *Reading in the Dark*, Deane the critic is advancing an argument for a more complete definition of history that is analogous to the argument of Deane the novelist about truth, i.e., that it involves more than just what is *deemed* rational.

In the midst of the revisionist attempts to reframe Irish history away from the nationalist model, and (according to Deane) to "cast doubt on the reality and the scandal of colonialism" and "surrender the notion of identity altogether as barren anachronism," the conflagration in the North began and "restored to central stage all those issues of communal identity, colonial interference, sectarianism, and racial stereotyping that had apparently been sidelined" (*Nationalism* 14). A central tenet of the Irish intellectuals who made up the Field Day company was that art is an activity "in which the whole history of a culture is inscribed" and that a fundamental problem with the revisionist view of Irish history was that it ignored culture, divorcing it from politics (*Nationalism* 7). The six original directors of Field Day—three Catholic and three Protestant, all from Northern Ireland⁴—formed the company in 1980 in response to the Troubles, which they claimed

⁴ The original directors included Stephen Rea, Brian Friel, Seamus Deane, David Hammond, Seamus Heaney, and Tom Paulin. Thomas Kilroy, the only member of the board of directors from the Irish Republic, was invited to join later.

had “exposed the absence within the island of any system of cultural consent that would effectively legitimize and secure the existing political arrangements” (General Introduction xx). Stephen Rea reflected later that they were “looking for a way out when the ceasefire wasn't even a remote possibility” (Keating). As culture and politics were so intimately related, and as politics had failed at that point to make any headway in ending the Troubles, they decided to search for healing in cultural endeavors. Field Day’s stated goal was to actively create a cultural identity that would embrace and unite all of the disparate identities that had historically been assigned to literature in Ireland (e.g., Irish literature, Gaelic literature, Anglo-Irish literature, Irish literature in English). They hoped to dismantle sectarian categorizations which were the result of a colonial paradigm that emphasized the idea of “the other” (*Nationalism* 18). The company produced pamphlets that focused on critical analysis of historical and contemporary political and literary rhetoric, published an anthology of Irish Literature which incorporated some 1500 years of Irish writing,⁵ and mounted productions of a number of plays. *Reading in the Dark* shares the central concerns of plays by Brian Friel, Thomas Kilroy, and Tom Paulin, all produced under the auspices of Field Day: “anxieties of naming, speaking, and voice and the relation of these to place, identity, and self-realization” (*Nationalism* 14-15).⁶

⁵ The initial three volumes of the anthology, edited by Deane, were met with some protest that female writers were poorly represented; thus, eleven years later, in 2003, two additional volumes were added. These were not edited by Deane, but Angela Bourke.

⁶ Despite its efforts to rise above the fray, Field Day was eventually criticized both for being nationalist and for being anti-nationalist, as well as patriarchal and hegemonic in its view of Irish culture. Deane would later comment that, “The responses Field Day very often brought out - in their clearest and most malign forms - were the very stock responses that we had been trying to rinse out of the system” (Keating).

From a postcolonial perspective, Deane's use of Gothic sensibilities in *Reading in the Dark* can be read as a response to failed national politics that are riven by sectarian and class divisions; it raises questions about legitimate origins, rightful inhabitants, usurpation, occupation, and nostalgia for an impossible nationalist politics by, among other things, presenting a "distopic representation . . . when the idealist project of the national allegorical romance fails" (Azzam iv). Deane may have rejected revisionist dismissals of the notion of nationalism, but he simultaneously spurned Irish nationalism. It was, he said "*mutatis mutandis*, a copy of that by which it felt itself to be oppressed" which had "produced contrasting stereotypes whose most destructive effect has been the laying of the cultural basis for religious sectarianism" (*Nationalism* 8). It is no accident that *Reading in the Dark* explores tragedies visited on their own side by Irish nationalists in the North. The narrator's family and community are irreparably damaged by the actions of a nationalist organization, regardless of whether or not nationalism was bred of colonialism, and despite the complicity of state forces in the misunderstanding that led to Eddie's death. In short, Deane's novel explores how both colonialism and post-colonial nationalism produce disfiguring effects (Harte 152).

Deane's nuanced treatment of the complexity of the problems in Northern Ireland is also evident in the novel's concern with the Irish language. The issue of Irish language was a complicated and important one to Deane, tied as it is to identity. Anti-colonialist theorists such as Paulo Freire, Frantz Fanon, and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o emphasize the role of language and identity in the process of subjugation, arguing that the use of imperial education systems to control language reinforces the broader power hierarchy (Mac Ionnrachtaigh 22). Deane wrote in the general introduction to *The Field Day Anthology of*

Irish Literature that “wholesale adoption of the English language by the Gaelic-speaking Irish — sometimes voluntary, more often enforced by atrocious pressures — carries with it a psychological heritage, a recriminatory history of scandal, betrayal and shame” (“General Introduction” 1: xxiv). Deane’s recognition of both the coercive role of a colonial power that wished to replace the indigenous language with its own, and the complicity of the colonized in the endeavor, is illustrated in *Reading in the Dark* as the narrator wrestles with his estrangement from the Irish language. When his grandfather challenges him to learn Irish because nobody “speaks French round here,” the boy retorts “An’ who speaks Irish around here?” (*RITD* 122). The grandfather can name just two people in response. In this way, Deane depicts the linguistic history of the island without reducing it to a binary unionist versus nationalist interpretation. He further complicates the issue by “plac[ing] multiple strands of Ireland’s language systems adjacent to one another” (J. K. Miller 26). For instance, the narrator and his brother giggle in response to their country relatives — a generation closer to Irish speakers — at his Aunt Ena’s funeral. Deane juxtaposes the narrator’s standard English with the uncles’ speech that includes phrases particular to Irish English like “this time o’year, wi’ Christmas on top o’us all” and “Och ay, so it is. Sore surely,” and “Did ye see Bernadette, now; the younger sister?” and “Far changed indeed. But sure she’d be shook badly now by that death.” (*RITD* 41). By showing that the boys find their speech strange and laughable, Deane is both problematizing simplistic nationalist rhetoric about identity based on language and also pointing out the plight of “politically voiceless populations, limited by access to education, economic sway, civil liberty and limited political representation” (J. K. Miller 27).

Irish language also takes center stage in the narrator's struggle to make sense of conflicting demands to be silent and to speak the truth. Ironically, in *Reading in the Dark*, this very ignorance of their "own language" by the narrator and his parents provides the boy with the means to negotiate the borderland created by the secrets between his parents; using Irish, he is able to walk the tightrope pulled taut by his opposing loyalties to his mother and father in the matter of the terrible legacy of his grandfather's confidence. The larger political conflict that is the background for the novel is tied tightly to the concept of identity. Postcolonial theory recognizes that the colonized have, *de facto*, incorporated aspects of the colonizer into their own cultural identity and therefore, makes futile "what seems like an endless search for a lost communal or even personal identity" (*Nationalism* 11). Thus, the question of the boy's problematic process of identity formation remains central to any postcolonial interpretation of *Reading in the Dark* (Harte 152). Deane's interviews about the book offer further insights into his views about the narrator's situation as emblematic of the colonized subject. Deane pointed out that colonized people in general are represented (and stereotyped) by their colonizers, and that the Irish, in losing their language, lost an important means of self-representation (*English & Media* 19). He maintained that "[o]ne way of coming into self-possession, of overcoming any kind of oppression, colonial or otherwise, is to take charge of interpretation yourself, not to allow yourself to be interpreted by others" and that he felt his novel was "about a young child who never earns a name. He never achieves sufficient identity [. . .] to deserve the name or the sense of self he's looking for" ("Reading Deane" 29-30).

The narrator's state of being "caught in-between" his parents is another metaphor for the colonial/postcolonial condition. The fact that the central conflict in the novel has political roots and involves the boy's parents, grandfather, and uncle aligns it with postcolonial Gothic fiction in which "family and familial relationships are the places in which political, historical, and social conflicts are staged" (Azzam 7). The Gothic mode is particularly suited to describe the liminal nature of colonial/postcolonial societies as its "spectral characters, images, and settings harbor the hidden reality that oppositions of all kinds cannot maintain their separateness" (Hogle 11).

The presence of the supernatural is a familiar form of hyperbolic expression in postcolonial literatures, notably in texts that use magical realism to highlight the clash of the rational (representative of imperial European realism) and the fantastic (representative of alternate, indigenous world paradigms). Lucie Armitt, in her comparison of the Gothic to its "sister form," magical realism, argues that the boundary between the two modes of writing is increasingly blurry, and Deane's work seems to bear that out (224).⁷ In magical realism, which is so closely associated with postcolonial politics, the postcolonial psyche is located in the suspension between the rational and the fantastic (Farris 103).⁸ This is precisely the space in which the narrator of *Reading in the Dark* finds himself, which Deane depicts using the Gothic mode.

⁷ Armitt also posits several important distinctions between the two modes, some of which deserve further examination in light of Deane's use of the Gothic. Marisa Bortolussi has written more generally about how magical realism differs from other modes that incorporate the supernatural. See "Introduction: Why we need another study of Magic Realism." and "Implausible worlds, ingenuous narrators, ironic authors: Towards a revised theory of Magic Realism."

⁸ Amaryll Chandary explores the implications of this "in-between" state in magical realism in "Magic Realism revisited: The deconstruction of antinomies."

POETICS

W. H. Auden said, “A poet is, before anything else, a person who is passionately in love with language” (444). In addition to writing criticism and this novel, Deane was a poet, and his love of language is reflected in the lyricism of his prose and the powerful, evocative imagery in *Reading in the Dark*. Anne Williams contends that Gothic fiction, historically linked with Romanticism, is essentially poetic (1-5), and indeed, it is Deane’s imaginative and sensitive rendering of internal and external landscapes that creates the Gothic ambience in the novel. Eagleton calls it “Deane’s artistic triumph that *Reading in the Dark* is at once an act of loving fidelity to the social landscapes of his childhood and a hard-headed refusal to idealise them” (47). But the physical and social landscapes of the narrator’s world are inseparable in Deane’s Derry where the physical conditions serve as a metaphor for the political conditions of the north. In his descriptions of life in and around Derry, the place itself seems to be alive. The personification of the setting, and its foregrounding in the narrator’s consciousness, contribute to the reader’s sense of the uncanny, of a kind of presence that escapes rational explanation but is nonetheless real and ominous. The houses in the Bogside were “crouching”; the “shadows on the gable wall shrivelled”; the fires “burnt down to their intestines;” the stars “fainted”; the “green corn whistled”; a tree had “nervous branches.” Deane uses both sensory language and an explicit reference to the Gothic in order to infuse his descriptions with a sense of decay and feeling of trepidation:

Now, instead, we had the high Gothic cathedral and its parochial house, standing above the area in a permanent greystone winter overlooking the abandoned site that seemed to me a faithless and desolate patch, rinsed of its colour, pale and bald in the midst of the tumble of small houses, unpaved streets and the giant moraine of debris that had slid from the foot of the city walls down a sloping embankment to where our territory began. (*RITD* 32-33)

In a 1997 interview, Deane described the north as “a gothic place” dominated by fire and darkness and characterized by links between fire, darkness, intimacy and violence (*English & Media* 19). Darkness, which obscures vision, is clearly associated with difficulties of understanding—and the title of Deane’s novel reflects the narrator’s ongoing attempt to “read” his world in the dark. But *Reading in the Dark* is also rife with images of fire, a Gothic trope of the sublime in which fear and delight are experienced simultaneously. From the fire in the distillery, to the summer bonfires, to the fires out of which the rats are driven to their deaths, screaming, Derry is burning in this novel. Even the ghost of Daddy Watts opens his mouth to reveal “a red fire raging within” (*RITD* 33). As a boy, the young narrator loves the excitement and intensity of the flames; he says, in a line that in its poetic inversion of subject and object emphasizes his fascination, “Fire was what I loved to hear of and to see” (*RITD* 31). He recounts with satisfaction the story of getting revenge on the policemen who had baton-charged in a St. Patrick’s Day riot then pursued the marchers into their own neighborhoods; the nationalists poured oil on the road and provoked the police into pursuing them in cars, which skidded and crashed, and “one car lit up in a blue circle of flame as the police ran from it” (*RITD* 35). Yet these same images of fire reveal its terrible powers of destruction. For anyone familiar with the history of sectarian mobs burning people out of their homes in Northern Ireland, especially in Belfast, the image of fleeing rats, burned out of their Bogside nests, resonates with symbolism. The narrator’s description of the ruins of the distillery, “a burnt out space in the heart of the neighborhood” (*RITD* 34) seems to echo the boy’s conception of hell as “a deep place you fell into, turning over and over in the mid-air until the blackness sucked you into a great whirlpool of flames and you disappear forever”

(*RITD* 5). In the yard, covered with concrete after he destroyed the rose bushes, he felt he was “walking on hot ground below which voices and roses were burning, burning” (*RITD* 111). And his mother, suffering in her terrible depression, repeats over and over again, “Burning. It’s burning. All out there, burning” (*RITD* 144).

These sudden outbursts of fire, and the violence they represent, take place against the background of a Derry that “lay entranced, embraced by the great sleeping light of the river and the green beyond the border” until “[i]t woke now and then... in clamour at its abandonment” (*RITD* 34). Deane replicates this contrast of peace and violence in small tableaux, such as that of the cozy domestic scene in which the narrator, seated in the kitchen, reads what he purports is a school essay to his attentive parents. In fact, the “essay” is a story of murder and betrayal, and that fact that he is speaking it aloud, even in a language they don’t understand, is a small act of violence against the code of silence within the family. In the end, the boy’s written account of the terrible truth is also relegated to the fire in the hearth, and silence is reimposed. When the narrator encounters a classmate’s essay—the episode an allusion to an actual incident in Deane’s own life, involving his classmate, Seamus Heaney (E. Longley 34)—the juxtapositions of the rational and the romantic, of intimacy and violence, are even clearer: “I kept remembering that mother and son, waiting in the Dutch interior of that essay, with the jug of milk and the butter on the table, while behind and above them were those wispy, shawly figures from the rebellion, sibilant above the great fire and below the aching high wind” (*RITD* 21).

As has been shown, Deane uses many of the tropes and conventions of the Gothic in *Reading in the Dark*. The dualities of love and hate, and beauty and ruin, the material

and the supernatural, run through the novel. Aptly, the fragmented nature of Deane's narrative supports multiple readings of the novel. By interrupting the straightforward structure of a rational explanation with spectral intrusions, the novel embraces Gothic doubleness and concerns with the slippery nature of the truth. The episodic nature of the overall structure of the novel—which he described as originating from a series of “flash memories” (*English & Media* 17) —also provides a mimetic re-presentation of the reconstructed, fragmented memories of the trauma survivor, characterized by gaps, self-doubts, and unresolved questions. What's more, fragmentation of narrative structure can be seen through a postcolonial lens, reflecting the hybrid identity of the colonized.

In considering Deane's work in the context of all of the Troubles writing under discussion in this study, two additional stylistic aspects are important. The first is his use of humor, an aspect not often associated with the Gothic, but very much associated with Irish writing, and surprisingly frequent in novels about the deadly Troubles. Deane tempers the oppressive, boxed-in atmosphere of a Derry under stress with episodes of wry humor, especially related to his manipulation of the bishop by pretending a possible interest in ordination, his unenlightening session with Father Nugent in which he is meant to learn the “Facts of Life”, and his ill-fated date with Irene Mackey. In each case, the gentle humor rests on incongruities between what is said, what is meant, and what is understood. Sometimes the obfuscation of meaning is deliberate (as in the narrator's canny dealings with the bishop), and at other times, it is simply a product of the failure to connect (as with his conversation with Father Nugent and his fumbling attempts at romance with Irene). However, in these relatively harmless, and therefore amusing, miscommunications, Deane emphasizes the ways in which language can be insufficient to

fully communicate meaning. In doing so, he reminds us why he has turned to the exaggerations of Gothic conventions to express ideas that are so complex: literal language lacks the facility to express and maintain the irresolvable opposition of the real and the impossible that reside within them.

Finally, it is worth calling attention to one way in which Deane uses sentence structure itself to reflect excess. In certain moments in which the narrator is overwhelmed by either internal or external factors, Deane employs a kind of syntactical piling that conveys intensification of feeling, recreating the emotional experience for the reader. For instance, in this passage the narrator describes how his thoughts churn as he and his father do the dishes, and how he longs for his father to tell him “something terrible some day,” even while he is frightened of hearing it: “That way I could love him more; but I’d love myself less for making him tell me, for asking him to give me a secret, for having sung a verse of his song, for the accident of having been the one with the flecks of his dead and maltreated sister’s blood on him” (*RITD* 45). The reader can feel the compounding weight of his dread as he adds each fearful repercussion. Deane uses form to reflect content in a similar way in this description of the Troubles, which have broken out by the end of the novel: “We choked on CS gas fired by the army, saw or heard explosions, the gunfire, the riots moving in close with their scrambled noises of glass breaking, petrol-bomb flashings, isolated shouts turning to a prolonged baying and the drilled smashing of batons on riot shields” (*RITD* 243). Here the accumulation of images at the sentence level mimics the barrage of violence it describes. This form of hyperbolic diction has its roots in ancient Irish poetry where it is used most often in passages that express heightened emotion (Tymoczko, “Hyperbolic” 111-16). This stylistic element

becomes much more pronounced in the works of later writers such as Anna Burns and David Keenan and will be discussed further in the chapters devoted to their novels.

When *Reading in the Dark* was published, Robert Boyers complained in his review in *The New Republic* that Deane's novel offers "the material for moral inquiry, but the inquiry is not pursued" (34). This misses the point. There is no moral clarity to be had here, any more than there is simple, straightforward truth. The narrator's encounters with the supernatural underline the idea that truth (moral or otherwise) is an uncertain commodity; the novel's (Gothic) uncanny functions to "manifest the mobility of meaning" (Botting, "Unconscious" 33). Painfully, the boy comes to understand that "the facts and the truth are not entirely coincident one with the other... the fact is here but the truth of that fact is larger than the fact" (Deane, *English & Media* 18). Ethical understandings are similarly ambiguous; the secrecy, deceptions, and sufferings that are woven into his family (and community) history eliminate the possibility of moral certainty. Themes related to the complicated moral calculations confronting the nationalist community during the Troubles will be echoed in the works of Burns, Keenan, and Hughes that are under study here.

The complexity of the situation in twentieth-century Northern Ireland was overwhelming to much of its populace. It was a tangle of numerous threads: the long history of plantation, segregation, dispossession, and rebellion that preceded its formation; the intractable stances of both nationalists and unionists; the seemingly irreconcilable dispute over identity; deteriorating economic conditions; institutionalized sectarian discrimination in enfranchisement, housing, employment, and dispensation of justice; the simmering resentments that led to secret militant groups; and the ever-present

specter (and manifestations) of betrayal. *In Reading in the Dark*, Deane uses the hyperbolic Gothic, whose “deliberately forced unreality . . . allows this mode to symbolize the threatening inconsistencies . . . in the personal and political unconscious” (Hogle 15). The boy’s struggle to understand and develop his own identity is rewarded with a painful loss of innocence as he comes to more fully comprehend and share in the private and political suffering of his community. The Gothic provides Deane with what realism cannot: a means to paint a darkly complicated, layered portrait of the precarious status of mid-twentieth-century Northern Ireland where apparently unresolvable dichotomies, built into the history and social structure of the state, laid the groundwork for the Troubles ahead.

CHAPTER TWO: FROM ONE EXTREME TO ANOTHER: THREE NOVELS BY

ANNA BURNS

*But these are women we loved.
Record-keepers with a different task.
To stop memory becoming history.
To stop words healing what should not be healed.*
—Eavan Boland, “*The Historians*”

Perhaps nowhere is the deeply communal and affective nature of the trauma engendered by the Troubles more effectively rendered than in the work of Anna Burns, one of a generation of authors who were born or grew up during the Troubles and have published their work in the wake of the 1998 Good Friday Agreement. As of this writing, Burns has published three novels related to the Troubles: *No Bones* (2001), *Little Constructions* (2007), and most famously, *Milkman* (2018). Reading her earlier works provides a clear view of her path to *Milkman*, showing her progression as a thinker, a writer, and one suspects, as a trauma survivor. While each novel is unique, there are a sufficient number of shared incidents, topics, and themes to read them as a trilogy in which Burns examines the cumulative, devastating impacts of living in “a society that is almost entirely in a state of emergency” (Deane, *Small World* 242). In these works, Burns’s use of the hyperbolic is crucial to communicating the nature of suffering endured by those who lived through (and those who did not *live* through) the decades-long Troubles in Northern Ireland. Richardson notes that what makes terrorism distinctive as terror is “contained in the excess of affect that its violence produces” (“Terrorism” 320). The trauma represented in these three novels is at once individual and collective, realistic and surreal, unspeakable and simultaneously revealed through the power of Burns’s extraordinary extravagance with language. Building on the long tradition of purposeful

exaggeration in Irish fiction and poetry “from the earliest period to the present, across both of the main languages that Irish literature has been written in during the last millennium” (Tymoczko, “Hyperbolic” 111), Burns exercises the full range of options outlined in Johnson’s expressibility spectrum—silences, understatement, verisimilitude, hyperbole, and a return to (altered) silences—in her depiction of excess affect experienced by characters terrorized by brutal and often intracommunal violence. In language that “self-consciously calls attention to the act of narration” (White 352), her novels employ hyperbolic literary configurations of the bizarre, the grotesque, and the absurd, as well as negative excesses in the form of euphemism, understatement, and silence, to portray the extremities of living amidst terror-based civil warfare for three decades.

In the late nineteenth century, Sigmund Freud identified the repression of memories, or dissociation, as a psychological defense mechanism. When an intolerable idea presents itself, one response is to push it out of consciousness; through this “intentional not-thinking of some target material,” human beings protect themselves from knowledge and memories that are too painful to contemplate, or in some cases, even acknowledge (Erdyli 4). Freud, who further developed his concept of trauma while working with World War I veterans, observed the repeated and often involuntary emergence of intolerable experiences, ideas, and feelings which the soldiers had “pushed away” from their consciousness. This “suffering from reminiscences” manifested in nightmares, hallucinations, or by unwitting reenactment painful events when the defense mechanism broke down (Erdyli 8). Caruth describes this reemergence of the buried memory as the “double wound” of trauma, comprising the initial event that is

“experienced too soon, too unexpectedly to be fully known” and the later repeated reimposition of itself on the consciousness “in nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor” (*Unclaimed* 3-4). The use of excessive “forgetting” as a key coping strategy runs through Burns’s work, along with the various ways in which traumatic memories reemerge and/or shape behavior. In all three novels, Burns lays bare the close relationship between public and private violence; her characters’ lives are rife with violent behavior in both the domestic and civil spheres. She explores the way violence in the public realm seeps into and becomes a normalized part of private life, erasing the boundaries between the personal and the political, as a communal affective impact of terror. In order to engage with the complexity of terror-related trauma, each text works to represent such trauma at three levels: narrative, theme, and style (Richardson, “Terrorism” 327). Yet, Burns continues to offer new insights with each novel as she approaches her topic from a different perspective and with a growing range of poetic techniques.

In *No Bones*, Burns’s first full-length work about the Troubles and the novel that is most clearly tied to place and time, Burns explores the relentless nature of the violence during the Troubles, the self-destructive ways in which human beings cope by “forgetting,” and the inevitable reemergence of repressed memories. Her use of excess is both topical—the sheer volume of life-threatening or deadly events is enough to be overwhelming—and built into the structure of the novel itself, with its kaleidoscope of shifting viewpoints and its gaps, redactions, and hallucinatory passages that undermine narrative authority.

Little Constructions is a satirical account of a town run by a violent crime family that bears some uncanny resemblances to a patriarchal paramilitary organization. The

overriding sense of chaos is accomplished by upending expectations at every level of storytelling. In addition to parody, Burns uses chronological hijinks and the mind-boggling editorializing excesses of an unknown narrator to examine the psyches of individuals who are damaged by, and who themselves often perpetuate, intergenerational violence. Indeed, her use of irony, sarcasm, satire, and parody infuse a surprising degree of levity into all three novels. Fiona McCann argues this causes the reader discomfort (20), but I contend that it provides just enough relief from the horrors of the situation to allow one to keep reading. In any case, Burns manages to be at once very funny and deadly serious.

Finally, in *Milkman*, paranoia—excessive fear—is a part of the community’s traumatic response to what Richardson describes as “pervasive uncertainty, a sense that experience is increasing and irretrievably slipping out of control” (“Terrorism” 326). *Milkman* is built on excesses in the language itself; its prolixity and discursive style, in striking juxtaposition with what is conspicuously unsaid, are used to convey the affective experience of overpowering anxiety associated with an elevated awareness both of dreadful things that have occurred and of any number of terrible events that might happen next.

Excess can also be seen in the sheer number of issues Burns raises in these novels—sexual predation, political violence, violence against women, violence by women, women’s awakening ideas of power, incest, abortion, religion, identity, historical narrative, superstition, parenting, the rigid constraints of sectarian identity in a divided community, cultural norms against informing, saying things by not saying anything, entrapment, mental health, homosexuality, the intervention of good luck, the possibility

of redemption, the persistence of hope, despite oneself—all against the backdrop of communities where the forces of warring paramilitary organizations and the apparatus of the state threaten day-to-day existence in a myriad of ways. Burns’s concern here is not limited to the sectarian divide. Instead, her work can be described as what Caroline Magennis has called “ecumenical criticism” (*Sons*, 16). Burns does not ignore the underlying causes of civil revolt in Northern Ireland; she acknowledges and condemns the sectarian hatred fueling the conflict from both sides, including the various forces of the state that are often complicit in the maltreatment of Catholics. However, she is particularly concerned with the hollowness of romantic nationalist narratives in the face of the criminality, violence, and corruption that permeated the local paramilitary force, or as middle-sister calls them in *Milkman*, the “renouncers of the state” (*MM* 7). Rather than choosing between, or even comparing, the chief antagonists, Burns focuses most on what happens in a nationalist community under the rule of a paramilitary organization during the Troubles — the kind of community she grew up in. She shows the cumulative individual and collective trauma visited on people living under conditions of prolonged and self-perpetuating terroristic violence. Whether it is because of one “big thing” or “a series of little things,” such violence is traumatic at the communal as well as the personal level. As the narrator of *Little Constructions* says: “That’s because of evil. That’s what evil does” (20).

NO BONES

No Bones tells the story of the childhood and adolescence of Amelia Lovett, a child of five or six years of age as the Troubles begin. The novel is firmly set in place and time: Ardoyne, a poor, working-class neighborhood in north Belfast during the period

from 1969-1998. On one level a trauma narrative in which Amelia is the central character, *No Bones* is also very much a chronicle of community that explores “the complex ways in which terrorism traumatizes bodies, societies, and their relations to one another and the world” (Richardson, “Terrorism” 321). Burns examines the self-destructive ways in which the people attempt to cope with the instability and unpredictability of daily life during the Troubles. She writes about multidimensional sources and impacts of trauma in the private sphere (domestic violence, sexual abuse, dysfunctional coping skills) as well as in the public sphere (burnt out houses, bombs, sectarian murders, reprisal killings within the community). In doing so, Burns turns to “exaggeration and overkill” (McCann 13).

Burns builds excess into the very structure of *No Bones*. The organization of the novel is similar to that of Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*: each chapter is grounded in a specific year, and the story moves forward in chronologically ordered chapters. However, while Deane’s story described the long, slow-burning fuse leading to the Troubles, *No Bones* immerses the reader in the conflagration that ensues from the day the Troubles begin. To accomplish this, Burns presents a far more fragmented narrative to reflect the chaos that characterized life in the north of Ireland, especially in working class Belfast, once the Troubles were underway. Burns relies on the familiar trauma narrative technique of incorporating gaps and redactions in the story, the effect of which is always to undermine the notion of a knowable central truth and emphasize the “undoing of the foundations of a stable subjective perspective” (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 121). By using multiple traumatized narrators, Burns emphasizes the fragmentation of the narrative to convey the communal, affective nature of the trauma. Various chapters relate events from

the perspectives of Amelia, her cousin James, or her friend Vincent, or, alternately from the point of view of an omniscient third-person narrator. Burns heightens the discontinuity of discourse by presenting Amelia's viewpoint in two different voices: her story is sometimes told by a (limited omniscient) third-person narrator and at other points in first-person. The reader's slight disorientation at the start of each chapter serves as a faint echo of the trauma victim's experience.

Burns further highlights and destabilizes narrative authority by layering these multiple viewpoints with a mixture of realism and the fantastic, and stretching the limits of form and language in what amounts to "shunning. . . literary common law" (Fadem 143). Violence, death, substance abuse, and mental breakdowns are presented in prose laden with wordplay, black humor (e.g., irony, sarcasm, satire), and narrator hindsight. The fact that viewpoint characters are shown to be suffering from a history of abuse, or hearing voices, or struggling with eating disorders and/or addiction, poses questions about the reliability of any given version of events. Readers' doubts are amplified by the doubts of the characters themselves about what Amelia calls their own "slippery" memories.

Through characters who are caught up in a relentless cycle of experiencing, suppressing, and remembering terrible events, Burns makes visible the traumatic dynamic of repression and the inevitable, consequent reemergence of memories. Chapters are vignettes which contain flashbacks, hallucinations, and/or reflective commentary. "Missing pieces" of personal history are often brought to the reader's attention when the characters rediscover them, voluntarily or not, and in the moment of rediscovery, learn that they were lost. The reader shares the experience of the traumatized consciousness

through flashbacks that permeate the defenses erected by “willful forgetting.” One such epiphany occurs in the chapter entitled “The Least Inattention, 1975” when Amelia witnesses her classmate Bronagh McCabe, enraged over an adolescent love triangle, pull a gun out of her school basket and shoot another girl on the playground. As Bronagh pulls “the trigger, a flash of memory” goes “flying through” Amelia’s mind. The polysemy of the word “trigger” here—it refers to operating the gun, and also to activating a frightening memory—calls attention to Amelia’s traumatized status. Amelia herself observes “[H]ow strange it was, the way things came back.” The “very slippery memory” that emerges is of being fingerprinted by the police in her primary school. Burns portrays both the need to remember what has been suppressed, and the difficulty of doing so, as Amelia reflects that with “the least inattention . . . it might slide away forever. I didn’t want to lose it, not for the second time” (*NB* 91-92). The reader, like the characters, is forced to weave various narrative strands together to make meaning of them, reenacting the trauma survivor’s process of constructing history from suddenly available fragments of memory; and like the trauma survivor, the reader is left with uncertainty about ever really knowing what happened.

For Burns’s characters, excess is part of the lived reality. Murder is a constant source of trauma, but so are domestic violence, abandonment, sexual assault, incest, unwanted pregnancies, general criminality, harassment by state forces, the deaths of friends and family members, and the need to be constantly on high alert while navigating the “religious geography” of Belfast’s streets. Alcoholism and anorexia rates are high.

Amelia and her friend Vincent take the practice of partitioning off memories, Freud’s “willful forgetting,” to such an extreme that they begin to dissociate from reality,

a process that Burns explores more explicitly in *Little Constructions* and that David Keenan depicts in detailed slow motion in *For the Good Times*. Amelia develops the habit of willful forgetting at an early age. The novel opens with the chapter, “Thursday, 1969,” which recounts, through the eyes of six-year-old Amelia, the story of the day the Troubles are said to have begun in Belfast.¹ This anchors the novel firmly in the history of the Troubles: the 14th of August, 1969, was the date of transformative events in the two largest cities of Northern Ireland. British troops were ordered into the streets of the city of Derry, and on the same day, large-scale violence broke out in Belfast. In west Belfast, Catholic families were burned out of their homes in Conway Street, and armored cars manned by the B-Specials, the auxiliary police,² opened fire on Divis Flats, killing a nine-year-old boy who was asleep in his bed (Conroy 29). Amelia’s neighborhood of Ardoyne was also a flashpoint for sectarian violence (Hanley). Within seventy-two hours, some three hundred people had been displaced from their homes in Ardoyne (RTE “A Violent Night in Ardoyne”). The narrator describes the mounting terror of Amelia, who is sent to hide under the kitchen table as someone tries to put a petrol bomb through the

¹ In fact, sporadic violent episodes and various forms of protest and civil unrest occurred in Northern Ireland throughout much of its history, and by the mid-1960s, tensions were rising. However, due to the events of 14 August 1969, it is often cited as the day the 30-year Troubles started. See, for instance, *Belfast Diary* by John Conroy.

² The so-called B Specials were members of the almost exclusively Protestant Ulster Special Constabulary, formed just prior to partition in 1920 as a quasi-military force to battle insurgency. As reservists, they were known as “B” men, or more commonly, “B Specials.” They came under fierce criticism for sectarian brutality and reprisal killings and were disbanded in 1970 at the advice of the Hunt Report on bias and discrimination in Northern Irish policing. They were replaced by the Ulster Defense Regiment (UDR) which was intended to consist of both Protestant and Catholic members, but which within three years was 96% Protestant in make-up. Over the years, the UDR was shown to have links to loyalist paramilitaries, even to the extent of sharing security files, and it came to be seen as a “carbon copy” of the B Specials (McCaffery).

mail slot which her mother had glued shut.³ While Loyalist attackers pry the board on the outside of the window off, the narrator introduces the reader to Amelia's method of coping: her first defense is to "blank out." The narrator tells us: "Then Amelia forgot. . . Amelia fell asleep" (*NB* 17-18).

As it progresses, the novel remains tethered to historical events and places. When Amelia's cousin James, a British soldier and the son of two Ardoyne natives who had moved to England, is deployed to Belfast three months later, he searches out his relatives. James, warmly greeted by his Ardoyne family on his first tour of Belfast, will be rejected by them and eventually killed by a friend of Amelia's brother when he returns on a subsequent deployment. James's experience illustrates, among other things, the transformation from initial relief within the Catholic community upon the arrival of "neutral" British troops, to eventual disenchantment as it became clear that the troops, over time, had become more closely aligned with the unionist power structures in the north of Ireland. The novel takes place in Belfast locations that a reader familiar with the city will recognize: Herbert Street, Clifton Street, Crumlin Road, Cliftonville Road, Havana Street, Terry McDermott's (Social Club), and the area adjacent to Ardoyne wryly referenced in the novel's title, the Bone. Other historical events of the Troubles, including the hunger strikes and the Shankill Butcher murders, are the backdrop to Amelia's story. For instance, in the chapter set in 1982, during Amelia's adolescent clubbing days, a Ford Cortina prowls the late-night streets, searching for Catholic victims, and narrowly missing Amelia's friend Fergal one night. A few hours later, another friend, the

³ Interestingly, a parallel scene occurs in Kenneth Branagh's film *Belfast*, set on Mountcollyer Street in a mixed neighborhood in north Belfast, when the young Protestant protagonist and his brother are ordered to hide under the table after a Loyalist gang invades the area to drive out Catholics.

unfortunate Danny Megahey, is captured and taken “very much against his will, into the heart of the Shankill, where he met his protracted, grisly and truly awful end” (NB 207). Burns is alluding to the so-called Shankill Butchers, a gang of Loyalist murderers who operated in Belfast from 1975-1982, often roaming the streets in a Cortina, who were notorious for kidnapping and torturing random Catholic victims before cutting their throats with a butcher’s knife.⁴

Burns’s terse description of Danny’s death is an example of how Burns uses understatement, the technique that Aristotle defined as negative hyperbole. Her omission of further information evokes in the reader an understanding that Danny’s experience is horribly beyond what she is able to describe. Instead of moving back to the truth from an exaggerated description, the reader must move past the understated description, imagining the missing details to arrive at some sense of the inexpressibly terrible truth. More often, however, Burns favors overstatement to reorient the reader’s perspective. The idea that two of Amelia’s close friends separately encounter the Shankill Butchers in the same night stretches credulity, yet the reality is that on any given night, anyone from Ardoyne could have encountered the gang as they navigated their way home from city center through a maze of short streets that offered varying degrees of danger, based on the sectarian geography of Belfast; and luck would play an oversized role in their survival if they did.⁵

⁴ The Shankill Butchers, and their leader, Lenny Murphy, are the subject of Eoin McNamee’s novel, *Resurrection Man*, which is discussed in a subsequent chapter of this dissertation.

⁵ The compilers of the oral history, *Ardoyne: The Untold Truth*, write, “So pronounced was the degree of sectarian segregation in that part of the city that loyalists could also be more or less sure that someone walking down a certain street, at a certain time, and in a certain direction was a Catholic. It is because of this (and the large number of people who were abducted and killed there) that the Cliftonville Road became known as ‘murder mile.’ It was one of the favourite ‘hunting grounds’ of various loyalist groups. This was particularly so for the most notorious and brutal of them all, the UVF gang that came to

One of the most notable affective impacts of sectarian terror on communities in Belfast during the Troubles manifested in the relationship of bodies to space in the city, where citizens were so famously and narrowly confined (by fear of violent death) to certain streets based on their religion. Another was the need to stay hyper-alert all of the time due to anxiety about events that had already occurred and those that might occur at any moment (Richardson, “Terrorism” 327). Burns, ironically, repeats the phrase “it goes without saying,” to emphasize both the necessity of this excessive attention to one’s surroundings and the way it has become normalized. When Fergal, too late to get an Ardoyne taxi, begins his walk home, he takes, “it goes without saying, the Cliftonville Road” (*NB* 202). His hypervigilance is not in vain – it saves him from the men in the Ford Cortina. A few pages later, Amelia, also too late for an Ardoyne taxi, starts her walk home, “taking, it goes without saying, the Catholic Cliftonville route” (*NB* 205). Luck is with her—she encounters only Danny Megahey, unaware that moments later his luck will run out when the red Cortina pulls up alongside him.

A frightening number of Amelia’s personal acquaintances end up dead in this novel as Burns catalogues the terrible fates too often experienced by those growing up in Ardoyne: Amelia’s sister Lizzie (suicide), Danny Megahey (killed and tortured by a Loyalist sectarian gang), Roberta McKeown (killed by a bomb), Bernadette (Bernie) Young (dead of anorexia), her cousin James (murdered by her brother Mick’s boyhood friend and rival) and quite likely, her brother Mick (disappeared, but if we believe Amelia’s friend Vincent, murdered). In a family history evocative of Synge’s *Riders to*

be known as the ‘Shankill Butchers.’ A number of the Shankill Butchers’ victims were from Ardoyne” (199).

the Sea, in which Maurya's husband, father-in-law, and sons have all been drowned, Amelia reports of her friend Vivienne Dwyer, who "of course *was* IRA," that "her brother'd been shot, and then her da'd been shot, and then her other brother'd been shot" (NB 97). Both Synge and Burns employ a hyperbolic aesthetics to emphasize the outsized threat of untimely death that confronts their characters. The range of victims in *No Bones* also suggests that for people living in areas like Ardoyne, choosing whether or not to engage in sectarian strife was not a reliable predictor of whether one would be killed.⁶ The futility of trying to stay safe by remaining a bystander is a central theme that will emerge again in *Little Constructions* and, even more starkly, in *Milkman*.

Having honed her forgetting skills by the time she is a teenager, Amelia manages to quickly lose the memory of meeting Danny Megahey on the night he was murdered. She'd walked part way home with Danny and kissed him goodbye just minutes before he was kidnapped and killed by a roving loyalist gang, but by the following night, in the pub with her friends, "She'd forgotten about Danny Megahey. They'd all heard and forgotten about Danny Megahey. Already he was not remembered. . . life moved on and any attention that was left was only for the music and only for the drinking. This, of course, was just as it should be" (NB 210). The diction here is worth examining. The repetition of how the friends had "forgotten," followed by the shift to Danny as subject—"he was not remembered,"—is a subtle shift of emphasis from the willed act of those pushing the memory of Danny out of consciousness to the idea that while not remembered, something

⁶ The oral histories compiled in the 2002 commemorative project, Ardoyne: The Untold Truth, show this to have been true and also suggest that the incredible number of victims among Amelia's friends and family is not as much of an exaggeration as we might wish. See, for example, the testimonies about Francis Bradley (pp. 228-231) or Danny Carville (pp. 304-407).

of Danny lingers. The narrator's absurd statement of approval indicates how far from norms of decency desensitized people find themselves operating in this dysfunctional society. It also makes clear that this forgetting is a communal activity. The narrator tells us that Amelia does exactly what Brendy McDaide did after leaving his buddies who'd just been shot: "Brendy, like everybody else in the area, had to forget and move on to the next thing" (*NB* 121). When Amelia's brother Mick murders Brendy in retaliation, "Everyone said wasn't it terrible, wasn't it awful, wasn't it a waste, wouldn't it always be remembered? But it wouldn't. And it wasn't. Everything got eclipsed, always got eclipsed, by the next, most recent, violent death" (*NB* 124).

As the weight of non-stop violence and pain accrues, Amelia tries other self-destructive tactics to cope with the excessive number of ultimately unbearable aspects of her life. Each of her strategies of psychological escape from the place where she is physically trapped lands her in more difficulties.

In "Battles 1987" Amelia relates in first person a drinking binge that begins on the day of her first Alcoholics Anonymous meeting. After meeting Jeanne at the meeting, she discovers they have a lot in common: "mostly wine, but gin and vodka and Jameson's, too" (*NB* 243). Burns again turns to wordplay to underscore the war that is raging on the personal as well as the societal level, substituting the word "battle" for "bottle" throughout a chapter that is full of accounts of unbelievably extravagant alcohol consumption. As in the pub scene where Amelia "forgot" Danny Megahy, Burns ties the use of alcohol to the effort to forget. In the midst of this bender, we learn that Amelia has also lost her job, and, more shockingly, that her father has died at some point in the past. His pocket watch, left to her by her "dead da," is missing, and she wonders where she

might have left it—just as the reader wonders where she might have left the memory of his death, which she has never mentioned before in her narrative.

Burns makes clear that it is not only Amelia who is traumatized in *No Bones*, and it is never a single event, or even a single type of event, that is at the root of the trauma. Amelia's good friend, Vincent, is hospitalized as a result of the trauma of seeing his father's dead body, which was stabbed *153* times, *and* by being abandoned and locked in a room by his mother for days at a time, *and* by witnessing the murder of Amelia's brother. Even her sister Lizzie, who seemed to Amelia to absolutely thrive on combat, commits suicide. No one escapes the traumatic impacts of the violence that permeates this community.

For a teenage Vincent and later, for Amelia, the practice of extreme forgetting will lead to breakdowns and stays in mental hospitals. In "Mr. Hunch on the Ascendent, 1980," Burns uses the motif of a surrealistic carnival to represent the funhouse mirror effects of the dissociative disorder Vincent develops. Told from Vincent's perspective, the narrative blurs the borders of truth and fantasy in an image-laden fever-dream that leaves the reader grasping along with Vincent for some reality to hold onto. Mr. Hunch turns out to be one of the voices in Vincent's head. Mr. Hunch's name suggests a suspicious nature, but that turns out to be an understatement; in fact, he personifies Vincent's paranoia. He urges Vincent to resist opening up to the psychiatrist, Dr. Parker. Vincent makes his way past carnival attractions with names such as "How to Sit With Your Depression," "Death and Half-Death!" and, the one he most dreads, "Identify the Body" that "had a queue a mile long waiting to go into it" where he spots his friends waiting (*NB* 159). When things get too uncomfortable in a session with Dr. Parker, Mr.

Hunch exhorts Vincent to leave. Burns describes Vincent's act of willful forgetting in response to Mr. Hunch's directive: he "knew the door would be locked so he didn't try to open it. He went through it the usual way and in no time at all he was gone" (*NB* 158).

Parker, an outsider in Belfast, cannot fathom that the violent experiences Vincent describes are true. He mistakes as too fantastic to be real Vincent's stories about Mary Dolan (who miscarried after being impregnated by her father and then subsequently was impregnated by Amelia's married brother Mick) or Jat McDaide, who "had his own private army, his own freelance murder squad" (*NB* 160). Fortunately, despite his limited understanding of Belfast realities, Parker refuses to make the "easy" diagnosis of schizophrenia urged on him by his fellow doctors; he recognizes that Vincent "chooses to go away" from reality, just as Amelia does, and he uses talk therapy to try to help him (*NB* 159). In this, *No Bones* anticipates a major theme in *Little Constructions*: the recognition of psychotherapy as a problematic practice that can nonetheless offer important benefits to trauma victims.

Burns implicates the reader in Parker's doubt—which parts of Vincent's stream-of-consciousness can we believe? — to underscore how difficult it is for those outside the community to imagine the reality of life during the Troubles. However, in a process that neatly illustrates the theory of the hyperbolic at the foundation of this analysis, it ultimately transpires that there is quite a lot of truth beneath the surrealistic antics of Vincent's hallucinatory narrative. Burns's exaggerations are not intended to deceive, but to reveal. The "radical, exaggerated falsehood" arrests our attention, and while we know it cannot be literally true, our "suspicion that something more is being said is

heightened;” the hyperbole forces us to “view the world otherwise” (Ritter, “Rethinking” 421-23).

As individuals are immersed in violence, the social dysfunction of the greater community manifests in the private sphere. Domestic violence exists separately and in parallel with the violence of the Troubles. One of the darkest, most grotesque, and most disturbing chapters in the novel, “Troubles, 1979,” opens with Amelia’s brother Mick and his wife Mena having sex on the living room settee, squeezed in between Mick’s parents, a sibling, four cousins, five friends, three neighbors and their own four-year-old daughter. Yet, in this chapter where “the bizarre is taken to the tipping point” (Fadem 155), it is the obvious nature of the exaggeration that pushes the reader to ask what is real beneath the excess. When, extricating themselves from the bodies piled on the couch, Amelia’s mother “remembered she had to go upstairs to scream her head off” and her father “remembered he had to go and stand at the gate,” the reader is forced to ponder the meaning behind the absurdity of their responses (*NB* 139). Burns uses exaggeration and excess to communicate hard truths about links between sex and violence, parents who look away from domestic sexual abuse, and the defense mechanism of denial. Mick and Mena decide to assault Amelia, who “still tried, by a massive effort of will, not to see anything and not to respond” (*NB* 144). Their attempted rape is foiled by the arrival of Amelia’s older sister Lizzie and her gang of best friends, who travel in a pack and are called, in a playful parody of Irish Catholic naming traditions, Sharon-Mary, Bea-Mary, Theresa-Mary, Grainne-Mary, Ann-Mary, Mary-Mary, and Mary-Ann-Kate. While Mick rationalizes what happened as not being about rape, “[a]s far as Amelia was concerned, it was absolutely about rape, of course it was, but there was no way she was ever going to

admit this. And how could she?” (*NB* 149). Instead, she takes another laxative, part of an ongoing eating disorder that distracts her, since “being at war with her body, indeed with any body” is simply inevitable at this point (*NB* 149).

For the bulimic Amelia and her friend Bernie Young, who eventually dies of anorexia, “the body and its relationship to the world are constitutive of trauma itself” (Richardson, “Terrorism” 321). Burns uses the shared response of excessive self-denial of nourishment by Amelia and her friends (who discuss the best methods for vomiting and how many laxatives are enough) to show the affective aspects of trauma associated with living in a state of prolonged terror, i.e., that it “is as much about the rupturing or damaging of how a body experiences the world at a relational level as it is a function of individual psychology” (Richardson, “Terrorism” 321).⁷

Linguistic Excess

In *No Bones*, Burns uses various forms of what Michael McAteer calls “linguistic excess” (*Excess* 258). For instance, the novel’s *a double entente* chapter titles, such as “In the Crossfire, 1971,” “Troubles, 1979,” “The Present Conflict, 1983,” and “Incoming, 1986,” refer simultaneously to the civil conflict and the personal problems of characters living through the Troubles, forcing us to consider once again the lack of boundary between the public and private spheres.

⁷ Sefik Tagay, et al. report that eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa have been shown to have a strong association with trauma. It is worth noting that many Northern Irish novelists writing about the Troubles, including Brian Moore, Deirdre Madden, and Eoin McNamee, feature characters with eating disorders, which would seem to indicate the prevalence of this traumatic response.

Burns relies heavily on hyperbole both as a figure of thought and as a figure of speech. Consider her description of a fight between Amelia's mother, Mariah Lovett, and Mariah's sister, Sadie Lavery:

"Mrs. Lavery had *just had her scalp pulled off* in an argument and had taken herself round to the Boys⁸ with the blood still dripping, to complain about her sibling, to show them her wounds and demand they do something about it . . . [o]f course she didn't want a reconciliation—*she wanted mayhem and war and blood and dead bodies*—but having the IRA go round was at least something in the way of getting her own back" (NB 67-68).⁹

In response to Sadie Lavery's request, the IRA sends two teenage boys to the Lovetts' doorstep. They speak insultingly to Amelia's father, who immediately and repeatedly punches one of them while her mother grabs a poker from the hearth and cracks it over the second boy's head,

[B]ut after that she couldn't really get involved for *Mr. Lovett was a tornado* and it was necessary to keep back in order to stop herself *being swooped up and dropped, broken-boned, right in the middle of the Shankill, on the other side of the barricades*, a stone's throw away . . . *all that remained of these two young fellas was one of them*. The blood streaming down his face and going into his eyes, he tried to drag the other, who was unconscious, or dead, along the road, away from Mr. Lovett, who was still kicking and *wiping the street with him*, unaccepting of the fact that this was a fight all over. After a few more steps of this dragging and staggering and hauling on a dead weight with a madman taking potshots, the second boy lost his nerve, let go of his comrade, gave up the mission and ran away. (NB 70)¹⁰

The situation itself is a manifestation of excess: Sadie Lavery escalates the personal disagreement by involving the paramilitaries, dissolving the boundary between the domestic and public spheres in what Simon Prince refers to as "the privatization of politics" (129). Burns uses diction, i.e., hyperbolic metaphors (Mr. Lovett as a tornado

⁸ A colloquial term for the IRA.

⁹ Italics are mine.

¹⁰ Italics are mine.

who wipes the street with him) and a hyperbolic description of the danger (being swooped up and dropped on the other side of the barricades), to emphasize the no-holds-barred violence of the enraged Mr. Lovett. The hyperbolic language and list-like accumulations of images and events are hallmarks of Burns's poetics: Mrs. Lavery wants "mayhem, and war and blood and dead bodies"; the boy, after "dragging and staggering and hauling . . . lost his nerve, let go of his comrade, gave up the mission and ran away." It is worth noting again that this same kind of linguistic excess is used to convey scenes of heightened emotion in early Irish poetry and folklore (Tymoczko, "Hyperbolic" 112), and indeed the image of Mrs. Lovett, as she "pushed and pulled the thwarted, dazed, still raging giant" back into the house as "the British Army" appeared (*NB* 70), recalls an episode from the Fenian cycle of Irish mythology. In that story, Fionn mac Cumhail, the legendary Irish warrior giant, had been feuding with a Scottish giant, Benandonner. But when Benandonner arrived in Ireland to fight him, Fionn's wife Oonagh pulled Fionn into the house to hide him because they knew that Fionn had no chance against the much larger Benandonner.

Disruption of the nationalist narrative

As previously noted, Burns moves beyond the dichotomy of a nationalist vs unionist framework as she portrays the violence that threatens her characters. In her stories, it is as likely to come from within the community as from the "other side." The larger-than-life Bronagh McCabe is a satirical vehicle for Burns's criticisms of gender and sexuality, sex and violence, and romanticized nationalism. Maud Ellmann has argued that *No Bones*, in contrast to novels such as Brendan Kiely's *Proxopera* and Eugene McCabe's *Victims*, dispenses with maternal deities (99). However, as McCann rightly

notes, Bronagh is an obvious parody of the Mother Ireland archetype, a typology that dates back to early Irish myths and sagas (19).

Amelia describes Bronagh at about age twelve as “one big beef of a girl, more than most big beefs of girls I knew” and narrowly escapes an after-school fight with her only because Bronagh shoots a classmate during gym class. From the start, then, Burns dispenses with the notion that women, so often the victims of violence, do not commit violence themselves. A few years later, in 1978, after Bronagh and Amelia have both dropped out of school, they are placed in an integrated (i.e., Protestant and Catholic) Youth Training Program. There Bronagh causes trouble by insisting on doing work designated only for boys, creates slapstick chaos, and eventually, after a disastrous attempt to attract one of the boys by making her appearance more “feminine,” erupts in a comically oversized rage that starts a brouhaha, sends people to the emergency room, and shuts down the program. By the next time Bronagh appears, in “Incoming, 1986,” she has transformed into a ruthless (and beautiful) IRA operative who specializes in planting deadly bombs.

In *The Irish Ulysses*, Tymoczko offers a brief history of how the Mother Ireland figure of modern Irish literature evolved from stories of early Celtic goddesses. Many of the characteristics of symbolic Irish female figures in Irish literary traditions (both oral and written) can be found in these earliest female deities who were associated with fertility and “vigorous sexuality.”¹¹ They were also notably connected with wars, either as leaders of armies or in the form of an actual war goddess such as The Morrigan.

¹¹ Tymoczko suggests Brian Merriman’s *Cúirt an Mheadhón Oidhche* (*The Midnight Court*) for a link between the idea of languishing women and vigorous sexuality. In his poem, the women complain that

The Sovereignty (in Irish, *In Flaithuius*) is one such goddess who appears in a number of early Irish stories in which she transforms from a hag to a beautiful young woman after her union with a rightful (i.e., worthy) king. This gave rise to the two predominant versions of the Mother Ireland figure that appear in later literature: the “Shan Van Vocht” (an anglicized version of *an seanbhean bhocht*), “the poor old woman;” and the eighteenth century *aisling*, a dream or vision of a beautiful, languishing young woman who represents Ireland and appeals for help to end her bondage. James Clarence Mangan popularized later representations of Ireland in the form of a woman in his translations of “Dark Rosaleen” (1837) and in poems celebrating Cathleen Ni Houlihan. In the early twentieth century, W. B. Yeats’s play, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, infused “Irish patriotic history” with ideas about dispossession, idealized Irishness, martyrdom, and the quest for fame, and was an inspirational influence behind the 1916 Easter Rising (Tymoczko, *Irish Ulysses* 105). The shared narrative is one of a woman waiting for that brave young man, the rightful king, and his warriors, who would free Ireland from British oppression.

Burns’s Bronagh McCabe is an over-the-top send up of the Mother Ireland figure. Neither Bronagh’s fertility nor her dedication to freeing Northern Ireland from British rule are in doubt. She is mother to six blonde sons (twin, triplets, and a toddler), each named after an Irish rebel: Kevin Barry, Henry Joy (after Henry Joy McCracken), Patrick-P (Pearse), James C (Connolly), Baby Wolfe Tone—and one whose name we never learn (the long-awaited hero-king on the horizon?). Through the boy’s names,

they languish for husband and children—and adamantly require sexual fulfillment as part of their demands (*Irish Ulysses* 101).

Burns extends the parody of Mother Ireland to encompass the cycle of uprising, failure, and commemoration that is part of a certain republican discourse about the Troubles (McCann 39).

Burns represents Bronagh's ancient roots in *The Sovereignty* through her rapacious appetites for war and sex. The first time the reader meets Bronagh, she has pulled a gun on a classmate. In the chapter called "Incoming, 1986" Bronagh plants a bomb and takes advantage of a drunken ex-classmate to get information that will allow her to kill the classmate's husband (who is a member of the undercover security forces). Two years later, in a grotesquely surreal chapter titled "War Spasms, 1988," she sexually assaults Amelia as "the build-up to committing murder." Bronagh, who is "so good always at killing people," has found that what helps her prepare to do so is "dominating and very fast sex" (*NB* 252). In a bizarre sequence, Amelia, who hasn't had alcohol in a year but is suffering from "being a dry drunk," comes to Bronagh seeking information about her brother Mick, who is rumored to have been shot as an informer. Amelia once again retreats into "blank mode," somehow not seeing the parts of the bomb on the kitchen table in front of her, and passively allowing Bronagh to force sex on her before Bronagh rushes off to drop the kids at their granny's and plant another bomb (*NB* 252-61).

Burns's biting satire of Bronagh's mothering skills suggests that Mother Ireland is anything but a nurturing force. Bronagh quickly abandons efforts to cook dinner for her children in her haste to have sex with Amelia: "Oh fuck the carrots, she thought, dropping the rest to the floor. The kids can have chips, her brain computed, the kids can have beans and pasties, the kids can have whatever they wanted when they got to Granny

McCabe's later on" (*NB* 253). She simply pushes the bomb components out of Baby Wolfe's reach, covers them with a dishcloth and turns her attention back to Amelia. This scene carries an echo of Mick's earlier assault on a helpless Amelia, another reminder that the pairing of sex and violence are a communal problem. Bronagh's repulsively oversized, aggressive, and unfeeling sexual desire, absurdly "vigorous," also raises questions about her own awareness of her sexual identity as she reassures herself that "sex with a woman didn't count as sex at all" (*NB* 256). And Amelia, as usual, "didn't see it coming, didn't stop it coming, didn't know how to stop it coming, didn't admit, in fact, what it really was" (*NB* 254).

Burns challenges nationalist narratives about the nature of the conflict in other passages, too. The timepieces in the novel symbolize being stuck in a cycle of violence based on nationalist mythologies. The stopped clock on the wall in Jeanne's apartment takes on excess meaning by being "cracked down the middle and there was someone's dried blood on it" (*NB* 244). The clock reminds Amelia of the (now missing) watch left to her by her father, which in turn reminds the reader of the watch her brother Mick longed for as a youngster, one that supposedly belonged to Wolfe Tone. Mick believes his cousin James has possession of it through James's father, whose surname was Tone, and James, although knowing it has no such lineage, kindly brings the watch to Belfast to give to Mick. The watch—with its glorious, fictitious history—is the real reason that Jat McDaide kills James. Burns simultaneously calls into question the historicity of the nationalist narrative and undercuts the notion of the idealistic heroism of those who associated themselves with the nationalist cause, suggesting that for all too many, the violence was really an adjunct to criminality and personal status.

Supernatural Manifestations

Hauntings are common in trauma narratives; specters arrive to force characters to acknowledge, revisit, mourn, or commemorate violent and unjust deaths (Lincoln and Lincoln 194). For Amelia, the cure for forgetting will be to literally confront her ghosts. The chapter in which Amelia is visited by these ghosts in her dreams (as sleep is no longer an escape) is called “No Bones, 1990-92,” a title whose multiplicity of meanings invites the reader to consider the totality of Amelia’s trauma. Ghosts, of course, have no bones. And at this point, Amelia has left Ardoyne and the adjacent neighborhood of the Bone; she is in London, away from the violence. Most importantly, it is time for Amelia to face the “make-no-bones-about-it” truths that she has been avoiding in an attempt to survive. Roberta McKeown, Bernie Young, and Danny Megahy all turn up in supernatural manifestations of memory to confront her for blocking their deaths out of her consciousness. She encounters her past as she walks in a dream along a cliff’s edge where the spectral forms of her friends force her to remember. She must acknowledge their deaths and her own numbness. Eventually, she is released from the mental hospital and ventures out to build a new life.

Amelia’s experiences in London are very much grounded in Burns’s own healing process. Burns has spoken about her own recovery from trauma after moving to England, where, she says, she felt afraid and eventually came to realize “it was Ireland” she was afraid of. Her memories began to return to her, and, she says: “My feelings were coming back into the whole thought process – I think they’d separated when I lived there, which was my way of coping. I was getting my felt reality back. It didn’t come back easy; it came back with a breakdown” (“A history of violence” 29).

In the final chapter of *No Bones*, “A Peace Process, 1994,” Burns creates an extended analogy for the fears, difficulties, and fragile hopes that accompanied the ceasefire and early peace talks in the north. When Amelia, back in Ardoyne for a visit, suggests that she and her friends take a day trip outside Belfast, the group is both suspicious and intrigued. They greet the idea with skepticism but eventually, “absolutely in spite of themselves,” they begin to “consider what it might feel like, tentatively, to say yes” (*NB* 335). Burns employs overstatement to depict affect in a traumatized community grappling with the idea of moving on: “It wasn’t as if their long-established, insular identities which they relied upon so heavily, could be ravaged and taken away from them just like that. So yes, they decided, a daytrip was within reason, just so long as they could come back and be miserable later on” (*NB* 335).

As they set forth, “[i]n spite of everyone’s courage in deciding on the daytrip, there was still a strong unacknowledged panic floating about in the air;” one friend cannot go through with it because of his “fear of the unknown and the letting go of an identity that had gone on far too long,” but the rest of the group ventures out (*NB* 339). The trip is fraught with uncertainty as the friends are ill-prepared and on edge. In describing the friend group, Burn reminds the reader of the lingering nature and shared affect of their trauma, as the narrator notes that “excepting Vincent’s wife, who had never been one, they were all reformed alcoholics” (*NB* 342). When Fergal criticizes Amelia’s driving, implying that “she was a timid driver because she’d had a nervous breakdown and that she’d had a nervous breakdown because she wasn’t him,” she privately thinks “The sooner he has his breakdown . . . the better” (*NB* 343). There is plenty of bickering and criticizing as they make halting progress towards an unknown destination. They

eventually take a ferry to Rathlin Island where they find the “Cliff of the Screaming” and encounter the “madman” Ambrose Gray. The monstrous Gray, “about fifty, with big red bursting-out cheeks, a giant solid belly and a smile that was nasty, an unpleasant arrangement, stuck on his face,” accosts them, demanding,” “Do *youse* think *youse* ’re tough coming over to our land?” (NB 349-50). They are further bewildered when they meet Cissadaye Farrell, who accuses them of somehow harming Gray. Rathlin Island, with its history of dispossessions and massacres, becomes a metaphor for Northern Ireland. Gray and Farrell represent the vitriol and resistance from the “other side” in the peace talks, and while the friends are discouraged by the seemingly baseless hostility, they themselves argue and divide into factions evocative of the political parties within the nationalist community (e.g., Sinn Féin and the SDLP).

Fadem suggests that Burns’s Rathlin Island is inhabited by ghosts and that it represents not just Northern Ireland, but the entire colonial history of all Ireland (176). Rathlin’s violent history lends itself to such an interpretation, and certainly there is something supernatural about the inhabitants of the island. However, the ghosts Amelia has met before this are all the spirits of people she knew. Further, Gray’s angry directive telling the friends to “go back to Ireland” in his “imitated Belfast accent” is intriguing. That and other elements of the friends’ journey to Rathlin open the possibility for reading the episode as a visit to the Irish *Otherworld*. Medieval Irish literature and later folklore recount visits by humans to this realm of the fairies, a multi-locational, geographically mappable, parallel world with boundaries that are permeable at certain times and places. The friends’ trip to Rathlin incorporates features of various types of such tales, including the *imram* (a sea voyage by boat to *Otherworld* islands), the *echtra* (an adventure or

expedition with some perilous aspects), and the *bruidan* (a visit to a fairy mound where the inhabitants are hostile to humans) (Tymoczko, *Irish Ulysses*, 183-84). The friends' experience of Rathlin includes other supernatural phenomena, including the ability of islanders to defy natural rules of time and space by suddenly appearing, disappearing, and reappearing. Likewise, the weather is extreme. On the mainland, the friends were enjoying the bright sun, but as they travel to Rathlin, the sky darkens. It begins to rain as they arrive, drenching them, and by the time they get to Cissadaye Farrell's door a short time later, "the breeze, which had stopped being a breeze to become a cold wind, was a cold wind no longer. It was a gale" (*NB* 352). Just minutes after that, as she slams the door in their faces, "the blizzard, which had been raging just after the hurricane but before the sun had come out, had come back, and was driving the last bit of the feeble sun away" (*NB* 353). The wildly exaggerated instability of the weather in this parallel world is a metaphor for the extreme instability of Northern Ireland in the first several years following the peace treaty, years during which terroristic sectarian incidents continued to occur sporadically, and British troops remained in the country as issues such as the decommissioning of weapons were being ironed out.

Nonetheless, *No Bones*, like all of Burns's novels, ends on a mildly optimistic note. Burns suggests that despite the setbacks, the peace agreement offers possibility for change as a smiling Rathlin shopkeeper, not to be put off by Farrell and her crew of elderly gossips, graciously serves the friends, unconcerned with how to label them. When Gray comes at them again, screaming, "Mine. . . My cliff! My cliff! Go away. Go back to Ireland. Nobody invited you here. Go and find your own!" (*NB* 357), instead of arguing, they back off, hoping to get free of him by refusing to engage. As they leave Rathlin to

return home, they wonder how they will move forward. This, of course, was (and remains) the question for the two polities in Northern Ireland, more than twenty-years after the publication of the novel and in the midst of rising sectarian resentment over Brexit and demographic shifts that are inspiring talk of a border poll (referendum) to determine the future of the six counties. In 2002, Burns captured the tentativeness of the 1994 peace talks in the vague hope Amelia holds out for the path to a better future: “[I]t’s an attitude of mind and maybe it can be got from somewhere, somehow, further down the line” (NB 358).

LITTLE CONSTRUCTIONS

In *Little Constructions*, published nine years after the Good Friday Agreement and six years after *No Bones*, Burns takes a wildly experimental approach that blends narrative, exposition, and parody in telling the disturbing story of the Does, a fictional crime family who terrorize and traumatize each other and their entire community. *Little Constructions* is an allegorical novel set in the fictional town of Tiptoe under Greystone Cliff (nicknamed Tiptoe Floorboard), but the attentive reader will notice elements of the setting that closely mirror conditions in Belfast during the Troubles, particularly the various groups in the social hierarchy, which include: a violent, armed, private organization worried about informers while engaging in internecine murder; rival gang(s) and “war factions”; a police force supplemented by “outside” police; undercover police; informers; tar-and-feathering mobs; media reporters who resort to clichéd journalistic shorthand that adheres to “official” government statements; and innocent people caught in the crossfire. Further, the narrator and characters all speak in an obvious Belfast vernacular (McCann 43). By avoiding explicit references to the north of Ireland, Burns

manages to extrapolate from the particularity of life during Troubles the likelihood—or perhaps even the inescapability—of widespread dysfunction in any society rife with violence. So, while *Little Constructions* does not identify itself as being about the Troubles in particular, it is very clearly linked to the (kind of) society the Troubles created, ruled by violent men and peopled with damaged, violent individuals who in turn inflict damage and violence on others in both public and private spaces. Viewing *Little Constructions* as the middle volume of a Burns Ardoyne trilogy does not undermine its universal themes; on the contrary, as Glenn Patterson has suggested, if we “understand one place very well it might just be possible to understand many other places at least in part” (“Northern Irish novelist” 152).

Although it has not earned the critical acclaim of her other novels, *Little Constructions* offers valuable insights into themes of individual and collective violence and trauma, including a heartbreakingly in-depth look at the trauma of sexual child abuse, something Burns touched on in *No Bones*. It also reveals itself as something of a bridge novel in which we can see a stylistic evolution from *No Bones* to *Milkman*. This novel features the wordplay and sly humor of *No Bones*, but exaggerates it to an almost manic level. The aesthetics of excess in this novel captures both the psychological and affective aspects of trauma by highlighting what Ben Highmore describes as “the messy *informe* of the ongoingness of process” (14). In *Little Constructions*, Burns experiments with craft to achieve effects that she will later perfect in *Milkman*. For instance, with a wink to the reader, Burns gives all of the major characters the surname Doe, the standard appellation for anonymity and alias. Her subsequent assignment of first names makes things dizzying; in short order the reader meets Jetty Doe, John Doe, Janet Doe, Jotty Doe, and

Julie Doe, all of whom are related in multiple ways to each other—and they are just the tip of the Doe family iceberg. There are also the gang members who aren't actually Does, but go by the Doe name. The naming technique is witty but cumbersome, and it is one of the elements that makes the novel frustratingly difficult to follow at times, but in it we see the precursor of the nameless characters of *Milkman*. As with the assignment of a fictional setting, the choice of a “neutral” name makes clear that neither sectarian nor political identity is the focus of this novel.¹² Instead, Burns is concerned with communal violence and communal trauma. Other techniques, including long digressions and an at times overwhelming profusion of words, also anticipate stylistic techniques that Burns uses in *Milkman*, where she has them under better control.

In *Little Constructions*, as in Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, the reader is led onto epistemological quicksand. Reality, if it exists, is a construct made up of the multitudinous “little constructions” of individual psyches, and as such, is an elusive concept, indeed. Burns amplifies the trope of the unreliable narrator to absurdity in order to represent both individual and collective trauma. The quirky, irreverent narrator keeps the reader off-balance, hopping from topic to topic with seeming disregard for logic or order, but still manages to cobble a storyline together—sort of—with lots of qualifications and caveats about what the truth of any given situation might be. She/he asks us bluntly: “How can you piece anything together when everybody remembers everything differently from everybody else?” (*LC* 105). The mimetic narrative structure mirrors the chaos of life in Tiptoe Floorboard. The novel raises far more questions about

¹² Burns raises the significance of names and identity explicitly in *Milkman*; this topic is discussed further in the next section of this chapter.

the nature of reality than it answers, beginning with the perplexing, unidentified narrator who at times is *heterodiegetic*, acting as an omniscient observer and removed from the action of the story altogether, and at other times is *homodiegetic*, slipping into scenes to hold conversations with the characters (McCann 42). Things are complicated further as the focus of the chapters shifts between several different characters' perspectives—all somehow presented by this same elusive narrator, who quite often addresses the reader directly in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Exactly how this narrator is privy to the thoughts of the characters is an unresolved question. Comparisons of *Milkman* by Claire Kilroy and other critics to works of Laurence Stern and Samuel Beckett, are even more pertinent to *Little Constructions*. Like the narrator in Laurence Stern's *Tristram Shandy*, Burns's "batty," digressive narrator frequently undermines her (or his?) own authority, even while, in Beckettian tradition, she/he traces the logic of what is patently absurd (Kilroy).

In this small, inbred community, the characters are embroiled in a web of overly-complicated and ambiguous relationships. For starters, John Doe, married to Janet Doe, is the head of the Doe family and is having an affair with Janet's sister, Jetty. Janet and John have two children, Julie and Judas Doe. John Doe himself is not sure whether his own mother is actually his aunt or his aunt is actually his mother, but in any case, John is one of eleven siblings—Benedict, JanineJoshuatine (yes, that is one name), Unity, Jotty, Samuel, John, the twins Abel and Abel, Gussie, Hale and Hesit. Most of these siblings are now dead or in the Tiptoe Under Greystone Cliff's Peninsula Mental Asylum. The narrator notes, in another small detail that ties the novel back to the Troubles, that Benedict, Samuel, Abel, and Abel were soldiers in the "Fifth Faction" (surely a stand-in for the IRA or any other of the paramilitary groups operating in Belfast), and that is why

John's criminal activities are tolerated by those who would otherwise enforce their own rough justice. Only Jotty stands apart, serving as the touchstone of sanity in the family—the one Doe woman who is not glamorously gorgeous, the only one who is unmarried, and the only one who rejects the violent lifestyle of the clan. The harrowing story of her childhood trauma, slowly revealed, is central to the novel. However, as it turns out, the reader can't be totally sure of any of those relationships. Matrilineal confusions abound because “maternity in this town is very difficult to prove” (*LC* 122).¹³

What's more, the truth of events as they are related is far from certain. Actions are described in detail, only to be questioned by the narrator with the insertion of a phrase like, “But did that really happen?” (*LC* 60) or retracted and identified as things that evidently did *not* really happen. Burns uses this extremely disruptive voice to undermine the entire construction of the narrative in a way that is clearly intended to echo the doubt that infiltrates the testimony of the trauma survivor. Using (and quite frequently, spoofing) psychiatric and psychological jargon, Burns's narrator makes open reference to the notion of trauma, discussing its causes, its manifestations in destructive and self-defeating behavior, and the enormous difficulties of recovery. Such commentary is sometimes accomplished in quick asides; at other times it is delivered in wildly discursive passages that foreshadow the rambling digressions in *Milkman*. Through these often darkly humorous explications of trauma, frequently directly addressed to the reader, Burns's metafiction “self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as

¹³ While a seemingly absurd statement, the implication here is that there are many hidden out-of-wedlock pregnancies. The scandals related to the notorious “mother-and-baby” homes in Ireland is testament to both the number of such pregnancies and the efforts to hide them.

an artifact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (Waugh 2).

Further, in a mind-bending manipulation of temporality, driven not just by lengthy digressions (sometimes multiple chapters long) but by the idea that while the narrator is digressing, the action in the novel is continuing, Burns creates even more gaps in the narrator’s knowledge. This is reinforced by frank admissions that what the narrator had predicted just a few pages earlier that a character would do turns out to have been incorrect. For instance, in chapter four, picking up where he/she left off with the armed and angry Jetty Doe getting into a taxi in chapter one, the narrator speculates on where the reader probably thought Jetty was going, then decides to tell what really happened—but not before interjecting, “At this point I have to own up and admit that I was wrong, for I thought she was going to two places” (*LC* 61).

Trauma is by nature a deferred experience, one that is not understood in the moment but is later re-visited through repetitive remembering and/or reenacting (Caruth, *Unclaimed* 117). Imitating this temporal instability, time is noticeably fluid in *Little Constructions*. The narrative skips around through time in vertiginous loops; Jetty Doe’s confiscation of the Kalashnikov that opens the book takes place on the same day that John Doe and most of the rest of his gang are arrested at the end of chapter twelve, but in between, and afterward, the story bounces between past, present, and future at breakneck speed, mimicking the unpredictable intrusion of triggered memories and anxieties in the trauma survivor, and making it almost impossible for the reader to sort out and keep track of the convoluted plot line. Again, it is the excess of affect that marks out this community—nearly every character has been severely traumatized by constant exposure to the threat

of violence, and their behaviors reflect that. Much of this violence is both perpetrated and experienced by the Doe family, but no one is safe. The town's nickname, "Tiptoe Floorboard" indicates that everyone needs to tread lightly.

The Doe crime family and the culture that has spawned them are brutally violent and endlessly damaging, especially to women; but neither gender is immune to the contagion of violence. In fact, the novel opens with a provocative challenge to traditional ideas about gender and violence: "There are no differences between men and women. No differences. Except one. Men want to know what kind of gun it is. Women just want the gun" (*LC* 1). In the next moment, Jetty Doe bursts through the door of a gun shop, intent on finding a weapon with which to kill her lover (and cousin), John Doe. Yet there is no doubt that Burns is particularly focused on violence perpetrated by men against women in this novel.

In a scene that foreshadows what the reader will learn about the Doe women and child molestation, a woman is assaulted by a young John Doe. The narrator again eschews any claim to an actual ability to create an objective version of events by beginning to relate what is going on in the woman's thoughts but abruptly stopping and saying, "{A}t this point. . . I myself was incapacitated from unravelling things further. This was because, temporarily and accidentally, I fell into her head" (*LC* 112). This is affect as defined by Deleuze, i.e., as encounter, and in this case, encounter by the narrator as witness to a traumatic event (Atkinson and Richardson 9). This episode typifies the excess that runs through every aspect of this novel: the fact that the woman is an innocent citizen simply waiting for a bus is not sufficiently appalling for the reader to understand the horrific nature of what Burns is describing. Instead, the narrator reveals that the

woman was raped in the past, that it was “a big thing” that, “given the tip of the iceberg of her history,” this very day she had felt encouraged that she was finally able to actually “enjoy a banter” with some men. So, as John Doe begins his approach, the woman begins having flashbacks and she is:

[N]o longer sure who she was, who he was, what year it was, what age she was, where she was and couldn't tell if what appeared to be happening was happening or if it was a ghostly re-enactment of one of the traumas from her past...[s]he knew violence, and especially the preliminaries of violence. . . Papa was standing beside her at this bus-stop, on the cusp of going one way or the other. (LC 112-114)

Burns continues to overstuff the scene with commentary on the misogyny of the Tiptoe Floorboard society in particular and the vulnerability of women to violence in general. John Doe, who “was now initiating his first beating of a proper adult woman,” afterwards “felt justified and he felt better” (LC 117, 121). When during the assault the victim also flashes back to a story another woman told her about being raped, this “extra” flashback suggests that women have a shared experience of gender-based violence. Burns also skewers the way the community permeated with violence continues to function by refusing to acknowledge that it exists: the women at the bus stop who witness Doe dragging the victim away, “quickly cohesed into a tight huddle. They started talking. This was their automatic way of not having to admit to any horror going on” (LC 118). The theme of communal repression will be more fully developed in *Milkman*. Burns also comments sarcastically on the way the legal system twists responsibility for sexual assault onto the victims as the narrator explains why the victim would not succeed in court, noting “After all, she did answer the friendly preliminary questions” (LC 112).

In *No Bones*, we saw Amelia's parents look away from her brother Mick's deviant sexual behavior. Now John Doe's physically and emotionally abusive mother,

“Pissed-Off Angry Woman,” belatedly appears on the scene to whack him over the head and drag him off by the hair, berating him for not looking after his sister Hesit. This is followed by a sickeningly ironic description of her expressing her relief and gratitude that the “nice Mr McCotter”—whom the narrator describes as “the neighbour with the crotch and the scary hair and the moving fingers”—had arrived to babysit Hesit (*LC* 123). By layering the acts of violence and denial in the public and private spheres, Burns once again makes the point that in violent societies, the border between the two dissolves. Every aspect of this community is dysfunctional not only because of violence and terror in the public and private arenas, but because everyone is invested in denying what is really happening, substituting their little constructions in order to avoid facing the appalling truths of their lives.

While not directly raising the specter of Mother Ireland in this novel, Burns certainly addresses and eviscerates romanticized stereotypes of Irish motherhood. John Doe’s performative “devotion” to his mother, expressed through staged funerals and burials that don’t actually involve a corpse but do involve tears and self-pity, is juxtaposed with the brutal degeneracy of his abusive relationships with (many) other women. Burns ridicules notions of women as naturally nurturing by exposing the extremely poor mothering skills (even worse than those of Bronagh McCabe in *No Bones*) displayed by the Doe women. John Doe’s mother (or maybe-aunt) is an absolute virago. His sisters “didn’t accept they really had these children” (*LC* 172-73). At the same time, Burns acknowledges these women as victims of intergenerational impacts of violence and offers an explanation for the inability of the traumatized to engage in fully

functional relationships with anyone, including their children, noting, “[T]hese women had no conscious awareness of the true state of their unbelonging” (*LC* 173).

As in *No Bones*, Burns explores the mechanisms of coping with violence, especially through repression and through becoming violent oneself. The Doe sisters are experts at repression who prefer their imaginary husbands to their real ones, who “mentally play out their super-intense, highly enclosed daydreams from the moment they awoke in the morning until they were placing their knives back under their pillow in whatever nook or cranny they happened to be sleeping in that night” (*LC* 192). Still, “[e]very so often . . . the psychic cracks they put their makeup over crack a bit more and out come these seepages. Strange rage attacks burst from them” (*LC* 171).

Chapter ten of *Little Constructions* presents Jotty’s story. The chapter opens with a remembered scene in which Jotty’s sister, Unity, visits Jotty to confide in her after she’s committed a violent act of some kind—the kind of visit Jotty receives frequently from her sisters. Burns’s narrator tells this part of the chapter in second person, where the “you” is clearly Jotty. Unity describes the sensation of “coming to” and looking down to find she has blood on her hands, or coming to after she’s “been sitting in a daze” and “just knowing” she’s been in a fight with someone. When she talks about calming down, and being “on the tip of the sword of revelation” and how she is at the moment of retrieval of “all that delicate and fragile memory,” we might anticipate that her moment of self-knowledge has arrived—until, in an abrupt and determined retreat from the memory, she announces that at a moment like that, her greatest hope is that she will have enough time to pull herself together and make up a story before the police arrive at the door. Burns pulls the rug out from under the reader again in this passage when the narrator explains

that Unity doesn't realize that she's telling Jotty about this, that she thinks she's in her own house and not Jotty's, that she thinks she's having the conversation in her head, "practicing," and preparing to go upstairs to wash, change her clothes, apply lipstick, and brush her hair. Burns makes the line between the literal and the figurative particularly fuzzy here — the image of blood on Unity's hands seems to be more than symbolic but perhaps less than literal. It is quite plausible but not necessarily true that she has physically harmed someone, and she may have spilled blood. Her grooming actions symbolize the deliberate partitioning off of the memory again; she washes away the evidence and rebuilds the facade that others will see. Now, she can move on, forgetting all about what she has done and visiting her sister to talk about hairstyles and fashion. In the spiraling account of this scene, the reader, too, becomes less and less certain about whether the entire series of events is occurring at Jotty's house or in Unity's head, a confusion the narrator acknowledges and reinforces by directly addressing us, with a grinning: "I don't think she's come to yet. Do you?" (*LC* 169). The sudden semantic slippage of the subject "you" sliding away from Jotty to the reader adds further to one's sensation of being off-balance.

As the chapter continues, things get grimmer. The narrator reveals more about Jotty's own experiences with repression. It turns out that Jotty, like all of her sisters before her, was repeatedly raped by her father. Now Jotty has had a breakdown and is in the process of a long, slow recovery. The breakdown was brought on by her brief affair with Tom Spaders (the man whose gun shop Jetty visited at the start of the novel). It was during a sexual encounter with Tom that the memories of her father's incestuous

relationship with her surfaced—in one of the most painful passages in the book, she describes the memory that she'd been trying to repress:

Disappearing into the wallpaper is Going Sideways. That's cutting-out and slipping-out—I mean, out of your body—until it's done and over with. Just count your numbers, recite your alphabet, examine that leaf on that tree beside that waterfall inside that wallpaper until Daddy or Daddy Substitute falls asleep or crawls off. (*LC* 199)

Unlike her sisters, who have never allowed themselves to be emotionally present during sex with their husbands, Jotty experienced something different with Tom. While the triggering of her memory led to a miscommunication and severing of the relationship, the encounter also motivated Jotty to seek therapy. Eventually, Jotty will heal and unite with Tom. In fact, all of *Tiptoe Floorboard* is on the road to recovery at the end of the novel, as described in this passage that also describes conditions in Northern Ireland in the years after the Good Friday Agreement:

The tables had turned. It was a new social order . . . The Interfering Foreign Policeman had done his neutralising work and, by now, had left Tiptoe Floorboard. Even the Fifth Faction, which had made up the six war factions as you know, had now dispersed and disbanded all their units. They had jumped on to the medial spokespeople bandwagon and were often to be seen giving syndicated history interviews on the TV. (*LC* 295)

Burns, while never excusing the violence and murders, and while mercilessly condemning their toxic masculinity, also explores the underlying frailty of the Doe males and the roots of their horrific behaviors. The narrator explains in detail the process by which traumatized children assimilate and adopt violence in response to violence through an agonizing condition called the Noises. (The employment of uppercase letters when satirizing psychiatric jargon is a form of dry humor that Burns uses repeatedly in this novel). This “psychological infection” spreads rapidly among all eleven Doe children. What are the Noises, exactly? The narrator says she doesn't “know what an expert

psychoperson writing a thesis on them would call them today,” but those Does afflicted by the condition do not fare well. In fact, “bar John and one and a half of his sisters, they were now dead, or in jail, or have been removed long ago to join the older-generation mad relatives in the Tiptoe Under Greystone Cliff’s Peninsula Mental Asylum” (*LC* 90). Hesit, the sister who was a one-year-old when the rest of her siblings got the Noises, only caught them herself at age nineteen; when she was twenty-two, “She killed herself and three others at a seance” (*LC* 91).

The narrator admonishes us that “from the outside [the Noises] do seem funny, but only from the outside,” and catalogues some of the long list of sounds that begin to disturb the children, beginning with the sounds of eating without consideration for others (slurping, burping, blowing, spitting) and expanding to more than eighty different noises. The children are tormented by the Noises from their “huge angry frightened distorted big mamma, and their even huger angry frightened distorted big papa,” as well as their parents’ “angry frightened friends” (*LC* 91). The children try to physically or mentally (for example, by counting) escape the Noises. When that doesn’t work, they *copy* what their parents are doing, because “It helped to copy, to imitate, to have a bit of power, in order to cancel out the ghostly mental repetition of the Noises” (*LC* 92). However, when they imitate their parents, they are “hit hard” and sent to bed, at which point their mother deliberately makes more Noises, “doing it for badness, knowing that they knew that she wanted them to know that she’d forgotten them, that she hoped they didn’t seriously think a pack of kids could interrupt her in her life” (*LC* 93). Soon the Doe children are punching classmates over the Noises. The Noises stop for those Doe children who have “unconsciously swapped their Noises for something more manageable. Violence — and

by the bucketload—kept the Noises away” (*LC* 94). The narrator offers this explanation of intergenerational violence:

It was a lost battle anyway because you see, there was this thing of your father having done it. And your mother having done it. And your brothers having done it. And your sisters having done it and who knows, maybe at some point you yourself having done it, not to mention the generations way back, and the not-so-way-back generations too—they probably all did it as well. So we’re stuck in that sequence. (*LC* 191)

In her 2007 review of *Little Constructions*, Lucy Ellman noted that Burns writes “as if there is no way to write about violence and violation other than with comedy, digression, wordplay and other peculiarities.” There are lighter notes in the novel. In addition to the more acerbic satire, Burns uses some less caustic parody to poke fun at dominant cultural discourses, exaggerating human foibles to the level of absurdity. Criticism is aimed at women’s magazines, self-help books, psychobabble, and the post-Troubles narrative of the IRA as responsible for peace (McCann 43). She also uses exaggeration to reveal truths about other human frailties. Jotty Doe, for instance, attends therapy three times a week for several years without uttering a single word to her therapist. Even while eliciting a grin, Burns’s hyperbole gently points to the unspeakable nature of trauma that makes recovery so difficult for survivors.

Burns also lampoons other tropes of the trauma novel itself. She has great fun with the idea of the “haunted” trauma victim, parodying psychological interpretations of ghosts. The Does, as a group, suffer from “ghost mania,” according to the narrator of *Little Constructions*. They are quite frightened of the ghosts, which is why they take every opportunity to watch ghost movies and are transfixed when “tail end” pieces on the nightly news feature reports of the supernatural. The Does are so enthralled by the topic of ghosts that they will take a break, right “in the middle of killing somebody, and over

the boiling kettle and KitKats . . . begin a round of the latest ghost talk” (*LC* 29). This outrageous incongruity of juxtaposed acts of murder with a cup of tea, chocolates and entertainment through scary stories creates a comic effect, but only temporarily. The narrator makes fun of “grown men” believing in ghosts, but then deftly takes us back to a psychological interpretation she initially scoffed at, musing that perhaps, after all, there are ghosts, and then asking why the Does believe in *so many* ghosts? In a display of the wordplay at which Burns excels, this time by absurdly piling on an alliterative string of potential expert witnesses, the narrator suggests that maybe a “psychoanalyst, or a psychoanalytic psychologist, or psychophysiological profiler, or even an unaccredited enthusiast with Jungian leanings” (*LC* 31) could offer an interpretation, but she certainly can’t.

The fast-paced, wisecracking narration may reflect an impulse to avoid a tone of earnestness, but the themes Burns explores are no laughing matter. Many of the incidents in the novel are heartrending despite the buffer of Burns’s wry humor. Behind all of the exaggerated exaggerations lies Burns’s intention to disrupt notions of reality so that readers may gain new insights into violence, incest, child abuse, murder, misogyny, and the traumatic responses to all of these violations of human well-being. The frenetic narrative depends on hyperbole and overkill to convey the surreally horrific; the digressions and embellishments are necessary precisely because realism is insufficient to convey the inexpressible realities of the situation.

MILKMAN

Milkman, published twenty years after the Good Friday Agreement, is Burn’s third, and arguably most perfectly realized, novel about the Troubles. In *Milkman*, Burns

retells the story of public and private violence in Ardoyne during the Troubles, this time focusing on the chokingly claustrophobic experience of living in a city where terror has become the norm and survival demands compliance with a complicated set of restrictions imposed by competing violent forces. In a 2020 interview for the *New Statesman*, Burns reflected on her childhood in Ardoyne during the most intense years of the Troubles, noting that “Growing up there, you had to conform, you couldn’t really criticise the area. It was very scary living there, very violent, but there was this feeling that you can’t say that, because it will somehow cause it to collapse. So you have to pretend we’re holding together” (29). This intense pressure to conform, coupled with the constant fear of the consequences of saying the wrong thing, underlies the aesthetics of excess in *Milkman*. The intensity that Burns describes is the affect experienced by middle-sister and the other members of the besieged community around her, the pre-emotional autonomous reaction to constant and unpredictable acts of violence, large and small, that finds its expression in paranoia.

In *Little Constructions*, almost all of the characters shared the name Doe; in *Milkman* Burns abandons naming her characters altogether. Instead, people and places are referred to in relation to each other or to how they spend their time. This strategy is more successful than her approach in *Little Constructions*, as it makes it much easier for the reader to follow the story. By removing explicit references to Northern Ireland, Burns renders the novel and its themes more universal; nevertheless, many characters and incidents in *No Bones*, as well as central topics of both *No Bones* and *Little Constructions*, are readdressed in this novel, and the unmistakable Belfast patois and religious geography set the story firmly in the Northern Irish capital. The narrator of

Milkman, known only as middle-sister, bears recognizable similarities to both Amelia in *No Bones*, and to Jotty Doe in *Little Constructions*: at the center of all three novels is a sensitive and vulnerable young woman who is subjected to a relentless series of violent, traumatic events. Like Amelia and Jotty, middle-sister looks for ways to separate and protect herself from the chaos around her. In *Milkman*, middle-sister is being stalked over the course of several weeks by a member of the “renouncers of the state,” an obvious euphemism for the IRA. The feeling of entrapment, apparent in the other novels but at the forefront here, reflects a Northern Ireland stuck in an unending cycle of transgressions and reprisals. Burns again uses an aesthetics and poetics of excess to represent the paranoia and repression in a community traumatized by terror, affects engendered and reinforced by narrow constraints on speech, movement, and a myriad of other small details of daily life.

Like Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*, *Milkman* is a story about growing up in Northern Ireland, a metanarrative delivered by an adult looking back; and like Deane’s protagonist, the younger version of Burns’s narrator, middle-sister, is compelled through much of her story to remain silent. The motivation for the young middle-sister to refrain from speaking is similar to that of Deane’s narrator, in that it is very much tied to the political realities of her world; it is different, however, in that the impetus for silence is not a family secret, but a mode of survival in a Northern Ireland where daily life has become consumed by violence and factionalism, and where every act of speech feels dangerous. *Milkman* shares many of the stylistic characteristics of excess that define her previous novels, including absurdity, word play, and digression, but in this novel, which is keenly focused on an excessive silence, Burns uses a single character whose

retrospective account of her speech-repressed teenage years in Ardoyne during the Troubles is, ironically, marked by prolixity. To depict the antinomy of repression and acknowledgement at the heart of her characters' trauma, Burns relies on both the negative excesses of understatement and silence to depict a society in which fear is the overriding concern. She emphasizes the extremity of that silence by contrasting it with the verbosity and exaggerations of the adult narrator who, twenty years later, is able at last to speak about her troubled past.

In *Milkman*, Burns's writing illustrates Seamus Deane's claim that in response to the radical dispossession of colonization, "the recovery of the lost Irish language has taken the form of an almost vengeful virtuosity in the English language" (*Nationalism* 10). Indeed, Burn's middle-sister signals her disconnection from the Irish language when she mentions an area of the city "which was really called something or other in my native language which I didn't speak and also called 'The Groove of the Neck' or 'The Crook of the Neck' or 'The Soft of the Neck' in the translated language which I did speak" (*MM* 43). Burns's narrator is further removed, generationally and geographically, from Irish speakers than Deane's narrator in *Reading in the Dark*, yet there are distinctive qualities that define her English as Northern Irish. As Clare Hutton points out, words, phrases, and formation derived from Irish language are woven into the English of non-speakers of Irish in Ireland (363). Burns, like Deane, offers a more nuanced understanding of language in Ireland than merely a binary of Irish or English. Middle-sister's English contains markers of both Irish and Scots. For instance, her use of "wee" in describing the youngest sisters is quite distinctively Northern Irish and Scottish; her use of "dander," meaning to walk, also originates in Scots. Ma uses the "do be" construction, derived from

Irish, that distinguishes a repeated action from one that is executed once when she tells middle-sister “Don’t you be coming out with your proud words to me” (*MM* 52). The influence of Irish language on the speech of Burns’s characters is also displayed in the hilariously over-the-top exchange between middle-sister and third brother-in-law at the end of the novel, where they use the Irish word “ach” in place of the English “but,” along with the typically Irish interjection “sure.” “‘Ach,’ I said. ‘Ach nothing,’ he said. ‘Ach, sure,’ I said. ‘Ach sure what?’ he said. ‘Ach sure, if that’s how you feel.’ ‘Ach sure, of course that’s how I feel.’ ‘Ach, all right then.’ ‘Ach,’ he said. ‘Ach,’ I said. ‘Ach,’ he said. ‘Ach,’ I said. ‘Ach’” (*MM* 347).

However, while Irish language issues are, at most, tangential to the novel, there is nothing more striking in *Milkman* than the way Burns’s first person narrator uses the English language, elevating it to a position of primary importance in the text. Critical reception of the book was overwhelmingly positive, and while reviews focused on many aspects of the novel, including ideas about coming of age, gender, and identity, language remained central to many discussions of the work. Those who did not admire the novel tended to object most of all to the excessive nature of Burns’s prose. Dwight Garner wrote in the *New York Times* that he found Burns’s “willfully demanding and opaque stream-of-consciousness . . . interminable” and attempted (without quite managing to achieve her lightness of touch) to parody it in his description of “the repetitions, the piling up of extraneous detail, the dashes within dashes, the sense she instills in her readers of craving verbs the way an animal craves salt.” James Marriott published a similar complaint in *The Times* when the novel was awarded the Man Booker Prize, protesting, “This could all have been said much more snappily.” The Man Booker judges,

of course, had a different take. In awarding the prize, the Chair of judges, Kwame Anthony Appiah, commented, “The language of Anna Burns’s *Milkman* is simply marvelous; beginning with the distinctive and consistently realised voice of the funny, resilient, astute, plain-spoken, first-person protagonist.” Christopher Tayler, writing for the *London Review of Books*, celebrated “the narrator’s mad, first-principles language, with its abundance of phrases in inverted commas and sudden changes of register” calling it “a brilliant rhetorical balancing act.”

Indeed, Burns’s character is chiefly defined by her use of language. The garrulousness of the narrator is in sharp contrast to her still-guarded sharing of information. Her restraint serves to universalize the individual and societal impacts of prolonged violence and to emphasize the need for unfaltering hypervigilance. The perils of being seen as an informer that are so central to Seamus Deane’s *Reading in the Dark*, and that are part of life in *No Bones* and *Little Constructions*, are very much on the mind of the narrator of *Milkman*. What is immediately apparent to the reader of *Milkman* is that the narrator is, literally, not going to name names. Despite the fact that the story is told many years after it takes place, we never learn her name or the real name of any character in the book, except that of the antagonist, Milkman (and even that is because she is, after the fact, admitting to a misunderstanding— what was widely believed to be his code name turned out be his actual surname). Events are related through her perspective alone; thus, even when others refer to her, she is called daughter, middle-sister or maybe-girlfriend. They, in turn, are defined by their relationships to her (ma, da, maybe-boyfriend, longest friend). Her siblings are differentiated by gender and birth rank (eldest sister, third brother-in-law, first brother, wee sisters, etc.). One character, Somebody

McSomebody, is assigned a moniker that denotes his dime-a-dozen status as a poser who wants to (but never will) be a *somebody*. A handful of other characters are designated by jobs (chef, real milkman) or neighborhood reputation (tablets girl, nuclear boy). This disorienting understatement of individual identity opens the reader to a number of possibilities—most importantly that these characters could be anybody, and not just anybody living in Ardoyne, or in Belfast, or even in Northern Ireland. At the same time, it underlines the perils of a society in which identity politics erases individual identity.

In contrast to the collage-like construction of *No Bones* or the twisting, tangled storyline of *Little Constructions*, the plot of *Milkman* is fairly straightforward. A teenage girl, living in a working-class nationalist Belfast neighborhood at the height of the Troubles, wants nothing more than to ignore the political strife around her. She works hard at not getting involved. Her two main activities are “reading while walking” and running, both means of escape. Her silence extends beyond the political into every personal relationship she has, even with her “maybe-boyfriend.” When she attracts the attention of a “renouncer” (her euphemism for a member of the IRA) of some stature, a middle-aged, married man who enjoys several girlfriends on the side, she is appalled, but at a loss for what to do. His stalking of her, the community rumors about it that begin to take on a life of their own, and her fruitless attempts to solve the problem by ignoring it, create a story arc of rising tension and fear. Milkman, rumored to be an intelligence officer, begins to threaten to harm maybe-boyfriend, and middle-sister begins to feel that her subjugation by this man, who seems to be always watching her, is inevitable. Just before she is to give in, to her (and our) great relief, Milkman is fortuitously assassinated by state forces.

In this novel, so clearly yet not explicitly set in Belfast in the midst of the Troubles, not once does the narrator use any of the following terms: Belfast, Northern Ireland, Ireland, England, Great Britain, unionist, nationalist, loyalist, republican, IRA, UDF, RUC, UVF, Protestant, or Catholic. She never names a street or a neighborhood. Yet, the words ‘informer’ (40), ‘informant’ (4), ‘informership’ (2), ‘informed’ (6), ‘informs’ (1), and ‘information’ (19) recur regularly through the narration. The word ‘rumor’ appears forty-one times.¹⁴ Paranoia is the affect created by the mechanisms of terror imposed by both the paramilitaries (on both sides) as well as by state apparatuses. Middle-sister describes the growing uneasiness of ordinary people in the nationalist community toward the IRA as the Troubles progressed:

[N]ot just because of the deaths and the mounting deaths but also the injuries, the forgotten damage, all that personal and private suffering stemming from successful renouncer operations . . . There was also that day-to-day business of dirty laundry in public, and of the district renouncers laying down their law, their prescripts, their ordinances plus punishments for any perceived infringements of them. There were beatings, brandings, tar and featherings, disappearances, black-eyed, multi-bruised people walking about with missing digits who most certainly had those digits only the day before . . . Above all there was the organisation’s paranoia, their examination, interrogation and almost always dispatch of informants and of suspected informants. (*MM* 119)

However, Burns does not lay responsibility at the feet of the IRA alone. The police are so deeply distrusted by and distrustful of middle-sister’s community, that “That being the case, and understood by both parties to be the case, the only time you’d call the police in my area would be if you were going to shoot them, and naturally they would know this and so wouldn’t come” (*MM* 182). When middle-sister expresses worry that

¹⁴ These are the minimum occurrences, by my count; I may have missed a few.

she is under increased surveillance by the security forces, middle-sister's friend assures her she is not alone.

'The whole community's a suspect community,' she said. 'Everybody has a file on them. Everybody's house, everybody's movements, everybody's connections constantly are checked and kept an eye on. It's only you who doesn't seem aware of that. With all their monitoring,' she went on, 'their infiltrating, their intercepting, listening at posts, drawing-up of room lay-outs, of position of furniture, of ornament placement, of wallpaper, of watch lists and geo-profiling, cutting feeds and feeding feeds, and "mother goose" and divination by tea-leaves and not least,' she said, 'with their helicopters flying over an alienated, cynical, existentially bitter landscape, it's no wonder everybody has files on them. If someone in a renouncer-run area didn't have a file on them, that would be a surety there was something dubious about that individual going on. They even photograph shadows,' she said. 'People here can be deciphered and likenesses can be discerned from silhouettes and shadows.' (MM 206)

Thus, the reader comes to understand that middle-sister's reticence is a result of not just her own fear but is also a product of the broader paranoia of the closed, sectarian enclave in a city undergoing unremitting crisis. She is not alone in this; however, she takes silence—or perhaps, more accurately, it *overtakes* her—to such an extreme that it becomes a source of danger to her and hers, rather than the protection she is seeking. Linguists point out that language both shapes and reflects human identity, i.e., that one's self-concept is formed both at the individual level and by a larger context of socio-political discourses (Evans 3). Middle-sister will not engage in conversation with most other people; she relies on "I don't know" to avoid being drawn into what is going on around her—when people speak to her, she "minimalised, withheld, subverted thinking, dropped all interaction surplus to requirement which meant they got no public content, no symbolic content . . . Just me, downplayed . . . devoid" (MM 174)—until, this extreme self-censorship so shapes her identity that her "seemingly flattened approach to life became less a pretense and more and more real as time went on" (MM 177). Middle-sister's longest friend, deeply entrenched in the renouncer movement, meets with middle-

sister to warn her about her anti-social behavior. She points out that middle-sister's attempt to elude danger by refusing to engage with the community has instead drawn greater attention to herself; longest friend explains regretfully to her that she is now considered one of the community's "beyond-the-pale" (*MM* 199). Reading-while-walking had already thrown suspicion on middle-sister, but the gossip claiming she is the girlfriend of the already-married Milkman has added perceptions that she is haughty as well as crazy. Middle-sister is shocked and bewildered at this turn of events, something that longest friend scolds her for. She warns middle-sister that her strategy of "not noticing" is "not normal." The similarity of middle-sister to Amelia in *No Bones* is clear—Burns is again presenting a traumatized character who uses denial as a way of coping. Longest friend describes the process of dissociation as she chastises middle-sister, saying: "Your head! Your memory! All those mental separations and splittings-off from consciousness . . . the recognising, the not recognising, the remembering, the not remembering, the refusing to admit the obvious" (*MM* 207). When longest friend advises middle-sister to stop reading-while-walking and to begin answering people in a friendly manner when they try to strike up conversations with her, middle-sister commits to the first but stubbornly refuses the second—protesting that she needed her silence, that it was her "one bit of power in this disempowering world." Longest friend simply replies, "You'd better be careful, then" (*MM* 205).

Burns's novel exposes the problems with the culture of silence and isolation in which her narrator is trapped, while fully acknowledging the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of speaking out. The narrator looks back on her younger self with compassion, asserting, "Not mentioning was my way to keep safe" (*MM* 44). In

retrospect, she realizes that her silent response to Milkman's unwanted affronts—trying to keep her head down, trying not to engage, trying to avoid confrontation, cutting herself off from the rest of the traumatized community—made everything worse, but she says “[A]t the time, given my intention had been to keep the nerve and to hold it together in a place where everybody in their own way was also trying to keep the nerve and hold it together, impossible it would have been for me to have glimpsed, to have understood any concept of help or comfort then” (*MM* 180-81). The idiom, “keep[ing] the nerve,” affirms that this kind of trauma must be understood as both psychological and affective. It underscores the “irreducibly bodily and autonomic nature of affect” (Massumi 89).

There are moments when, under duress, middle-sister does try to speak up, but as in the case of Deane's narrator, what she says cannot be heard or understood by those around her. When she tells her mother that she is not involved with Milkman, ma is too driven by her own anxiety to hear her and accuses middle-sister of lying. When she tries to deflect Milkman's attention from maybe-boyfriend, it costs her twice: once in ceding ground to Milkman by actually speaking to him, and again because doing so did not dissuade him from threatening (and eventually harming) maybe-boyfriend. When she speaks to longest friend, seeking solace and understanding, her words fall on deaf ears. Longest friend is fully committed to the cause and can only see the world through the norms of the closed-in, sectarian society. These dynamics, when narrated retrospectively by her older self, create a “paradox of the narrator's political marginalization and narrative empowerment” (White 354). The silenced middle-sister has become the historical witness. And even as a teenager, middle-sister does not feel completely hopeless. She does get help from her mother's friend, real milkman, when she speaks up,

asking for assurance that he will properly bury the cat's head she found in the ten-minute place. She attends a mixed-religion French class where she catches glimpses of another possible kind of existence. And third brother-in-law remains a steady, reassuring presence in her life; he manages to cope with things through a relatively harmless obsession with exercise and the unusual political savvy to cultivate friendships with both the men and the women of the community.

Middle-sister's plight illustrates what was required of those who lived through the Troubles in Northern Ireland (and by extension, to those living under conditions of prolonged violent civil strife elsewhere). The novel is what Richardson has termed "fictive literary testimony" ("Torturous" 11). Witness testimonies of Troubles survivors such as those detailed in the oral history project *Ardoyne: The Untold Truth*, confirm the historic veracity of Burns's novel: middle-sister's experience is authentic, and the trauma she evinces is at once individual and communal. In the closing chapter of the project, the compilers of witness accounts note that coping with what had happened, "almost always involved not talking about what had happened" (*Ardoyne* 530). *Milkman*, then, is in a very real sense, a history curated with intermittent commentary by the now older and more empowered narrator, who, one senses, must finally speak up about what happened, to bear witness and to come to her own understanding of it— but who continues to exercise certain restraint (she will name no names, give no identifying detail). In having her narrator tell her story in a way that omits so many specifics, facts that one might expect to be critical to understanding the history, Burns shows that it is in the other details, in the small particulars of human response to a traumatic situation, that one will find the more important truths.

One of the most notable features of the text is Burns's employment of lists and list-like accumulations to communicate affect through hyperbole, a technique whose roots, as has been noted, date back to the earliest forms of Irish literature (Tymoczko, "Hyperbolic"; McAteer). In an early chapter, Burns uses this approach to illustrate the extreme level of allegiance required in the sectarian communities of Northern Ireland. Thus, middle-sister provides a page-long catalogue of boys' names, purportedly compiled and maintained, although not originated, by a local missionary couple; these names are banned in her community for being "too much of the country 'over the water'" and "infused with the energy, the power of history, the age-old conflict, enjoinders and resisted impositions as laid down long ago in this country by that country" (MM 23). While the notion of a couple actually managing such a list is patently absurd, in fact, in Northern Ireland people often use(d) first names to determine a new acquaintance's religious identity (failing that, finding out where someone attended school would usually suffice). The naming restrictions are just one of many "rules of allegiance" or "tribal identification[s]" the narrator of *Milkman* documents. Other aspects of language must also be monitored because using words such as *extraordinary*, *marvelous*, *tremendous*, *stupendous*, *stunning*, *sensational*, *topper*, *super*, *crikey* (sic), *smashing*, *bizarre*, or *exceedingly* is proscribed; these words are also too redolent of "over the water" (MM 20-21), a euphemism for England. Similar care must be applied to the television and radio programs one chooses, the tea and butter one consumes, the bus stop one uses, because it is a fact that "you created a political statement everywhere you went, and with everything you did, even if you didn't want to" (MM 25). Middle-sister is not alone in her circumspection. She tells us, "[M]ost people here chose not to say what they meant in

order to protect themselves” (*MM* 36). The policing and weaponization of language, in the form of gossip and rumor, drive people to take refuge in silence or obfuscation.

Now, looking back and recounting the tale, the narrator seems to take delight in describing things in multiple ways, as if the luxury of being able to speak out is making her giddy. Her account is characterized by a dark humor that offsets the horror of much of what she is relating. However, the stark juxtaposition of the wordiness of the backwards-looking narration with the narrator’s effort to maintain silence in the moment also suggests that no matter how many words and phrases middle-sister uses, none will actually suffice to communicate the reality of the situation. Just as Burns uses an everything-everywhere-all-at-once style of narration in *Little Constructions* to try to explain the madness of life during a reign of terror, the backwards-looking narrator of *Milkman* keeps adding to her explanations, piling up words and phrases in a mimetic attempt to communicate just how complicated life is when everything one does matters so much. Much of the novel consists of lengthy digressions like the one that takes place in the middle of middle-sister’s run through the park with second-brother-in-law, which begins on page 16 and ends on page 57. There’s a sense that despite these details, there is always more to tell, more to know in order to be able to navigate this “psycho-political atmosphere” (*MM* 24) without being killed or irreparably harmed.

As linguistic verisimilitude fails, then, Burns turns to hyperbole to convey intensity, a term Brian Massumi equates with affect (83). In describing her father’s depressions and her mother’s inability to accept them, middle-sister recalls:

[D]a had had them: big, massive, scudding, whopping, black-cloud, infectious, crow, raven, jackdaw, coffin-upon-coffin, catacomb-upon-catacomb, skeletons-upon-skulls-upon-bones crawling along the ground to the grave type of depressions. Ma herself didn't get depressions, didn't either, tolerate depressions

and, as with lots of people here who didn't get them and didn't tolerate them, she wanted to shake those who did until they caught themselves on. (MM 84)

The extravagance of her description of her father's bouts of depression communicates their overwhelming nature and is deftly contrasted with the short, emphatic, dismissals of her mother, who clearly sees them as self-indulgent. The resulting tension between diametrically opposed approaches to coping with crisis is more evidence of the complexity and range of responses to trauma within the community.

Burns again uses lists to create a kind of run-away-train effect in the recounting of ma's reliance on euphemisms (another way of saying without saying) when trying to find out if middle-sister, who has actually been poisoned, is pregnant and has tried to end the pregnancy. Ma asks middle-sister if she has been, "fecundated by him, by that renouncer ... Imbued by him ... Engendered in. Breeded in. Fertilised, vexed, embarrassed, sprinkled, caused to feel regret, wished not to have happened;" a few sentences later, ma moves on to the topic of abortion, which she refers to as "vermifuge, pennyroyal, Satan's apple, premature expulsion, being failed in the course of coming into being" (MM 223). The reader understands the inside joke here, that ma didn't really use archaic terms like this in the moment, but that the narrator is offering a funny, hyperbolic example of how ma, too, constrained by social norms, uses many words to obscure her meaning. As comical as this passage is, Claire Wills points out that for middle-sister and for the community as a whole, having to expend this much energy on not saying things is exhausting ("The Unnamable"). It also indicates the inadequacy of the language of verisimilitude to express all there is to say.

Wills notes that Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and *Milkman* share important characteristics: both have young, unnamed protagonists who like to read, are children in

large families with “obscure ties to the Republican movement,” and are “persecuted by a half-understood history of violence and intimidation” (“The Unnameable”). She contrasts the role of truth in the novels, however, contending that Deane’s narrator finds the truth, even while discovering that it does not, she notes, set him free. Burns’s narrator, on the other hand, makes no effort to find the truth—in fact, she does everything she can to avoid it. Such is the traumatic affect of the descent into violence, both within and across sectarian factions, that tore apart Northern Irish society during the Troubles.

Like *Reading in the Dark*, *Milkman* offers no easy, straightforward, moral resolution—the lesson of the author is surely that middle-sister’s situation doesn’t lend itself to moral clarity. Middle-sister explicitly talks about the moral compromises one is forced to make because in a world like hers; morality itself becomes a border area. Future middle-sister describes how in the time of the story, having “a view” of the situation was unavoidable for everyone on both sides of the sectarian divide, and how having a view led to the “irreconcilables” that everyone had to live with: the atrocities from your own side that made you ask “‘*God O God O God. How can I have a view that helped on this action?*’” (MM 113); the unending cycle of “revenge and counter-revenge”; the closed nature of the society; the identification of all officialdom as enemies; and the ultimate retrenchment to just trying to survive, until moral judgment is not possible. Middle-sister explains, “As for the killings, they were the usual, meaning they were not to be belaboured, not because they were nothing, but because they were enormous, also so numerous that rapidly there was not time for them” (MM 113). It is this magnitude of events and their resulting affects, that drives the need for an aesthetics of excess in Burn’s work. To survive in a country that has become like the ten minute area

that middle-sister walks through on her way home from French lessons— a place to be gotten through, a place that is “stuck and deluded” (*MM* 84)—teenaged middle-sister can manage nothing more than to keep her head down and keep her silence. Only later can she try to overcome the inadequacy of language by taking it to its hyperbolic limits in order to convey the truth of the situation as she lived it.

SUMMARY

Burns’s perspective as a post-Good Friday Agreement writer of the Troubles imbues her work with not only an undercurrent of skepticism of sectarian versions of history, but also an implicit criticism of post-agreement efforts to “move on” without any of the acknowledgement of what happened that is necessary for true reconciliation (Heidemann; McCann). Nonetheless, each of these three novels ends with the hope that “Terror’s traumas, its circulating and mutable affects, can at least be shaken free, if only for a moment, so that a more hopeful future might be imagined” (Richardson, “Terrorism” 329). Thus, Amelia’s trip to Rathlin marks a step forward for the friends, offering them a view of another possible future; Jotty Doe finds love of her own and a way to help heal the other women in her community; and middle-sister survives the threat that Milkman embodies, catching glimpses of happier possibilities in her French class, her new understanding of maybe-boyfriend, her mother’s newfound happiness with real milkman, and her healthy friendship with third brother-in-law.

Siân White comments that the narrator of *Milkman* unfolds her story “in an often absurdly humorous manner, taunting those who might mistrust her telling, as if to say, ‘I’ll give you something to disbelieve ...’” (352). This is true of all three of Burns’s novels and also gets at the heart of what critics from Longinus to Baudelaire to Johnson

have argued: hyperbole is an unconventional form of truth-telling that challenges and disorients our concept of what is possible in order to reveal what is perhaps an otherwise inexpressible reality.

CHAPTER THREE: DAVID KEENAN'S *FOR THE GOOD TIMES*

*Don't look so sad
I know it's over
But life goes on
And this old world
Will keep on turning
Let's just be glad
We had some time to spend together
There's no need to watch the bridges
That we're burning*

— Kris Kristofferson, “For the Good Times”

Like Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and Burns's *Milkman*, David Keenan's *For the Good Times* is both a novel about trauma recounted by a first-person narrator looking back in time and something far more wide-reaching: in all three novels, the “individual memory of the narrators is implicated in the collective memory of the communities” (Drong, “Remembering” 3). Situated in the same Ardoyne neighborhood of north Belfast and same time frame—the 1970s—as *Milkman*, Keenan's novel moves beyond the boundaries of personal trauma and the politics of the Troubles to explore other aspects of war torn societies, especially the allure of violence for young men, the romance of fraternity, and the suffering which runs through all of it. A good deal of what Burns writes about is unspeakable, destructive, gendered violence during the Troubles; Keenan writes about the perpetrators of such violence, how violence creates them, and how it destroys them, too.

The novel is like an overstuffed bag, bursting at the seams—Keenan employs hyperbolic effects at every level, including structure, theme, characterization, plot, symbolism, and diction—yet the writer is clearly in control of his material. Keenan integrates hyperbole as “an inherent, fundamental force functioning within discourse,” i.e., a performative and dramatic trope that pushes ordinary discourse beyond its limits

(Ritter, “Rethinking” 412). The audacious range of literary techniques in this ambitious, complicated novel is in itself a manifestation of excess, and in some ways, it is reminiscent of Irish modernists such as Joyce and Beckett. *For the Good Times* is, as Alistair Braidwood wrote, a “novel of extremes set in the most extreme of times (it is also extremely funny).”

Keenan uses fiction to record a history of the Troubles that is focused on lived experience, asserting “[C]ertain stories . . . are best told through fiction . . . fiction can be closer to reality than any kind of documentary might allow . . . It gets as close to the psychic truth of it as anything else” (“Interview—David Keenan”). Susan Moore calls Keenan, “a new kind of historian who understands history is an act of creation, a performance” (“Bloodlust”). Like Burns, Keenan anchors the story in recognizable territory and timeframe through references to important historical and cultural events, using fictional characters to try to authentically portray life during the Troubles. Those characters operate in an atmosphere of ubiquitous violence in a working-class community where “the street and the home are not. . . seen as contrasting categories of public and private space” (Milroy 92). One of the novel’s central concerns is with how such unrelenting violence shapes identity. More specifically, the story illustrates, in language that reflects geography and class, how the weight of a rigid, hypermasculine group identity, in combination with a violent culture of silence and secrets, can compress individual identity to the point of shattering it.

Keenan's extremely fragmented, circular narrative structure reflects the maelstrom it describes. The novel begins and ends in the Maze Prison,¹ some years after the events of the story. The book is divided into six parts that move forward in time (after an initial move back from the Maze to 1970s Ardoyne), but each section is marked both by flashbacks and by allusions to future events. The retrospective account by the narrator, Sammy, is disrupted not only by copious digressions and abrupt chronological shifts, but also by numerous multi-genre fragments—stream-of-consciousness hallucinations, Pat and Mick jokes, scraps of poetry, song lyrics, comic book scripts, and Biblical allusions—all in the shape of Ouroboros, the circular symbol depicting a snake swallowing its tail as an emblem of the eternal cycle of destruction and rebirth. In addition to such disruptions of narrative, the spatial arrangement of the text on the page is periodically interrupted by white space and/or creative typography, such as the circle of names used to depict a séance scene, and the colons at the beginning and end of the novel that suggest both the cyclical nature of violence in Northern Ireland and the iterative cycle of repression and remembrance of the trauma victim. The novel is rife with metaphor and symbolism, especially that related to snakes, to doubling (*doppelgängers*, mirrors, mannequins) and to the illusory nature of truth (references to role-playing, masquerades, and movies). The sheer volume of uncontrolled anger, graphic violence, death, complicated relationships, betrayals, and paranoia is deliberately overwhelming in order to convey the affects that result when people come to experience life as war.

¹ The HM Prison Maze, called Long Kesh Internment Center until 1976, was the infamous H-Block prison where Northern Irish paramilitaries were housed from 1971-2000 and the site of the 1981 hunger strikes in which ten IRA and INLA men, led by Bobby Sands, died of starvation protesting the removal of political prisoner status.

Writing about affect, Ben Anderson describes a state of “total war” as one in which the front line is expanded and folded into the home front, in which psychological operations are used to shape and mold perceptions, and in which distinctions between civilians and soldiers fade and disappear (169-70). Each of these conditions applies to Northern Ireland, and certainly to an area such as Ardoyne, during the Troubles. In fact, Sammy describes himself “defending several fronts at once, juggling who needed to know what, and what had to be kept secret from who” and then quotes Goebbels, who “says in that case you fight a Total War, which means that every single thing is geared toward the fight” (*FTGT* 111). Keenan’s complex narrative shows that such a “battlefield” becomes a “site of swirling resonating affects” (B. Anderson 170).

As the novel begins, Samuel (sometimes, Xamuel) McMahon is a prisoner at the Maze. A photograph of Sammy and his friends at a wedding that took place years earlier serves as the starting point for Sammy’s nostalgic account of his friends, their growing involvement in the IRA, and its eventual outcomes. What is perhaps most impressive, and definitely most disconcerting, about the novel is that Keenan’s high-energy, testosterone-fueled prose describing horrific behaviors recreates the characters’ youthful enthusiasm for their outrageous actions and takes the reader along for the joyride, as long as it lasts. The banter and wit of the narration, delivered in what one review called its “guilty-laugh-out-loud prose,” is disorienting because the humor is constantly interwoven with acts of murder and mayhem (“Ones to Watch”). While the narrator’s lack of reflection is appalling, he is also smart and, as Braidwood notes, very funny. Like Burns, Keenan uses laughter to offer respite from the monstrous realities of the characters’ worlds; however, in this case, those realities are very often created by the cold-blooded acts of the main

characters themselves. Despite the humor that runs through the narration, no suspension of disbelief leaves room to imagine a happy ending to this tale because in the very first sentence of *For the Good Times*, the reader is confronted with the current unstable psychic state of the narrator, who refers to himself (and perhaps to others) as “I’s.” It is only in looking at a photograph that he begins to tell his story in a lucid manner, suggesting that he has been traumatized and the picture is triggering repressed memories.

Anna Gibbs writes that “Trauma involves a shattering of self, that complex structure both relatively stable and yet of necessity open to ongoing transformation” (131). For the first few pages of the narration, the narrator’s speech is fragmented, broken into short cryptic ramblings that contain references (e.g., Bobby, blanketmen,² priest, Father) that the reader must piece together in order to make sense of what he is saying. It is clear at the outset, with his account of a visit from “Christ Jayzus,” that Sammy is currently in a state of mental disarray. Despite the hallucinogenic quality of these first passages, they introduce, in a garbled but meaningful form, many of the themes Keenan will develop through the testimony of his traumatized protagonist, especially how intergenerational trauma, urban sectarian identity, and toxic masculinity combine to unleash a cyclone of extreme violence that destroys everything in its path. What is worse, Keenan implies, is that all of it is based on illusions.

² This refers to the “Blanket Protest” at the Maze prison in response to losing Special Category (political prisoner) Status and being treated as criminals instead. As part of the change in status, incarcerated paramilitaries were required to wear prisoner uniforms. In September 1976, Kieran Nugent, the first prisoner to be sentenced under the new rules, refused to wear prison clothes, choosing instead to wrap a blanket around himself; other IRA and INLA prisoners followed suit. The protest continued for five years, expanding to the “Dirty Protest” in 1978 and culminating in the 1981 hunger strikes when ten republican prisoners died. Eventually many of the elements of special category status, including no uniforms, free association, and no prison work, were restored to paramilitary prisoners.

FATHERS AND SONS, MASCULINITY AND VIOLENCE

In her 2010 study of how hegemonic masculinity is represented and criticized in contemporary Northern Irish fiction about the Troubles, Carol Magennis notes that definitions of manliness are socially constructed and subject to “a matrix of other factors, such as age, race, and class” (7). Keenan’s work portrays masculinity in the context of the socio-historical setting of the late 1970s nationalist, working-class community of the Ardoyne, a religiously-segregated urban area with few opportunities for gainful employment where violence was, as also seen in the novels of Anna Burns, part of daily life. Keenan underscores the limited educational options available to those growing up in neighborhoods like Ardoyne in the 1960s and 1970s. Sammy is the youngest of his group and the only one who had been to school; he describes his friends and others like them as “basically illiterate . . . their das had them out working since they were seven year old” (*FTGT* 12). The economic class of the characters provides important context for the novel because the Catholic working class in Northern Ireland bore the greatest burdens of the Troubles, both in terms of unemployment rates and as recipients of the most repressive security measures adopted by the state (Coulter, “Class” 15). Poor, working-class neighborhoods were also the areas most ravaged by violence. In Belfast’s communities like Ardoyne, “maintenance of solidary relationships was seen as a necessary buffer in times of sickness or need, or against hostile outsiders, particularly the authorities” (Milroy 73).

Unlike the absent or ineffectual fathers typical of Eoin McNamee’s novels, two of which will be discussed in the next chapter, in *For the Good Times*, Sammy’s father is at once his hero and—as the narrator of John Cheever’s short story, “Reunion,” describes *his* father—his doom. Judith Butler defines gender as “a constructed identity, a

performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief,” grounded in “the stylized repetition of acts through time” (“Performative” 520). Certainly, Sammy forms his own male identity by self-consciously modeling himself on his da:

I thought my da was Jimmy Cagney. What meant that I was Jimmy Cagney’s son. What meant that I had to learn to be smart mouthed, sharp-cut, a cold-hearted killer, a family man, and swank with the ladies. I’d watch my da and his pals and try to copy their moves. The way they shaved in the mirror. The way they smoked their fags³ from the very corner of their mouth. The way they greased their side-partings. The way they called the top pocket of their suit the top bin; that was where you kept the fags. The way they smelt of Old Spice; aftershave, you called it, never cologne, not unless you were a fairy. How they fluffed up their silk hankies in their top bin. How to tuck a gun down into the waist of your dress trousers without using a holster. How to always have songs ready, just in case you’re asked to sing. How to always have jokes ready, just in case there’s a down moment. How to always do the right thing and send a little money back for bullets. How to drive the ladies crazy. How to have class and style. How to woodpanel a kitchen or a bathroom in a single day; that was a key skill. How to foster a network of safe houses, just in case you need to disappear. How to never linger over a drink. How to throw a punch (keep your arm loose till the very last moment). And how to make every day a comeuppance for every single historical slight your family has ever suffered. You call it the IRA, the Provos, Óglaiigh na hÉireann. We called it The Boys. (*FTGT* 79-80)

Sammy and his friends embrace the admixture of violence, glamor, sociability, practicality, homophobia, and republicanism that constituted a boy’s passport to the masculine culture of late 1970s Ardoyne. The hyper-masculine model of manhood was tightly intertwined with an ethno-nationalism that created an affective appeal through its “ability to satisfy the demand of individuals for a sense of identity, community, and worth” (Coulter, “Class” 10). It is part of a male culture in which violence is at once intoxicating and self-destructive. Keenan relies on the hyperbolic — both in the brutality of Sammy’s father and in the absurdity of Tommy’s father — to show “this terrible need

³ Slang for cigarettes.

to put suffering on a pedestal, this cult of pain” in which the boys are schooled from childhood (*FTGT* 183). Sammy’s father’s embrace of overblown machismo is ruthless; he gleefully forces his very young sons to view their grandfather’s corpse as a ritual of manhood, smashes a man’s head in with a hammer, disowns Sammy’s gay brother, and wraps his own testicles in barbed wire as a form of religious worship (i.e., mortification of the flesh). The farcical but no less influential figure of Tommy’s father, who “was on death’s door for about the space of what seemed like forever” (*FTGT* 16), lies in a bed behind a curtain in the family kitchen, moaning and wailing, but never emerging—only his arm reaches out during conversations to grab a cup of tea or a lit cigarette or to angrily shake his “floating wee fist that comes through the curtain like a ghost in a play” (*FTGT* 19). Despite the fact that Tommy’s father claims to have sacrificed himself for the Troubles, Sammy privately thinks it’s “all a big fucking drama,” and indeed it turns out that the man has a long record of being a trouble maker in the IRA—and that he has been secretly selling off an IRA weapons stash for his own profit. The fallibility of these fathers is on full display.

Keenan’s novel also offers a glimpse beyond the dominant “hard man” culture in an area like Ardoyne to alternative versions of masculinity that existed at its margins. For instance, in an interesting and ironic counterpoint to their fathers, Sammy and his friends Tommy and Barney find a very different male role model in the singer Perry Como, whom they idolize not just for his smooth style, but for the fact that (according to them) he’s never cheated on his wife and he never swears. The novel is named after one of

Como's most popular songs.⁴ In contrast, another version of gender expression—the homosexual male—is violently rejected, both by Sammy's father, who disowns Sammy's brother when he comes out, and by Tommy, who violently beats a man who accidentally makes contact with his genitals during a group orgy in Scotland. (In contrast, Sammy himself remains nonjudgmental, defending his brother to his father, insisting that his and Tommy's response to the first transexual they encounter in London is puzzlement, not "the homophobia"). By acknowledging alternative possibilities of constructing gender, and the inevitable suffering imposed by their fathers' version of masculinity, Keenan exposes the destructive nature of the brittle, hyper-masculine personae they adopt.

This ultra-violent version of manhood makes meaningful connections with women virtually impossible; the characters lack deep relationships with women, even if those women are their partners, and the novel reflects that in the absence of developed female characters. Keenan's men are deeply flawed but still elicit the reader's sympathy because they are revealed to be in some sense innocent, despite the horrendous acts they perpetrate. Sarah Hughes points out that "Keenan knows that his characters are monsters, but they are monsters who live and love and even strive for a way out of the world they find themselves in" ("For the Good"). Sammy is intoxicated by violence and killing, yet he idolizes Tommy and loves him ("like a brother," he says). His tender feelings toward Tommy, his compassion for his other friends, and his occasional moral qualms (which he consistently pushes aside) show the remnants of a boy's heart that has been trained not to

⁴ Perry Como's "For the Good Times" was number one on the Irish Singles Chart on November 8 and November 15, 1973. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_number-one_singles_of_1973_\(Ireland\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_number-one_singles_of_1973_(Ireland))

feel. Tommy himself is a cold-blooded killer, an operator par excellence, yet there is also poignancy in his desire to overcome his own limitations and understand the world. He reads the *Reader's Digest* to better himself, visits an art museum in London, discusses the famous artist, "Picasto," tries to reinvent himself as a singer's agent. Even Sammy's father, who is most often portrayed as shockingly callous, is humanized by moments when he bonded with his sons. Sammy describes lying on a blanket on the grass at night as a "wee" boy, looking at stars, his father telling him and his brother (erroneously, of course) that each star was a planet just like earth, until, Sammy says:

[W]e would fall asleep, with our heads on his chest, his warm chest, rising and falling, and that smell he had, that manly smell, calm and happy as we drifted off, sure in the knowledge that up above us, and carrying on forever, were planets where fathers and sons lay out in the night on blankets together and pointed to each other, lying there, high, in the night-time sky. (94)

The women in the novel, on the other hand, are almost all just "birds" whom Sammy consistently describes in the coarsest terms, usually assessing (and denigrating) their looks or rating them in terms of the sexual satisfaction they do or do not provide. He is incapable of truly connecting with a woman. The only scene in which he interacts with his own mother consists of one sentence at his father's funeral, and that sentence is about his father. Other mothers who do appear in the text are reduced to stereotypes, ineffectual and irrelevant to the male-dominant culture. Sammy's unfeeling objectification of women and the fact that he inadvertently causes his mother's death through his own recklessness may be read as a metaphor for the kind of gendered violence wreaked on women by self-centered men that Anna Burns examines in her work. By flattening, omitting, and exaggerating the powerlessness of women, Keenan emphasizes how Northern Ireland was in many ways a "a rigidly patriarchal society in which men expected to dominate outside and inside the house" (Begoña). Men and women tended to polarize in working-

class communities, and sharp distinctions were drawn between activities deemed appropriate for each gender (Milroy 79). Sammy says his father, “[L]ong after he had died, came to me in the spirit world, as a dream, and he tells me the information that he and my ma had never really understood each other” (*FTGT* 310). The IRA in particular was associated with “robust masculinity” (I. Miller 197). Ironically, one of the impacts of the Troubles, and especially of internment without trial, was to expand the role of women far beyond the confines of the household. As women became more actively involved in the conflict, and not always in passive, peace-loving ways, their new self-reliance often created domestic strains after their husbands returned from prison and actually led many couples to separate (Begoña).⁵ Sammy’s rueful comment to a driver that “I wish I had made more time for women in my life” shows some belated awareness of his own alienation from women and reflects the broader cultural gulf between the genders that resulted from hyper-masculinity (*FTGT* 337).

Kathy, the woman that Sammy, Barney, and Tommy kidnap on behalf of the IRA, is the closest to a three-dimensional woman in the novel, but even she is barely more than a sketch, a mystery Sammy never really understands. Sammy’s relationship with her turns out to be another illusion, and the reader shares his doubts about it from the start. When he runs into her at a dance club some time after the kidnapping (and her subsequent escape), she initiates a quick sexual encounter with him in a bathroom and invites him to call her. Although he admits to harboring some suspicion about her

⁵ Some, but few, women took on combatant roles (Ashe 236). However, women became extremely active in other ways as they “organized in their streets, picketed the police stations, created an alarm system to warn against army raids, hid IRA men in their houses, and passed around information about family benefits, prison visits and state bureaucracy” (Begoña).

motivation, he confesses, “I convinced myself that she was attracted to me. That she saw something in me, something that drew her. Something special” (*FTGT* 76). He meets with her for sex in a room at the Europa Hotel (where she works) on a regular basis and occasionally indulges in fantasies of running away from Northern Ireland with her. Ultimately, he learns that she is a prostitute, finds out that she was having an affair with Tommy at the same time she was meeting him at the Europa hotel, and she is pregnant with Tommy’s child; she also reveals that her assignations with Sammy were part of her job for the authorities who were hoping that her clients might reveal details about the IRA. Kathy, like everyone else in the novel, is inhabiting a role—or more accurately, multiple roles. At times it seems that she might be good enough at the game to come out on top, but in the end she, like every woman in the book, is a victim of violence from multiple sources: her abusive husband, the state authorities, and the IRA.

THE MASQUERADE

Role-playing is a central motif of the novel. On the whole, the boys assimilate the performative hyper-masculinity of their fathers: the attention to appearance, the ability to banter and socialize, the sense of loyalty to the community, and especially, the gleeful embrace of violence. Keenan points out the performativity inherent in this gendered behavior not only by creating scenes that parody action films, but also by Sammy’s multiple references to feeling as if he is in a movie. In the first escapade Sammy relates, he and Tommy take a trip to Dundalk, a town in the republic of Ireland just south of the border, where Tommy murders a snitch. Keenan creates an exaggeratedly stylized metafictional scene: Tommy, who has been playfully wrestling with the clueless target, stands up “cold as you like,” and pauses very briefly to look in the mirror, smile, and fix

the part in his hair, “[a]ll in this film that has slowed to the point where you feel like you could live in it forever” before pulling out his gun and killing the man “without even looking at him” (9). The over-the-top cinematic action continues as, spotting what may or may not be two unmarked police cars at the end of the road, Tommy straps himself to the roof of the car and starts firing as Sammy speeds off to the sound of Tommy singing a Perry Como song. That night in the pub, Tommy revels in his celebrity “like a movie star” and autographs a rubber bullet for a young fan “*For the good times*” (FTGT 11). Sammy later thinks: “It was good times, if you were on the right side, or at least one of them. But if you fell through the cracks: forget it” (FTGT 66).

The idea that he is playing a role becomes Sammy’s mode of rationalizing all that he does. He compares his life to an RPG (Role Playing Game), saying: “These are games where what you do is you pretend to be somebody else. But here’s the thing: the point of the game is not to win. The point is to play your part . . . What I’m trying to say is, it was about being true, to a fantasy, for sure, but being true to it all the same” (FTGT 67).

Sammy refers to his role(s) again and again in the novel. Like the RPGs, the idea of superheroes with special powers serves as a metaphor for the way he and his friends perceive themselves. When a young fellow working in the comics shop they took over starts creating his own comic, he bases his three superheroes on Sammy, Tommy and Barney. Barney is *Neutrino*, who can be in two places at once. Tommy is the *X-Ray Kid*, who can read thoughts, sees through walls, and has eyes that can hypnotize people into believing anything he wants. Sammy is *The Anomaly*, whose superpower (forgetting) he declines to reveal until the last page of the novel. Keenan explicitly links the superhero

motif with the idea of a “masquerade” late in the novel when Sammy and Barney attend a costume party for comic book characters.

Throughout the novel Sammy makes numerous references to various “masquerades”—a word he says that he learned from Tommy, who was, after all, a double agent. Interestingly, Michael McAteer explores the concept of doubling as a form of infinite excess in *Finnegan’s Wake*, basing his analysis on Alain Badiou’s mathematical set theory (*Excess* 253-255). For the purpose of this study, the fact that both Tommy and Sammy encounter their doppelgängers during the course of the novel is a form of double excess: both the idea that there is another (excess) version of each of them and that it is true for both of them. Furthermore, duplicity—a word that itself has two meanings, both deceit and, in older usage, doubleness—is part of the game. Tommy is not only working for both sides (i.e., the IRA and the state); he also has a doppelgänger in Kathy’s husband Davy; and he is in duplicitous relationships with both Kathy and with his partner, Patricia. When Sammy suspects that Tommy is seeing Kathy, it eats at him, but ultimately, he accepts that they are all caught in a “web of lies”:

It's the default position of the Irish. If in doubt, lie; if asked, make it up; if questioned, deny it. It had been drilled into us since we were kids, tell them fucking nothing, but it meant that every single relationship in your life was up for questioning. It meant that there were things you wouldn't even tell your own reflection. (*FTGT* 216)

Role playing and deception are so woven into the fabric of their lives that knowing what is true becomes impossible. Looking back, Sammy tells the reporter:

I never once felt like I was lying. I never once felt like I was doing anything other than honestly playing the role that was given to me. I says to myself, what's true? What does that even mean, being true . . . I mean, Mad Frank Marby might be a fucking serial killer in private but he knew how to play the game. We all did. I don't know who knew what back in that meeting or who was playing who, but the point was it was all about the playing itself, and we all knew it, was what. (*FTGT* 324-25)

Keenan uses irony throughout *For the Good Times*, but perhaps none is greater than the posthumous discovery by Sammy that his best friend, Tommy, whom he idolized, was a double agent working for the security forces against the IRA, even as he was participating in IRA activities. As Sammy discovers more and more layers of secrets surrounding the man he thought he knew, he has to reconcile the truth with his idealized version of Tommy. Sammy, rather than being angry at Tommy, admires him all the more for being able to pull this off, even while acknowledging the futility of Tommy's role-play: "You would think I might be mad. You would think I might have felt betrayed by the news that he had been moonlighting for the other side all along. But really I was in awe of him, all over again. He had every single one of us fooled, and on both sides too. But really he was fooling no one" (*FTGT* 310-11).

CHALLENGING NATIONALIST MYTHOLOGIES

Keenan, like Anna Burns and Michael Hughes, is a post-Good Friday Agreement writer who challenges romanticized sectarian narratives, while still acknowledging the historical, political, economic, cultural, and sociological realities of those living in a poor, religiously-segregated community like the Ardoyne. In her novels, Anna Burns criticizes the criminal activities, including violence against anyone they consider to be disloyal to their cause, of the paramilitary groups who came to control much of life in 1970s Ardoyne. Keenan, too, focuses most of his story within the nationalist community. While there are plenty of references to "Huns" (Protestants) versus "Tims" (Catholics), the vast majority of the IRA-sanctioned violence perpetrated by Sammy and his friends is aimed at traitors or rival nationalist paramilitary group members.

In an interview for *The London Magazine*, Keenan said, “I do think that is a big part of . . . any armed movement or struggle, it’s kind of inevitable that it gives way to gangsterism” (“Interview—David Keenan”). The idea that the IRA became a mix of criminal enterprise and political idealism is embodied in Sammy and his friends. They are petty criminals and vandals long before they join the IRA, but they are also aware of “every single historical slight” against their community. Sammy recounts meeting his best friend when Tommy is selling golf clubs out of the back of a car; he describes their attendance at a Bill Haley concert as “just an excuse to rip out the seats” (*FTGT* 15). They begin by doing small jobs for the IRA and show almost no ideological commitment — they’re in it for the fun, the money, the feeling of power, and perhaps most of all, for a sense of belonging to something, to being important. Sammy and his friends are not very interested in reading the *IRA Green Book*, the training and induction manual they are issued, and they engage in unsanctioned and/or impulsive acts of violence that belie the idea of the IRA as a disciplined force fighting a strategic war. They are immature if not innocent, driven by a need to be admired, motivated, as Sammy admits, “by more immediate concerns: protection, resentment, ambition, revenge, honour, sex, money, style, class . . . plus a history of violence that ran through our veins and that (let’s face it) was one of the only things holding the generations together” (*FTGT* 126).

Years later, as a prisoner in the Maze, Sammy sees on the news that Patricia, who had been Tommy’s girlfriend, was killed by Loyalist terrorists because she was a civil rights lawyer working to ensure fair trials for republican prisoners. He reflects that “[S]he had dedicated herself to the cause and that ultimately she had given her life for it and I realised that Tommy and I, that me and Tommy and Barney and I, would die for

something quite different, that really we were on a different side altogether” (*FTGT* 347). What side is that? Sammy and his friends feel the real grievances of the nationalist community, but in the end, their side is simply the side of desperate, small men who dream hard dreams and want to be part of something (S. Hughes). Sammy expresses it this way: “I was on nobody’s side, really, except for the side of history, which is all you can do, except for the side of the future, which is on its way” (*FTGT* 109). Keenan’s novel is focused not on the sectarian politics of the Troubles, but on the impacts they had on the people living through them. He told an interviewer, “The real story of The Troubles isn’t really the death of Bobby Sands—instead it is all the undocumented lives, all the terrible murders that took place, and all the families that were bereaved” (“Interview—David Keenan”).

VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA

One reason the reader can feel some sympathy for Sammy and his friends is that Keenan makes clear that the roots of their behavior are in trauma and that the trauma is the product of the historical, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions of their environment. The link between trauma and violence is widely recognized—not only is it true that victims of violence may be traumatized, but it has also long been understood that committing acts of violence, such as soldiers do in wartime, can lead to trauma. Indeed, Freud developed his theories of trauma by studying the lasting effects of WWI on veterans, and the way they relived horrific moments in their dreams. Caruth notes that Freud turned to an excerpt from Tasso’s poem, *Gerusalemme liberata*, to explain the way in which the “unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind” is at the core of the trauma victim’s experience (*Unclaimed* 2). In Tasso’s poem, Tancred

unknowingly slays his love, Clorinda, when she is disguised as an enemy knight; later, as Tancred strikes a tree with his sword, he re-experiences the moment that he ran his sword through Clorinda. Freud uses the story to demonstrate that people can be traumatized by their own violent actions. A traumatized individual may be either the perpetrator or the victim of violence—or both. More recent research has shown that trauma may also *lead to* violent behaviors (which, in turn, can eventually further traumatize the perpetrator). Children exposed to extreme violence (e.g., war, rape) are the most likely to suffer the effects of trauma, one of which can be to engage a range of violent and high-risk behaviors that includes everything from delinquency, to aggression, to substance abuse, and to increased likelihood of committing murder (Neller et al 152). The younger the child is at exposure to violence, and the more extreme the violence, the more severe the effects are likely to be (Neller and Fabian 6). Like other trauma victims, children, especially those with “deficient parental models of emotional expression,” may learn to insulate themselves from painful experiences through dissociation (Neller et al 153). They are also at increased risk for “affective flattening and callousness,” distrust, and detachment (Neller and Fabian 6). Keenan’s fictional Sammy is a convincing version of a now-grown child evincing his trauma through his perpetration of violence, his emotional detachment, and his pattern of dissociation.

A legacy of violence is passed on to Sammy, just as it is to the members of the Doe clan in Burns’s *Little Constructions*. Sammy recounts a shocking experience of violence when he was “four or five” years old and his father, taking a hammer out of his pocket, assaulted a man at a Dublin arcade whom he perceived to be threatening to cheat an old woman out of her winnings:

—[I]t's the first time I realised that my da always carried a weapon—and starts fucking the guy over the head with it. The side of his skull caves in and he falls forward but my da catches him with another blow and sends him flying backward, through the window and out into the street, and now there's blood and glass everywhere. Me and Peter are both crying. (*FTGT* 127-28)

Sammy's account reflects the incomplete memories of a trauma victim: while he can recall so many other details of the scene (e.g., his mother not being there because she was washing her hair, the jam-packed arcade, the old dear playing the penny falls machine that was about to pay out), the victim of his father's attack is "a shady-looking silhouette, now in my mind, a featureless ghost, hiding out in my past . . . this blank silhouette . . . this gap in my mind" (*FTGT* 127). Sammy also reports that after the assault, his father, "calm as you like" turns back to the penny falls machine to ensure the old woman gets her winnings in an act that he no doubt perceives as gallant. Then, rushing the boys out of the arcade, the father looks back in bitterness at the old woman talking to the police, certain she will betray him, admonishing his sons, "Trust no one. . . and don't tell your ma, neither" (*FTGT* 128). This is a sequence that Sammy will reenact over and over in the novel — perpetrating violent actions, often out of rage, then rationalizing them, trusting no one, and hiding the truth, even from himself. Sammy adopts forgetting as his superpower, the method he uses to navigate a society in shambles. Repression is a means of survival for Keenan's Sammy just as it is for so many of the characters in Deane's and Burns's novels. It is only when Sammy allows himself to think about what he's been doing that his life falls apart.

Keenan, like Deane and Burns, points to the intergenerational trauma experienced by the nationalist population in Northern Ireland. Recounting the experience of his family after the Blitz, in which his sister was killed and his family home destroyed by a German bomb, Sammy's father tells him that it was the discrimination against and abuse of

Catholics after the bombing, both for those who remained in Belfast and those who sought refuge in Glasgow and London, that made him hate the Union Jack. So, when the IRA found his family a house in the Ardoyne, he joined up as soon as he could. He tells Sammy that by the age of twelve he had “seen dead bodies,” including witnessing a soldier shot point blank in the face, bodies “beaten so badly. . . they looked like dead cows,” and the “suppurating legs of poor women . . . crawling along the streets, beneath mocking British infantrymen with machine guns pointed to their heads” (*FTGT* 79).

Keenan follows this with an ambiguous sentence that blurs the line between generations: “I saw my da and two of his pals whack this guy in the car park of a pub. I watched from the back window of the car as they beat him over the head with snooker cues and one of them snapped” (*FTGT* 79). The lexical ambiguity in the use of the first-person pronoun as the son tells the story of his father telling his story creates uncertainty about who is watching his da here —Sammy or his father? There are also multiple possible meanings in the pronoun “them” in this sentence: who or what snapped? A snooker cue? Or one of the men?

Amy Griffith writes that trauma should be understood as “not the simple or direct result of exposure to an external event, but . . . the result of a repression of the memory of that event” (37). Keenan first introduces the push-me-pull-me of remembering and forgetting in the opening pages of the novel, after immediately drawing the reader’s attention to Sammy’s dissociation from himself by his referring to himself in plural form, as “I’s.” In an allusion to Bobby Sands that compares his suffering to that of Christ (who visits them), Sammy likens the sight of the hunger strikers to “a painting on the wall of a cell in heaven, remembering. And I’s are seeing it for themselves” (*FTGT* 3). Sammy,

like Burns's characters Amelia and Vincent in *No Bones*, practices "extreme forgetting" to the point of mental breakdown. Sammy's processes of repression and dissociation are apparent over the course of his narration; they are seen in his emotional detachment from everyone (with the notable exception of Tommy), the way he describes, in graphic detail and without flinching, the violent acts of himself and others, and his fidelity to the explanation that he is just playing the role(s) he's been assigned. He compartmentalizes things to an extreme extent that threatens his sense of a cohesive self, as is clear when, on his way to plant a bomb in the Europa hotel, he says:

I'm in there on my own but the mirrors are making me look like I'm surrounded by endless versions of myself myself myself. Which one of youse is going to do it I says to my selfs and they says it right back to me. Which one of youse is going to do it? they says. Not one of you cunts will take responsibility, I says to them. Fuck youse, I says to them. I'll fucking do it myself. Then we're all in on it.
(*FTGT* 145)

Although Sammy works hard to repress memories, they gradually emerge from his unconscious, often in the form of ghosts, that familiar (excessive) trope of trauma fiction. He refers to the man that his father beat outside the penny falls, saying "I still think of that ghost every so often, that shade lying in the glass and the blood on the pavement, and I wonder if he's alive or dead" (*FTGT* 128). Sammy expresses little emotion about all the killing he has done. He shows a shocking lack of feeling in discussing his mother's death, which was accidental but very clearly his fault. The reader waits for some mention of grief, but there is almost nothing—just one sentence quite a while after the event where he admits "it ate at him." Despite his silence on the subject, it is clear that his breakdown begins shortly after her death; the IRA sets him up with a new house, but he begins to have "phone calls" with his dead parents at night, as he sits on the stairs with a gun in his hand, and when he wakes in the morning, he feels "confused, like

my dreams were bleeding into the day” (*FTGT* 217). It is then that he starts thinking for the first time about what he had been doing, and that thinking, he knows, is dangerous.

Because that was the one thing we never did: we never asked ourselves any questions, in fact we lied. We lied to ourselves more than we did to anyone else. You had to. How else do you do this stuff day in day out? If you had a working brain you would be finished, and then I says to myself, it’s me on the other end, hello is that you, Xamuel, I says to this silence on the end of the line, and I says to it, Xamuel, and it echoes, right back to me, and I lie down, and I listen to it, and I fall asleep, and maybe get connected to heaven, maybe where everybody is waiting for us, and where I’s didn’t need to be I’s anymore, in the end, I’s no more, and where we could step out of the game, and have a right old fucking laugh about all these I’s, in the end. (*FTGT* 218)

Similarly, Sammy claims that he can remember the names of (almost) every one of his victims, although he shows no remorse. When he boasts at the end of the novel that his superpower is forgetting, the reader recognizes this as bravado. Sammy has long used silence, forgetting, and role-playing (dissociation) as coping strategies, but they have failed him and will continue to fail him, just as they fail the mother of the narrator of Deane’s *Reading in the Dark* and so many of the characters in Burns’s novels. As things begin to fall apart for Sammy, especially after Tommy’s death, he begins to see ghosts everywhere, reflecting at one point that “Belfast is full of ghosts, that Belfast is haunted in the daytime and that nobody pays any attention to any of them, no one bats a fucking eyelid when a disembodied woman goes by them in the park because it’s just another ghost of Belfast” (*FTGT* 232). Sammy is able to turn this thought aside, but the ghosts keep appearing. The silent phone calls at night, which he later remembers as communications with his dead parents, who don’t actually speak but make a kind of singing noise, are another form of repressed memories that on insist on being heard.

Keenan replicates the trauma victim’s cycle of repressing, remembering, and repressing again in a scene where Sammy smokes hash for the first time. The hash puts

Sammy into a dream-like state where anxiety is absent, exactly the conditions that will permit “excessive stimuli [to] break through the regulative membrane of the mind” — at which point, in Freud’s words, “there is no longer any possibility of preventing the mental apparatus from being flooded with large amounts of stimulus” (Griffith 42). As the drug triggers his memory, Sammy says, “I start to minding stuff. Next thing it’s a flood of stuff. Then it’s like too-much-stuff, like a river of stuff, a river what has burst its banks and what is sweeping everything up in its wake and plus the waters are filthy in this river what’s coming back to me in a dream” (*FTGT* 45). The syntax—a series of heightening descriptions of the volume of resurfacing memories that builds to a crescendo—reflects Sammy’s feeling of being quickly overwhelmed.

At this point, Sammy literally runs away from the memories, to the outdoor loo, where he looks in the mirror. “There’s nothing there. It’s like an ice rink. Frozen. Empty. There’s no face, just thick fucking ice that has frosted over the mirror. I’m stood there staring into this frozen mirror at my own lack of a face for I don’t know how long. Where’s my face. Where’s my fucking face, Samuel?” (*FTGT* 45). Keenan’s diction — the sudden resurfacing of Sammy’s painful, “filthy” memories, “coming back. . . in a dream” —is the language of the trauma victim remembering (*FTGT* 45). The blanked-out face in the mirror is a symbolic loss of identity, the partitioning off of the self in the re-suppression of the unbearable remembering. While Sammy distances himself from his own brutality by imagining that he’s simply playing the role(s) he’s been assigned, as time goes on more and more repressed emotions begin to penetrate his detachment: “[I]t was the things you couldn’t see that began to worry me. Things that can put their hands

straight through the flesh of your chest and grab hold of your heart and take it out and beat it to a pulp” (*FTGT* 133).

When things get out of control during what will be his final IRA operation, Sammy’s mental state mirrors what is happening outside him. Their plan to silently seize Danny Whitaker from the back room of a pub and take him for questioning is derailed when one of the other men goes off-script and opens fire on everyone in sight. In the killing spree that will be his undoing, an undoing that he has begun to long for, Sammy sees that Whitaker is his doppelgänger and completely loses his head. As he confronts and kills his double, the symbolism is obvious—he is ready to be put an end to his role playing. In that moment, he also rips off his mask in another symbolic move that signals he can no longer hide from himself, or from the ghosts of the dead that surround him in Belfast.

LANGUAGE AND EXCESS

Language itself is central to Keenan’s work, just as it is to Burns’s. Sammy is every bit as garrulous as Burns’s middle-sister, and every bit as witty and articulate, too, albeit in a much rougher form of the Ardoyne *patois*. Keenan also briefly raises the issue of Irish language, just as Deane, and to a lesser extent Burns, did. Sammy does not know or speak the Irish language until he is a political prisoner in the Maze, where he learns it as part of an effort to reclaim his identity. He says, “That’s when I began to learn the lingo that I intend to speak for the rest of my life. The Irish lingo that I have come to associate with the camaraderie of The Maze and with the breaking of the echoes” (*FTGT* 343). This is an allusion to the historical Irish language revival movement in Northern Ireland that gained much of its momentum from the sustained period of internment and

imprisonment of nationalist political prisoners during the Troubles. In the late twentieth century, Sinn Féin built on a long-standing tradition of Irish language transmission among Irish nationalist internees that had developed during various periods of internment earlier in the century in Wales (after the Easter Rising in 1916), Northern Ireland (in 1922 at the establishment of the state and again during World War II), and Ireland (during the Irish civil war and World War II). The language served as a symbol of identity and resistance for those engaged in a political struggle against the British presence in Ireland (Mac Ionnrachtaigh 92-134). In fact, the unbroken stretch of internment and imprisonment from 1971 through the end of the century led to the development of a unique dialect of the Irish language that was specific to the context of the Long Kesh/Maze prison (Mac Giolla Chríost). The death of hunger strikers who were committed to the Irish language as part of “the struggle” led to a concurrent interest in the nationalist community outside the prison (Mac Ionnrachtaigh 158). The Irish language issue is so strongly associated with nationalism, despite a growing number of non-nationalist language learners, that it remains a point of contention between the political parties in Northern Ireland today.

Like Burns’s middle-sister, Sammy’s use of English language is a powerful force in the novel, alternately displaying “comic artfulness” (Irving) and “genuine literary inspiration, black diamonds of profound insight almost overwhelming in their beauty” (McKillop). Keenan’s “keen ear for how people speak,” is reflected in Sammy’s speech, which reflects the influences of both Irish and Scottish English vocabulary that are part of the Belfast dialect (Braidwood). Most significantly, Sammy’s extreme verbosity, with its often-frenetic pace and vertiginous shifts from one topic to another, conveys the affective

experience of being immersed in chaos and the pervasive sense that things are simply beyond one's control.

Keenan's prose is so often open to multiple interpretations that it can be said to carry excessive meaning. For instance, an examination of the following paragraph from the second page of *For the Good Times* offers an early indication of the thematic overabundance, as well as the aesthetics and poetics of excess at play in the novel:

This is the story of Adam's Apple, son, this is how they all became scundered about being naked in front of each other, because up till then life was fucking beezer, my friend, only they couldn't mind anything at all because of that they had no lingo, all except for body lingo, and for making sounds like songs, maybe, like musical sounds, a wee bit, I think, but not actual words, that is until Adam takes a bite of this fucking apple and it meant he could speak the English, just like that, up until then every day had been the same but then Jayzus Himself, or more likely his da (let's face it), let a snake loose in the garden and the snake was the first thing what could talk but it was lonely because nobody else had words that they could use with it, so as the snake tempted Adam to eat this apple, he didn't even know it was an apple till then, he thought everything was a part of himself, he didn't even know how a snake was a snake, so we'll never know how it did it, but basically the snake says to him that the apple was something different from himself and that if he wanted to he could eat it and find out the names of everything, including his wife, who at that point he had no idea was called Eve. After that, he began remembering. (Keenan 6)

The linguistic excesses of the brief passage are immediately obvious in its composition of an extraordinarily long, meandering sentence followed by a very short and pointed one. Intertextuality, here and throughout the novel, is layered. The passage is a parodic version of Genesis, of course, but it also bears a strong resemblance to the versions of Bible stories retold by Dublin school children, recorded by Peig Cunningham in the 1960s, and later made popular as the soundtrack to the animated short film series, *Give Up Yer Aul Sins*. Part of the hilarity in Keenan's parody derives from extreme incongruities: the profane rendering of the sacred story, the sharp contrast of the childlike interpretation recounted in the coarse language of a working-class tough, and the way the

innocence of the child is comically distorted into the ignorance of the uneducated young male. The confident authority of the speaker, the wordplay with Adam's Apple, and the underhanded dig at the thought of English being the language of Eden all contribute to the humor of the passage. The natural, uninhibited way in which the story is related in working-class Belfast demotic, using slang like "scundered" (disgusted) and "beezer" (excellent), is at once provocative, disarming, and revealing. Beneath the exaggeration inherent in this rendition of Adam's choice lies a truth the reader comes to understand about the main characters of the novel: they are young men whose own innocence has been misshapen by violence from their very early days and whose ignorance is exploited by powerful forces they do not understand.

The passage introduces several additional thematic concerns that emerge in the novel. One is the reference to the father as introducing the snake into the garden, the first of many references to snakes (and fathers) in this work. The incident foreshadows the oversized influence that fathers wield in the novel, an influence partially articulated by Sammy's best friend Tommy when he says, "You end up martyring yourself to your da's ideas" (*FTGT* 195). Keenan explores both male bonding and toxic masculinity; the legacy of physical brutality, acted out in both domestic and public spheres, is passed down from father to son. The idea of a self-perpetuating cycle of violent destruction and rebirth is embodied both in the family histories of the narrator and his working-class friends, and on a larger scale, in the history of Irish uprisings against British rule.

Most significant is the last sentence of the paragraph, which must be read in conjunction with the earlier phrase "only they couldn't mind anything at all." In Hiberno-English, the word "mind" can mean to remember. So, in the state of innocence, Adam

and Eve remember nothing; remembering coincides with the fall from grace.

Understanding this association of memory and suffering is essential to understanding the character of Sammy. The snake, a classic symbol of lost innocence, will reappear many times the novel. Linking remembering with the snake also links it to being driven out of the garden, out of a state of ignorant bliss; thus, this remembering carries exile, shame, and pain. The loneliness of the snake reveals a vulnerability not often seen in renderings of the Fall, a loneliness that is at the core of a trauma victim who is unable to fully connect with others, an unspoken loneliness that underlies everything that Sammy does.

Like Burns, Keenan uses various formal devices of excess, such as long digressive sentences, to try to express the overwhelming affects that permeated places like the Ardoyne during the Troubles, as if “the millions of words that have been written elsewhere about the Troubles have failed to capture the texture and interiority of this history; the horror, the hauntings of act and place, the failures of individual agency in a world of overdetermining fate” (Hayden). Keenan’s hyperbolic approach recreates affect by straining “discursive limits, analogical frameworks, and literary and rhetorical conventions” in order to push the reader’s thoughts about the situation beyond normative boundaries (C. Johnson 2). As memories begin to inundate Sammy, he details how one killing led to another in an extraordinary, breathless sentence that is two full pages in length. Keenan has Sammy use the image of dominoes to describe the chain of events.

Here is how the stream of consciousness begins:

And dominoes is the scene that comes to my mind, it’s dominoes, tumbling, one till the other, as far back as the eye can see, and I think to myself, what was the first domino, and in that case how did it fall, and I imagine this big finger, this big fuck-off finger coming down and parting the clouds, this deathly hand flicking the first one, and setting it all off, and then sitting back and watching the carnage, as

one domino tips the other into the other into the other into a plastic bin up on Royal Avenue . . . (FTGT 204)

And here's how it ends, two pages later:

. . . scattering bodies across the fields like seeds, bodies I can't even remember now, bodies with no faces and no names, bodies with no limbs at all, sometimes, bodies that nobody will ever find again, bodies with pine trees growing straight from their fucking hearts, I mean sharpened pine stumps, who even makes that up? (FTGT 206)

The hyperbolic piling on of the descriptions, each intensifying the previous one by adding details to it, leads the reader's mind to the incredible magnitude of death and destruction in which Sammy is immersed. The sequence of intensification a "this big finger, this big fucking finger...this deathly hand" is an example of what Quintilian termed *incrementum*, a hyperbolic accumulation that "continues, goes further, and attempts to pass beyond" (Ritter, "Rethinking" 413). Keenan uses such sequences frequently.

The entire sentence is also an example of *mimesis*: it mimics the process of returning memories coming back into focus, becoming more and more defined, carrying the weight of emotional distress. Keenan uses the same approach to relate the rush of memories shared by an artist ("a burnt man, with no skin on his face") who describes in a series of extremely long sentences how he came to be locked in the attic of the British Embassy in Dublin when it was burnt to the ground in 1972 (FTGT 224-229).

Keenan also uses other techniques of excess that Tymoczko and McAteer identify as part of long-standing tradition in Irish Literature. One is the use of lists and list-like passages to convey affect through hyperbole. For example, in one of the most gruesome paragraphs of the novel, Sammy recounts a period when he and Tommy go "on tour." His outrageous inventory of the horrific violent acts he perpetrated reaches the level of the grotesque:

I broke a guy's jaw with a wrench. Smashed full sets of teeth with a chisel and an iron bar (the sound of bone splintering is like nothing you could ever imagine). Tore a guy's ear off with a Hoover. Crippled two blokes with pair of fire extinguishers. Shot a guy in the leg out the window of a moving car for the wild fuck of it (he had no idea where the bullet even came from). Dropped a guy on his head from the top of a multi-storey car park. That was messy. Buried a guy up to his neck on the beach and took turns toeing his head like a fucking football. That was even messier. Did that thing where you slit the guy's throat with a Stanley and pull his tongue through like a tie, what do you call it, a Glaswegian necktie, but his tongue was too short, and it barely stuck out, and you couldn't see it for the blood and gore anyway (lesson learnt). Forced this car off Etna Drive, stabbed the guy six times in the chest, put him in a bin bag and threw him in the dump. Forced this other car off the Antrim Road, held the guy down, slit his wrists and waited till he bled to death, drove back to his house, kicked the door in and left his body sitting up in a chair next to the fire for his wife to find. Held this guy by the legs off a bridge and made him sing the whole of the 'Boys of the Old Brigade,' only he got the words wrong so as we had no option but to drop him. Blew up a row of shops in Strabane. Beat a guy senseless, shaved his head, wrote INFORMER on his forehead and hanged him from a lamp post in front of his house. Cut both a guy's pinkies off, shoved them up his nose and sewed his nostrils shut. Only joking, we didn't sew them shut. But we would have, if we'd thought of it. (*FTGT* 106-107)

This sort of graphic description of cruel violence—some of it can only be described as torture—and the sense that the narrator relished his role in it, explains why Keenan's novel has raised questions about the ethics of his portrayal of violence with some critics (Hayden), and perhaps helps to explain why there has not yet been a lot of scholarly response to this novel. Alcobia-Murphy, in his discussion of the dilemmas artists face in trying to depict atrocity, notes that silences and narrative breakdowns in texts by Northern Irish writers often result from both a wish to remain "civil-tongued" and a perceived inability of the linguistic medium to represent the materiality of violent events ("What Do I Say" 287-88). Keenan, however, abandons such nicety and uses an excess of stomach-churning imagery, broken only by a handful of flippant asides to his audience, to illustrate atrocious violence and the affective state of its perpetrators. His willingness to do so is one reason that Eoin McNamee, asserting that "the real thing felt

more like *For the Good Times* than it did like anything else,” lists Keenan as one of a handful of new writers who have begun to address “The North’s bequest of the unsaid and the never-to-be-said” (“Troubling Truths”). The idea that Keenan is glamorizing bloodshed through his depiction of highly-stylized violence is also countered by the “bumpkin comedy” that frequently depicts Sammy and his friends as inept and clownish (Cummins).

Among the atrocities listed in this passage, the act of putting a body in a bin bag and throwing it in a dump is of particular note because it functions as a significant symbolic expression of human life as excess. McAteer has written about the concept of human beings as disposable material surplus (excess) in the works of several Northern Irish authors. For instance, in Beckett’s *Endgame*, Nagg and Nell, with only stumps for legs, dwell eternally in rubbish bins and can be seen as “verging on nothingness in the destitution of their condition as garbage” (McAteer, *Excess* 201). People are also associated with trash and parasites in Glenn Patterson’s 1988 novel, *Burning Your Own*, set in the years leading up to the Troubles. In Patterson’s novel, the impoverished, young Catholic boy, Francy Hagan, secretly lives in the garbage dump that abuts the new Larkview housing estate in Belfast. Larkview is “Protestant and British Loyalist in profile” (McAteer, *Excess* 211). The dump existed long before the housing estate was built, and Frankie treats the rats he lives among as his landlords. The metaphor for the British presence in Ireland is made clear both through the idea Francy lives off the leftovers of the Larkview community, and by the fact that its residents decide to burn the rats (and him) out. As was mentioned in previous discussions of both *Reading in the*

Dark and No Bones, the practices of burning out rats and burning people out of their homes recur with some frequency in Northern Irish literature about the Troubles.

Keenan takes the notion that some human beings were treated as disposable garbage during the Troubles to the extreme, moving from the metaphorical to the literal, when Sammy and Tommy place a corpse in a garbage bag and bring it to a landfill. The reduction of human beings to literal trash recurs in more detail in another tragi-comic scene. After murdering an off-duty soldier on the street, Tommy suffers a heart attack, and Sammy, desperate to get rid of the soldier's body before the ambulance arrives for Tommy, convinces a homeless drunk to help him put the soldier's body into a dumpster. The explanation he gives is that it's all in good fun, just a stag-party joke on an inebriated friend, and the "tinker" willingly obliges, finding the prank absolutely hilarious. Here again, Keenan uses humor to soften the impact of the horror of what Sammy is doing; the irony of the other man's response and the slapstick struggles they have getting the body into the bin are undeniably, if uncomfortably, funny. The scene also reveals a deep contradiction between Sammy's heartfelt concern for Tommy and his ability to (as he says) "think on my fucking feet" and coldly dispose of a body, even manipulating someone else into helping him do so. Sammy's reflection at the end of the passage once again exposes the two extremes of his character. Tenderness underlies the monstrous: "At first I'm disgusted, but then I says to myself, poor sod, poor fucking sod with no name, getting tipped into a bin on Royal Avenue in his best clothes with the help of a friendly tramp, what a sin" (*FTGT* 204).

Linguistic comedy expressed through understatement, comic exaggeration, and sarcasm is incorporated in the narration to relieve the grim realities of the violent,

perilous world in which these characters are immersed. Humorous devices ranging from word play and quick one-liners, to parody and the recitation of jokes, offer the narrator and the reader momentary escapes — minute dissociations, actually, compliments of Sammy — from the unrelenting unfolding of horrific events in the narratives. Dark comedy and quick-witted conversation are especially important to Keenan’s development of authentic dialogue and context. His characters and their speech are strongly influenced by his own Ardoyne relatives, including his father. In a 2023 interview with Francisco Garcia, Keenan described his Belfast relatives: “‘These guys,’ he said, including his father, ‘were all illiterate. But they loved language. They’d compete to tell the best stories. Stories of the most terrible trauma. But they’d have you crying with laughter at the end of it’” (“The Cult of David Keenan”).

But while the power of humor to provide some distance from pathos gives the characters, and the reader, space in which to hold at bay the intolerable, beneath each laugh is buried a painful truth. The Pat and Mick jokes that are scattered through the narrative in *For the Good Times* work on puns and misinterpretations of language—Tymoczko argues that such word-play, “[D]efying reason and classical logic, whether for purposes of humor or visionary utterance, puts the audience into a fantastic epistemological space” and constitutes “a verbal strategy of invoking excessive meaning” (“Hyperbole” 114). The Pat and Mick jokes are clever enough to provide comic relief in the often a gruesome account of events. but their underlying theme of the Irish as stupid or ignorant represents long-standing British stereotypes of “Paddy.” They serve as a kind of background noise, uncommented on by the narrator; superficially light-hearted, they are freighted with meaning, comprising another element of the negative affect that spurs

Sammy to, as he says, “keep my hatred sharp” (*FTGT* 97). That Sammy’s recitation of the jokes masks a deeper resentment is revealed only after the bomb he left under his bed blows up his mother’s house with his mother in it; then he says, “[I]t ate at me like the punchline of the worst Paddy joke of all time” (*FTGT* 197).

The fantastic is incorporated into the gritty urban setting in the character of Miracle Baby. The friends come to see Miracle Baby, a neighborhood boy with cognitive difficulties, as a prophet, and they begin to turn to him for answers: “[W]e realised that Miracle Baby could read the future. That was his superpower ... everything he made up started coming true. Only but it takes us a while to figure it out” (*FTGT* 123). Miracle Baby embodies two extremes of intelligence: he is both intellectually limited and has powers to know things that no one else can see. The friends turn to him to lead a séance, complete with Ouija board, in order to contact Tommy from beyond the grave. Miracle Baby is one of the “beings that glimmer between the natural and the supernatural, that inhabit the line between the two [and who] are common in Irish literature written in English” (Tymoczko, “Hyperbole” 106).

The book also includes the text (i.e., dialogue and diegetic commentary, but no graphics) for five interleaved, surreal comic book episodes that provide “an esoteric counterpart” to the central narrative (Hayden); as such, they constitute another form of narrative excess. The episodes function as brief vignettes that reflect, in an extremely condensed form, important plot points and offer clues to the significance of events and themes in the main story. They feature the alter egos of Barney (Neutrino), Tommy (The X-Ray Kid), and Sammy (The Anomaly). The fantasy characters’ superpowers and their adventures in the alternate world of Hibernia (the ancient Roman name for Ireland),

presented in a modern, super-concentrated form of storytelling, represent an updated version of the “hyperbolic fantastic” that is part of the Irish folklore tradition. (Tymoczko “Hyperbole”; “Interview—David Keenan”). Likewise, the circular text structure, with its beginning and ending colons implying an unending loop, as well as Sammy’s frequent references to looping, recall the iterative episodes of medieval poetry in Ireland.

Similarly, the doppelgangers of Tommy and Sammy (and the fact that both them have doppelgangers) can be related to what Tymoczko calls the “perfect symmetry” that is a part of the poetics of the hyperbole in Irish literature. Keenan himself notes the intertextual legacy of his work which can be traced back through the Irish modernists (Joyce and Beckett) to the Irish folklore tradition. He lists James Joyce as a major inspiration and explains that the scene where Sammy is arrested is a conscious allusion to the ending of Joyce’s “The Dead” (“Interview—David Keenan”). Tymoczko has detailed Joyce’s reliance on folklore and the Irish *Otherworld* in “The Dead,” *Finnegan’s Wake*, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, and *Ulysses*. Sammy’s trip to Scotland with Tommy, and especially the orgy scene, is evocative of the Stephen Dedalus’s trip with Leopold Bloom to Nighttown (the brothel district) in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which Tymoczko interprets as a modern voyage to the *Otherworld* (*Irish Ulysses* 189-201).

SUMMARY

In short, *For the Good Times* is an absurdly complicated mashup of excess violence, death, denial, betrayal and paranoia, expressed in excessive diction in an excess of genres using an excess of symbols and allusions—an excess of excesses, so to speak. It uses hyperbole and excess to re-present the affective experience of living through the Troubles, an experience that is “transpersonal and personal, social and subjective,

conscious as well as unconscious” (Breu and Hatmaker 9). Keenan approaches the topic from a new perspective, offering the witness testimony of a cold-blooded but somehow likable killer whose immaturity and humanity make him a tragic figure and highlight the toxicity of the environment into which he was born. McNamee’s portrayal of Victor Kelly in *Resurrection Man*, discussed in the next chapter, offers a much darker vision of a character whose story has a number of similarities to Sammy’s.

Keenan’s emphasis on cinematic scenes of violence raises questions about the intersection of violence and entertainment in modern society, particularly in graphic media such as films and comics, and extending into RPGs. Critic David Hayden, writing in *The Guardian*, expresses uncertainty about Keenan’s novel, unsure whether it is “giving the reader a rare chance to reflect on the intoxication with violence at the heart of our culture, or providing us with a florid example of its celebration” (“Good Times”). Yet Hayden himself notes that no Troubles survivor would buy into Sammy’s claim to be able to forget at the end, and this is surely Keenan’s point. The stark contrast between the “good times” feeling of Sammy’s youthful free-wheeling violence and the realities of death, destruction, and mental and emotional collapse provides the answer to Hayden’s question. Yes, the novel ends with Keenan’s narrator defying the expected embrace of an enlightened self, and with a wink, boasting of his ability to forget—but this is the hollowest of boasts, in light of the recitation of memories that has come before it, and the final punctuation mark (a colon) that returns the reader to the matching colon at the hallucinatory opening of the book. The snake eats its own tail, just as Sammy’s determination to forget is challenged over and over again by the persistence of memory, and just as the Troubles were the latest installment in a long historical cycle of Irish

nationalists attempting to reclaim sovereignty over their island. Whether those cycles can finally be broken is a question Keenan leaves open.

For the Good Times is one of a growing number of post-Good Friday Agreement novels, including those of Anna Burns and Michael Hughes, that repudiate the notion that the legacy of the Troubles can simply be ignored as a means of reconciliation. Sammy's avowal to forget the past is analogous to what Heidemann calls "the disabling impact of the Agreement's rhetorical suspension of the country's violent past in favour of a "new beginning" (Heidemann 6-7). Keenan has talked about how his Ardoyne relatives "had an incredible faith in the power of language to redeem things that they'd been through . . . And they would tell these stories in a way where it was hard to know what was true and what was myth-making" ("Close to Madness"). Instead of forgetting, Sammy will tell this story over and over again, in another endless loop, hoping that if, in Keenan's words, he "could perform the story perfectly, there would be some kind of epiphany, some kind of gnosis at the end of it" ("Close to Madness").

CHAPTER FOUR: EOIN MCNAMEE'S *RESURRECTION MAN* AND *THE ULTRAS*

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

—W. B. Yeats, "*The Second Coming*"

Eoin McNamee was born in Kilkeel, Co. Down, in 1961; the Troubles began when he was eight years old. A prolific writer, he's published some twenty novels, including several that are set in Northern Ireland, as well as poetry, short stories, screen plays, television scripts, and *The Navigators* series for children. McNamee also regularly reviews fiction in national Irish newspapers, and is a Professor of Writing at Trinity College. He's written a series of crime thrillers under the pseudonym John Creed. Although the John Creed crime fiction is generally regarded as belonging to the category of "Troubles Trash" —that is, the books are straight-up, formulaic thrillers— he has also published a number of other novels about the Troubles under his actual name that are deemed more complex, "literary" novels. This study will focus on two of the latter: *Resurrection Man*, published in 1994, the year that began the ceasefire leading up to the Good Friday Agreement; and *The Ultras*, published in 2004, six years after the agreement was signed.

The various forms of excess in these two novels both overlap with and diverge from each other and those novels discussed in earlier chapters of this study. Like Keenan's *For the Good Times*, for instance, *Resurrection Man* incorporates topical excesses of violence and hyper-masculinity; like Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, it features a particular literary mode of expression, employing the excessive elements and tropes of

noir. *The Ultras*, too, is interested in hyper-masculinity, and like Burns's novels, it is particularly concerned with excessive secrecy and silences, paranoia and uncertainty. Yet McNamee's approach is distinctive. He is among the most controversial of Troubles fiction authors, in good part because he fictionalizes the stories of well-known real-life figures from the conflict. In doing so, he oversteps the bounds of documentary historical fiction¹ by deliberately changing known details—sometimes minor, sometimes major—in a deliberate challenge to “official” histories of recent events. This has led to accusations of “failing to pay respect to the sanctity of the historical record” (D. Smith 267), as well as of being insensitive and/or disrespectful to those involved and their survivors. McNamee pushes back on criticism relating to accurate representation of Northern Irish history, writing in response to a query from Magennis, “Your question presupposes that there is a reliable history that I can be accurate about. What passes for recorded history would seem in fact to be a series of imposed and promoted political narratives which operate to deny complexity” (*Sons of Ulster* 157). That skepticism about official accounts is an underlying central theme of both novels.

Resurrection Man and *The Ultras* present the reader with main characters closely-based on actual people who represented extremes even within the context of a violent conflict, men who were the subjects of immense public attention and a kind of horrified fascination during the Troubles. In *Resurrection Man*, McNamee creates Victor Kelly,

¹The use of the term historical fiction at all in conjunction with McNamee's works may be contested because historical fiction is often defined as relating events of fifty or more years previous to the time of writing, while the gap between actual events and publication is only twenty to thirty years in the case of these two novels. However, it is impossible to ignore that these two novels are so tightly attached to actual persons and real events that they are at once historical and fictional.

modeled on the real Lenny Murphy, a serial murderer who, with his loyalist² gang, murdered at least thirty people, mostly Catholics (Dillon, *Shankill Butchers* xx). In *The Ultras*, McNamee turns to the story of Robert Nairac, a British intelligence agent who tried to infiltrate the IRA, disappeared, and was murdered in the “IRA bandit country” of South Armagh in 1976. In telling their stories, McNamee explores the communal traumatic affects of the Troubles that both made room for and resulted from the actions of such extreme individuals.

McNamee’s work is sometimes referred to as *faction*, a somewhat pejorative portmanteau for writing that blends *fact* and *fiction* (Gray 58). It is both more accurate and more useful to understand his writing as *hyperrealistic* (Gray; Haslam). The term *hyperrealism* first emerged in the visual arts, particularly photography and sculpture, in the 1960s. It describes, as its name implies, an exaggerated, or hyperbolic, depiction of reality. A hyperrealistic work creates “a life-like copy of reality” that depicts *something more than can actually be seen* with the naked eye:

The goal of hyperrealistic art is often to create a kind of FALSE REALITY. A “perfect copy” already requires a lot of artistic skill, but these artworks go even farther: They pose as a qualitative “improvement” of the original, in which shadows, light effects, surfaces and textures are depicted much more clearly than they are actually perceived in reality. This stirs DIFFERENT EMOTIONS IN THE VIEWER than the original.³ (“A Matter of Term”)

² There is an important distinction between the terms, “unionist” and “loyalist.” Unionists are those who support a continued union between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, rejecting the idea of a united Ireland. Northern Irish loyalists are a subset of unionists, often part of the working class, whose loyalty to the crown is intertwined with ethno-nationalism, and who are widely associated with violence and paramilitarism. The two largest loyalist paramilitary groups operating in Northern Ireland during the Troubles were the Ulster Defense Association (UDA) whose military operations were performed under the name of the Ulster Freedom Fighters (UFF), and the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). There were also a number of smaller loyalist paramilitary groups, many of which had ties to the UDA and UVF.

³ Capitalization in original source.

Thus, hyperrealism is an art form that employs exaggeration and overstatement of details in order to present a “truer” picture of things. One can conclude, then, that in hyperrealism the “different emotions” stirred in the viewer are the product of Baudelaire’s *vertige de l’hyperbole* and that it is the resulting disorientation that offers opportunity for new perspectives and understandings.

In both *Resurrection Man* and *The Ultras*, McNamee relies heavily on—and undermines—the accounts of these real-life men offered by the investigative journalist Martin Dillon.⁴ Rather than mimicking journalistic realism, McNamee turns to the hyperrealistic mode, creating “improvements” in his “life-like copies” of Dillon’s histories (which, it should be noted, constitute an already mediatized reality). He achieves this through exaggeratedly stylistic prose, employed precisely in order to communicate social and political *affects* of the Troubles to his audience, i.e. to stir “different emotions” in his reader than those evoked by the “real” version of events offered by Dillon. The predominant aesthetic in these novels is that of noir, an excessive mode of expression particularly suited to “staging the negative power of affect” (Breu 9), and this chapter will discuss how the excesses of noir work to support McNamee’s hyperrealistic expression of the widespread traumatic affects generated by sectarianism, hyper-masculinity, and terrorism—both paramilitary and state-sponsored—in Northern Ireland.

McNamee’s novels are highly metafictional: even as they themselves mediate real events, they are *thematically* concerned with the way mediatized (i.e. journalistic, both

⁴ This is not to imply that McNamee does not use other journalistic sources as well. That he does is evident both in the novels and through his own assertions in interviews. However, many details in the novels align so closely with Dillon’s books that many critics and reviewers have identified them as a source for important details of McNamee’s plots and characterizations. This will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

print-based and broadcast) versions of events shaped public ideas of reality during the Troubles. In the second half of the twentieth century, French philosopher Jean Baudrillard raised the alarm about a postmodern world where the hyperreality created by information and communication technologies provides experiences more intense and involving than the scenes of actual life. In such a world, hyperreality becomes *more real than real*; the simulacra (models, codes, and images) of the hyperreal come to control thought and behavior (“Jean Baudrillard”). McNamee’s work engages with the ways in which the media and government influenced and controlled the narrative of the Troubles, determining what people understood to be reality. Asked if his writing was driven by anger about the politics of the period, McNamee replied that what angered him most was “the manipulation of perceptions, and the refusal to admit that the discourse of that time is able to bear the kind of complexity that I’m working to identify” (Wild).

McNamee’s use of many of the conventions of crime fiction in these works serves to “trace and confront the seemingly unfigurable complexities, and criminalities of the state” (A. Kelly 24). Writing in *The New York Times*, Denise Mina argues that the “central mechanism of noir fiction is to create a justice deficit that needs to be redressed. Shock and violence disarm the readers and heighten their indignation — that way, they are not being preached at but invited to engage . . . There is no better form to explore social injustice” (“Raymond Chandler”). McNamee’s use of excess, is, however, like Deane’s, expressed through the use of a generic sensibility even while resisting classification as a genre novel—thus these novels are distinguished from the formulaic

crime fiction he writes under his pen name.⁵ Breu and Hatmaker argue that noir is “first and foremost, an affective disposition” (7); McNamee’s highly atmospheric novels incorporate familiar hyperbolic elements of noir fiction, including overwhelming urban decay, masculine violence, rampant crime, corruption, and contempt for the law (Mitchell 10). His Northern Ireland is a dark place, peopled with broken characters. The plots are driven by the stories of men who embody extremes, living far outside the already distorted norms of a society saturated with violence and paranoia. Their stories are in turn framed by the men investigating them, men who are themselves damaged and lonely, who drink too much, whose marriages fail. In short, McNamee’s bleak settings exude a sense of despair that matches that of his characters.

By leveraging noir’s “oddly inflated role of description” (Mitchell 3), McNamee is able to focus the reader’s attention on communal traumatic affects even while writing about such famous individuals. As mentioned, many of the affective elements that appear in the novels of Deane, Burns, and Keenan are also present in McNamee’s work, including a kind of numbness to ubiquitous violence in the public and private spheres, excessive secrecy, misogyny, and paranoia. In addition, McNamee engages with ways in which both paramilitary and state forces engaged in terrorism, separately and in collusion with each other, that contributed to the excess affects of the period. The excessively negative, postmodern sensibility of noir is well-suited to these novels which offer no clean resolutions or clear moral triumphs, but instead raise questions about the social

⁵ It is interesting to note that noir has its roots in the Gothic, the very mode that Deane employed in *Reading in the Dark*. Multiple critics have referred to Gothic elements in McNamee’s work.

apparatuses that enabled and even encouraged the actions of these extreme men who operated in the darkest shadows cast by the Troubles.

RESURRECTION MAN

In the early nineteenth century, a burgeoning interest in anatomical study in the United Kingdom meant that the demand for corpses outpaced the supply of bodies legally available to medical students. The bodies that were available were limited to those of executed murderers who were predominantly young men, which meant that the opportunity to study the impacts of disease and aging was curtailed. As a result, a new trade emerged—the illegal practice of digging up graves and selling corpses to medical schools, or in some cases, abducting and killing elderly or drunken people from the streets. Those who engaged in this business were called resurrectionists or resurrection men. Due to the short sea route across to Scotland, Belfast became a favored source for exporting corpses to medical schools in Glasgow and Edinburgh (Evans 161). By 1820, resurrectionism in Ireland had reached “epidemic” levels—so extreme was the situation that a number of formal measures to prevent grave robbers were employed, including metal cages to fit around coffins, large stone slabs to place on top of coffins, watchmen, guard houses, “resurrection lamps,” and *mort-safes* (Evans 155-58). These precautionary methods, however, were available only to the wealthy, with the result that it was mainly the poor who were the victims of predation, making them, as Alun Evans points out “worth more dead than alive” (157). McNamee’s title, *Resurrection Men*, is an allusion to the practice of snatching and killing people from the streets of Belfast, newly manifested in the late twentieth century when their bodies were used for political rather than financial capital.

Lenny Murphy

The real-life Hugh Leonard (“Lenny”) Murphy was born into a working class Belfast family in 1952. The city had been divided on a sectarian basis from the inception of the Northern Irish statelet, and the Murphy family had problems navigating this sectarian divide because their surname suggested that they were Catholic, although they were, in fact, Protestant. This resulted in the family moving house often because of erroneous suspicions and the resultant hostility of their Protestant neighbors. By all accounts, Lenny Murphy grew up with a fierce resentment and bitterness toward Catholics, further fueled by the nickname “Murphy the Mick” that was given to him by his schoolmates (Dillon, *Shankill* 4). He found ways to stop being bullied by his peers: by age ten he had organized a gang to take the pocket money of his classmates at the point of a penknife, and at age twelve he was arrested for shopbreaking and larceny and sentenced to two years probation. He left school at fourteen and continued to have run-ins with the law for theft and driving offenses. At seventeen, he joined the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF), a paramilitary group determined to defend the status of Northern Ireland as a British state. Murphy situated himself in Shankill, a strongly loyalist neighborhood in Belfast that borders on Catholic areas along the Falls Road. Shankill is a working-class, loyalist enclave that is separated from its neighboring working-class nationalist neighborhoods by a peace wall.⁶ It was a breeding ground for Protestant paramilitary groups. Like the Catholic areas of Ardoyne and Clonard, Protestant Shankill was a site of

⁶ The first “peace wall” or “peace line” was constructed in 1969 to separate the working-class Protestant Shankill and Catholic Falls Road neighborhoods of Belfast. It was intended as a temporary security measure to prevent violent clashes between the two communities, expected to be removed after six months (“Public Policy”). It remains in place as of 2024.

intense violent conflict during the Troubles, and like their counterparts in working class nationalist neighborhoods, young men in working class loyalist areas achieved identity and a sense of belonging by joining ethno-nationalist paramilitary groups dedicated to their cause (Coulter).

While the UVF has its roots in the early twentieth century, it was during the 1960s, as Catholics and others began demanding equal civil rights, that it reemerged under the leadership of Gusto Spence. Spence infamously directed a 1966 operation to kill a known republican named Leo Martin. When he and his unit drove around the Catholic area of the Falls Road and they couldn't find Martin, they randomly chose another Catholic man who had no connection with the IRA and shot him dead instead. Spence told Martin Dillon, "the attitude was that if you couldn't get an IRA man you should shoot a *Taig*"⁷ (Dillon, *Shankill xxi*). This mindset (one that Spence came to repudiate after educating himself in prison) is the one that Murphy and his gang carried with them in choosing their victims on the streets of Belfast in the 1970s.

Over time, Murphy formed his own death squad that continued to fall under the umbrella of the UVF but often functioned as a rogue unit, carrying out its own unauthorized (but tacitly approved) operations. The crew became notorious for abductions and gruesome murders that involved torture with knives. Their trademark was the use of butcher's knives to cut the victim repeatedly and finally slash the victim's throat, earning the unit the sobriquet "Shankill Butchers," with Murphy as the "master-butcher." The Shankill Butchers terrorized the Catholic population of north and west Belfast for a period of seven years and have been associated with at least two dozen

⁷ Derogatory term for a Catholic.

murders, most of which were sectarian in nature.⁸ There is evidence that Murphy had help from various officials in evading conviction and in murdering another imprisoned gang member who had agreed to testify against him (Dillon, *Shankill*). Murphy also killed at least eight Protestants, and most of the unionist population in Belfast was appalled by his actions, many considering him as nothing more than a serial killer operating under the banner of the UVF. Eventually, Murphy became a liability to the UVF in terms of bad publicity and because he could not be controlled through the chain of command. He was assassinated, reportedly after the IRA received a tip-off from the UVF on when and where to find him. However, there were many people within the loyalist community who supported him and continue to see him as a hero today. In the summer of 2023, a memorial plaque listing an honor roll of UVF members was installed on a mural in Shankill; the list includes the names of Lenny Murphy and other members of the Shankill Butchers (“Victims”).

Victor Kelly

Victor Kelly is McNamee’s fictional version of Lenny Murphy. For the most part, *Resurrection Man* moves back and forth between the third person narrative viewpoints of Kelly and a Belfast journalist named Ryan, but it also includes occasional vignettes from the viewpoints of Victor’s mother, Dorcas, and his girlfriend, Heather. The narration is further fragmented by time gaps of varying and sometimes indeterminate length, adding to the sense the “official” history remains incomplete.

⁸ In Anna Burns’s *No Bones*, the narrator alludes to this group, describing men in a Ford Cortina kidnapping and murdering Catholics on the way home from the pub. The Shankill Butchers, according to Dillon’s book, used a number of different Ford Cortinas to carry out their grisly work. For further nonfiction accounts, see the oral history, *Ardayne: The Untold Truth*.

As many critics have noted, there is little doubt that McNamee appropriated and adapted Martin Dillon's journalistic account of real-life Lenny Murphy and the Shankill Butchers as source material for Kelly and the *Resurrection Man* killers (Gray; Scanlan; Tobin). Billy Gray enumerates many of the novel's details that are closely tied to the journalist's reporting, including McNamee's portrayal of Victor Kelly's upbringing, early signs of antisocial behavior, and career as a sectarian killer, as well as his depiction of the other members of the gang (173). The plot of *Resurrection Man* follows the trajectory of Murphy's biography as presented by Dillon. However, in McNamee's hyperrealistic rendering, the story of the real-life Murphy, depicted as the fictionalized Kelly, and the Belfast he inhabits take on the exaggeration, distortion and disfiguration of noir. McNamee uses the genre's "distorted symbolic representation and affect that encircle and encyst the traumatic real" (Breu, "Public Violence" 59) to show a society immersed in a miasma of ongoing violence and alienation.

McNamee, like Dillon, offers a simplistic psychological analysis of the "master butcher" (in the novel, "resurrection man") that is based in good deal on the killer's poor relationship with his ineffectual father and unhealthy relationship with his overbearing mother. Victor's father, James, is portrayed as meek and emotionally absent, while his mother, Dorcas, is a grotesque figure who is ultimately complicit in Victor's murderous violence. She has transmitted her disdain of Catholics to her son; she will not admit to the possibility that he has done anything wrong. Instead, she characterizes his actions as showing he is "(l)oyal to the crown" (*RM* 3). She asserts, "If Victor was involved in the protection of Protestants, she asked no questions" (*RM* 143). His apparent devotion to her, manifested in his rage at the insults of classmates who imply she must have "rid a

Catholic,”⁹ his letters from jail which reminisce about his childhood and are always signed “Yr loving son” (*RM* 8), and his habit of sending her cards with pink hearts, mark her as the only person to whom he may feel steadily attached. Dorcas’s disappointment with her husband’s emotional distance is also transmitted to her son, who imagines his father as “in the crowd that collected around a scene of disaster. Or standing slightly apart at some great event” (*RM* 5). Coming to hate his father, Victor instead bonds with a different older man, the psychopathic loyalist Billy McClure. McClure, like Victor, operates at the extremes; it is he who creates the “Romper Room” in Maxies’ pub, named after a children’s television program in which a magic mirror supposedly allows the presenter to see children through their television screens at home. McClure’s “Romper Room” is a place for ceremonial torture, a venue where he initiates and makes complicit large numbers of onlookers as he murders his victims; Victor soon adopts McClure as his mentor. McClure encourages and facilitates Victor’s Resurrection Man activities until they become a liability, at which point he sets up Victor’s assassination (Magennis 95).

Peggy O’Brien calls McNamee’s explanation of Victor’s psychopathy “overly deterministic” (149). Indeed, it is so excessively Oedipal as to be parodic, stripped of the power to evoke sympathy for Victor, and rendered both banal and unsatisfactory as a rationale for Victor’s evil actions. (McNamee takes a similar overdrawn approach to the two females in Victor’s life, who are reduced to clichéd female archetypes: Dorcas is the dotting, blindly loyal mother; Heather is the soft-hearted, ill-used whore.) Thus, the

⁹ Engaged in sexual intercourse with.

individual becomes less important than the society that produces him/her. Victor's warped behavior is facilitated by and exemplifies the worst qualities of the Northern Irish environment during the Troubles: sectarianism, hyper-masculinity, and excessive violence. In his correspondence with Caroline Magennis, McNamee suggests that the characters and actions of Lenny Murphy/Victor Kelly (and Robert Nairac) were "dictated by the political psychosis which armed them and sent them out . . . It's hard to dissociate them from the extreme nationalism which they both represented. I don't believe that they could have been psychotic without the system or systems which surrounded them" (*Sons of Ulster* 159). Both *Resurrection Man* and *The Ultras* are very much focused on the criticism of those systems, especially paramilitary organizations, the media, and government agencies operating in Northern Ireland during the Troubles.

Resurrection Man, like Keenan's *For the Good Times*, depicts members of a hyper-masculine paramilitary group in an area of high unemployment and low opportunity in Belfast where participation in ritualistic violence is a form of initiation and continuing membership (Magennis 114). The men in Kelly's cohort engage in collective perpetration of violence and viewing of pornography—complicity is the tie that binds them. Women are marginalized, available to meet the sexual or domestic needs, but controlled through violence and fear. Thus, the men in Victor's crowd invite Billy McClure to "come around our place give the wife one of them digs any time" (*RM* 29).

McNamee examines the communal affects that contribute to the emergence of an individual such as Victor Kelly, including two major societal influences on Victor Kelly's identity formation: the affective polarization of extreme sectarianism (and its

associated expression in hyper-masculinity) and the oversized role of media, both in the early shaping and later reinforcement of his sense of self.

Sectarianism and Embitterment

More than any of the authors under discussion in this thesis, McNamee highlights the dominant, destructive role of sectarian identity in the violence that traumatized Northern Irish society. Extreme sectarian hatred is an important part of Victor's psyche, learned not just from his mother, but from the community around him. It drives Victor's killing; it also allows him to earn the admiration and fear of those who share his ethnic enmity. Victor has assimilated and nurtured an intense hatred for Catholics, not just from his family's early experiences of being bullied over a traditionally Catholic surname, but from an atmosphere of sectarian embitterment. Victor's antipathy is reinforced at Cornmarket prayer meetings where fiery visiting preachers recite extremist "sectarian histories" of Catholics: "The whore of Rome. There were barbarous rites, martyrs raked in pain. The Pope's cells were plastered with the gore of delicate Protestant women. Catholics were plotters, heretics, casual betrayers" (RM 9). He and McClure bond over sectarian hatred: "Their detestation of Catholics was a companionable thing. They agreed upon it as a resource requiring careful nurture" (RM 64).

Sectarianism in Northern Ireland has its roots in the historical overlap of schisms in the Catholic church with the age of expansion. At the time of its mid-sixteenth and early seventeenth century expansion into Ireland, Britain was a militantly Protestant state, and the British approach in Ireland emphasized displacement of a native Catholic Irish elite with Protestant settlers from Scotland and England, especially in Ulster, which, unsurprisingly, the Irish Catholic elite resisted (Ruane 5). Thus, Britain's plantation

settlement in the northern part of Ireland after 1600 carried with it a religious agenda and established a lasting antagonism “rooted in a fusion of politics, religion, and economics” (Morrow 7). Irish society became divided both ethnically and religiously, with those divisions rooted in its landscape as well as its institutions. The animus between the native Irish (Catholics) and the settlers (Protestants) persisted and was handed down through generations. In the north, “power and community were based on difference; unequal power added to the hostility that attached to difference; power was a critical resource in defending difference; communal solidarity was a source of power, and the context in which difference was reproduced” (Ruane 6). Although by the twentieth century, most of the hostility was politically based, religious affiliations continued (and still continue) to be used to denote differences in political and national divisions.

The affective nature of sectarianism is broadly based on the need to belong and intimately related to identity formation. Identities, conceived of in a number of ways (e.g., as individual, familial, ethnic, sectarian, national), are maintained through definitions of in-group vs out-group (Hancock 445). Solidarity within one’s own group feeds discord with the “out-group” (Sen 2). Ethnic and kin-based identities formed at an early age have added weight in the psyche; these “socialized” identities are reinforced with narratives. When the narratives include perceived threats to the group, identities “begin to polarize into powerful camps of ‘us’ and ‘them’” and lead to the escalation of conflict (Hancock 446). The opposing historical narratives of Protestant and Catholic communities fueled the conflict in Northern Ireland, where, as Keenan’s narrator in *For the Good Times*, Sammy, says, “history isn’t written. It is remembered” (*FTGT* 129). Embitterment, an affect in which the sense of having been insulted may combine with a

desire to fight back and lead to an urge for aggression and revenge, is closely tied to such narratives. “Nagging and self-reinforcing” (i.e., painful and rewarding at the same time), embitterment can become addictive (Linden and Maercker 1). In their study of the social dimension of embitterment in Northern Ireland, Cairns and Hewstone emphasize that it was the “role of the collective past in the collective present” that made the conflict especially difficult to bring under control (222).

Each community in the north has what Hancock calls its “chosen traumas,”¹⁰ narratives they used to justify the violence and bloodshed of the Troubles. The Civil Rights movement, initially including members from both communities, was perceived by some unionists to be a thinly disguised attempt to overthrow the social order that protected Northern Ireland’s membership in the United Kingdom. When Protestant loyalists casting themselves as defenders of the union attacked peaceful protesters, the IRA swiftly seized the opportunity to don the mantle of defenders of the Catholic community and reengage in the fight for a united Ireland. In light of the outbreak of violence, the cross-community movement, ironically, served to deepen rather than lessen divisions (Morrow 7).

¹⁰ For the Northern Irish Protestant community, three events have fed a narrative of being threatened with extinction: the Siege of Derry (1689), the Battle of the Boyne (1690), and the establishment of the (Catholic) Irish Free State (1922) (Hancock 447- 449). This “siege mentality,” led the Northern Ireland government, as it came into being in 1921, to make its first objective the support of unionism and the repression of republicanism; from thereon in, its primary concerns were preferential treatment of the Protestant majority, suppression of anti-union sentiment, and establishment of a government that would employ only those loyal to it (Andrews 49). The Catholic community of the North (and the rest of the island) has its own trauma narratives, starting with colonization and including the imposition of Penal laws (approximately 1695-1798), the Great Hunger (1845-52), and Partition in the early 1920s (which also ignited a civil war in the newly formed Irish state to the south). After partition, discrimination against Catholics in employment, housing and enfranchisement was the source of ongoing trauma and grievance in Northern Ireland.

Like Burns's *No Bones* and *Milkman*, McNamee's *Resurrection Man* highlights the way the sectarianism is encoded in the partitioned streets of Belfast, contributing to the paranoia of working-class people in Belfast who develop "an intimate knowledge of the sectarian geography of the city and of the ethnographic cues that reveal religious identity" as a means of survival (Coulter 9). Victor drives Heather "carefully along the edges of Catholic west Belfast," places she, significantly, has never actually been close to before, only having seen them on television; he shares his fantasies with her about how "you could wipe them off the map" (*RM* 45-46). Victor's obsessive mental mapping of the city enables him to identify the best routes to get in and out of the Catholic neighborhoods and interface roads where he selects his victims, abducts them, and drives them back to the Shankill to torture and murder. In Burn's *No Bones*, the Ford Cortina(s) driven by the (unnamed) Shankill Butchers are what Amelia and her friends most fear walking home from the pubs; staying alert to potential danger is a necessity. Hypervigilance is called for in McNamee's Belfast, too—the need to be constantly aware of territorial boundaries and sectarian markers of identity is urgent and pervasive in a city where "[y]ou got a feeling of single cars cruising the streets with sinister gleams from their windscreens. Drizzle falling from a vigilante sky" (*RM* 25). Thus, when the journalist Ryan enters a pub to meet his colleague, Coppinger, who hasn't yet arrived, "he knew he was going to be singled out. He had trouble summoning the correct responses. It was a question of assembling an identity out of names: the name of school attended, the name of the street where you lived, your own name. These were the finely tuned instruments of survival" (*RM* 33-34).

Many novels about the Troubles reveal the ways group identity can force people into allegiances and decisions that conflict with their own values and concepts of self, and decry or lament the polarity of political identities in Northern Ireland.¹¹ Those texts focus on individuals caught up in and harmed by sectarianism and inevitably culminate in death and destruction resulting from the violently futile contest with “the other.”

McNamee, however, does not present sectarianism as a moral dilemma for his characters; it merely exists as an inextricable element of a larger malaise that has Belfast in its grips. In *Resurrection Man*, there is no redemptive moment of understanding for the perpetrators of violence, no moral revulsion at what they have done. Neither Kelly, for whom sectarian murder becomes a *raison d’être*, nor any of his associates ever question the legitimacy of their ethno-religious hatred. Any remorse they express is portrayed as artificial and calculated to reduce prison time. Sectarianism remains the communal bond, and the nature of that sectarianism is far less ideological than visceral. Nor is McNamee’s Kelly simply a psychopath for whom sectarianism offers an “appropriate” pool of victims—the prominent role of the media in this novel calls attention to another, equally powerful societal factor in the creation and maintenance of the monstrous Victor Kelly as the “Resurrection Man.”

The Media and Manipulation of Affect

Ryan, as investigative journalist, is the flawed noir detective in the novel. Separated from his wife who left him after he hit her, he drinks too much and is cynically

¹¹ See, for instance, Bernard MacLaverty’s *Cal* (1983), Ann Devlin’s “Naming the Names” (1986), Glen Patterson’s *Burning Your Own* (1988), Brian Moore’s *Lies of Silence* (1990), and Deirdre Madden’s *One by One in the Darkness* (1997).

self-destructive. Egged on by his colleague Coppinger, Ryan finds himself drawn to the activities of the Resurrection Men, even as most of the media seem reluctant to report on them. The novel repeatedly refers to how the media works upon people's perception of reality, in good part by suppressing the truth. Coppinger becomes keenly focused on the goings on of Kelly and his gang early on. He begins to see connections between their crimes long before the rest of the press, but rather than rewarding his investigative reporting, the newspaper he and Ryan work for actively represses the stories and sidelines Coppinger, reassigning him to the sports desk. Ryan, too, meets a good deal of resistance after following up on the story. In *The Dirty War*, Dillon notes that the main reason he began researching his book on the real Shankill butchers was that they had received relatively little attention in the media, "even though they killed more people than any other mass murderers in British criminal history" (*Shankill xvi*). In a 2019 interview, Dillon reflected that it seemed to him that "it was almost as if the detail of this cruelty was kept away from the people to avoid some hysteria or panic about the reality of what was happening" ("Nightmares"). J. Edward Mallot has written about McNamee's novel in the context of the media war that was being waged in Northern Ireland in the 1970s. There was fierce debate at that time over the ethics of giving terrorism "oxygen" by press coverage; governmental (both British and Irish) restrictions on and reprisals against journalistic expression led to widespread self-censorship on the part of news media. Even while the public relied on journalists to understand what was happening around them, "the media . . . assumed a crucial but confusing role . . . frustrating in its silence, its recourse to stereotypes, and its refusal to provided detailed content yet understood by all

involved to be vital in its potential to influence the conflict itself, as well as the fortunes of individual participants” (Mallot 35).

Communal traumatic affects created by the repeated exposure to violence are central to McNamee’s novel; the numbness and repression that Burns depicts in her three Troubles novels (*No Bones*, *Little Constructions*, and *Milkman*) are also present in *Resurrection Man*. However, in McNamee’s novel, a more sinister element of the desensitization process emerges; in his Belfast, the media is actively engaged in an effort to “foster public indifference,” inuring public response to violence by making it all seem the same (Mallot 45). Thus, Coppinger famously complains “there’s no good riot footage any more,” voicing his belief that the news coverage of the Troubles, with its new vocabulary of “acceptable levels of violence,” geared toward “cultivated boredom,” is “being ordered. Contrived even” (*RM* 156). As an unintended result, a self-perpetuating pattern emerges. The quest for headlines inspires more and more radical acts of terror; the sensational nature of Kelly’s horrifying killings begins to get some newspaper attention. Finally, Kelly is deemed “too unpredictable” by those in power and must be eliminated, so McClure starts to feed information about him to the newspaper man, Ryan, which will eventually lead to his exposure and downfall.

Linguistic excess, hyperreality, and affect

McNamee’s stylistic excesses produce a preternaturally distanced view of a Northern Ireland where violence was ubiquitous and “where the conflict was filtered through a media lens” (Magennis 34). Breu and Hatmaker note that Freud “positions affects precisely between images and feelings, representation and embodiment” in an account that is “equally poised between the material and the representational as well as

the personal and impersonal” (13). McNamee manages to convey traumatic affects present in 1970s Belfast by creating space for them between the concrete and the abstract in his prose, i.e., through material images weighted with emotional symbolism.

The malignancy festering in society is represented in extremely negative descriptions of the city’s infrastructure. Belfast becomes an exemplary noir setting where “an exhausted landscape matches a series of debilitated native figures” (Mitchell 25). As the novel opens, the reader learns that “The city itself had withdrawn into its placenames. Palestine Street. Balaklava Street. The names of captured ports, lost battles, forgotten outposts held against inner darkness. There is a sense of collapsed trade and accumulate decline” (*RM* 3). The street names carry excess meaning, alluding to war and occupation (many republicans draw a parallel between Palestine and Northern Ireland as occupied territories) and terrorism (balaclavas were the preferred mask of terrorists in the North). The city of Belfast takes on the role of a traumatized character, having “withdrawn itself.” Throughout the novel (and in *The Ultras*, too), McNamee uses the word “sense” to signal affect. He writes: “By day the city seemed ancient and ambiguous. Its power was dissipated by exposure to daylight. It looked derelict and colonial. There was a sense of curfew, produce rotting in the market place” (*RM* 6). The affect lies in the space between the material image of rotting produce and the feeling (sense) of curfew. Still later, Ryan thinks:

Sundays in the city were still and vacant with flat grey skies or watery sunshine. It was the silence of the empty quarter, the uplifted quivering palm, the silent howl. In the morning congregations gathered outside churches and meeting halls then dispersed as if their acts of worship were a preliminary to greater assembly, a preparation towards some fervent communal act of expiation (*RM* 77).

Again, affect emerges amidst material images and their emotional connotations; it resonates in the scene's "flat grey skies," "watery sunshine," "uplifted quivering palm" and "silent howl."

Mitchell argues that when reading noir, "Having come for plot, we stay for style" (5). McNamee's excessive style is at the heart of much of the negative criticism of his work. John Dunne complains that *Resurrection Man* is blighted by "verbal felicities" and "'poetic' weeds that strangle an already attenuated narrative," and that "Far too often the author's literary sensibilities intrude on his vernacular characters" (80-81). Glenn Patterson writes that the novel's images were often communicated "in an idiom the reader has to strain to credit as belonging to any of the characters" and implies that McNamee is aestheticizing violence ("Butcher's" 43-44). O'Brien, while appreciating McNamee's rich prose, complains he has gone too far: "There are too many moments, however, when fine writing becomes over-writing and a self-denying temperance seems necessary to quash a suspicion of authorial self-indulgence. The sheer sensuality of the style, can feel like a guilty pleasure for author and reader, yet another sexy take on the Troubles" (149-150). Ethical unease with McNamee's use of "achingly exquisite prose as concentrated as poetry"¹² to describe acts of horrifying violence is a recurring theme in criticism of his work. Mallot insists that "charges of exploitation and voyeurism do matter," a sentiment shared by many critics (34).

McNamee's extremely stylistic (hyperrealistic) prose employs the "suasive rhythms and diction" of noir (Mitchell 5) to create a dreamlike mood and underscore the

¹² From the *Sunday Times* blurb on the back cover of the Faber & Faber 2004 paperback edition of the novel.

idea that men like Victor Kelly and Billy McClure are entranced by their own power to torture and kill. The writing operates at both ends of Johnson's spectrum of expressibility: the overblown emotional connotations of his ornate descriptions of place give way to gaps and silences during scenes of killing. Events, laid out in an absurdly clinical fashion, take place in seedy inner-city settings where the air is thick with suppressed anxiety, an affect that is deliberately nurtured and magnified, but not experienced, by the killers. The killers are devoid of empathy; instead, they savor the precision of their sadistic methods, and the power that accrues to them from performing for an audience, "maintaining a ceremonial pace with pauses and intervals for reflection" (*RM* 28). They feel nothing for their victims.

McNamee conveys tension and communicates torture through dialogue that is replete with lacunae and redactions. In the "negative hyperbole" of understatement, the reader experiences a disorientation that opens the imagination to what is otherwise unimaginable. Thus, when McNamee describes the murder of John McGinn in the "Romper Room," he provides the voices of his tormentors, first directly addressing the victim and then each other, but avoids any description of action:

'What's your name?'

'John.'

'John fucking who?'

'John McGinn.'

'Through the magic mirror today we can see John McGinn. Hello John. We'll call you Johnnie. Do your friends call you Johnnie? We're your Friends.'

We share your sense of bewilderment. Your intense loneliness. You were in a hurry walking down the Crumlin Road. You were going to work, to a night class, to meet a woman, to a bar. We can hear her crying because you didn't turn up. We share her sadness. We will be a comfort to her.

‘Over to you Victor.’

‘Fucking butterfingers.’

‘Hey, he near broke my foot. He’s got something hard in there.’

‘It’s his fucking skull.’

‘He levitated. I swear to God he levitated over the bar. He’s a magician or something.’

‘Here’s a message for the fucking Pope.’ (*RM* 28)

Notably, the commentary takes on the character of a sportscast, with its “Over to you, Victor” and “He levitated. I swear to God he levitated over the bar. He’s a magician or something.” Meanwhile, the reader is forced to imagine what is not said and, in doing so, perceive the inconceivable: the inexpressible suffering of the victim and the horrifying satisfaction of the torturer in his own exquisite execution of evil.

The terrorism employed by Victor Kelly and Billy McClure is a slow-motion performance, calculated to deeply unsettle its audience. After Ryan meets McClure, he begins to experience “moments of panic. A horror that felt artificial as if the night had been contrived towards this end. This type of fear, he realised, would be a speciality of a man like McClure. Gothic, manufactured. There was a cinema feel to it” (*RM* 153). As noted, critics have complained that aesthetic pleasure to be obtained from the sensuous beauty of McNamee’s style can create a conflict in the reader, seeming to implicate them in the kind of voyeurism that McClure promotes. Certainly, communal voyeurism is one of the issues that McNamee is addressing in this novel. In an age of mediatization, when large numbers of the community are exposed to visual accounts of terroristic events, the viewing public becomes, in some sense, voyeuristic, seeking more and different images

and experiences of violence, looking for, as Coppinger says, “The thrill you get when you see a petrol bomb hitting a Land Rover” (*RM* 156).

Thus, hyperrealism and voyeurism become interwoven concepts in the text. Regardless of the efforts of government and media authorities to tamp down coverage of the ongoing violence, the novel’s “characters experience the conflict they live in through the images they see on the screen” (Mallot 39). McNamee’s Belfast is a society which is so steeped in media coverage that it can no longer distinguish between simulated reality and reality itself. People frequently gather, in pubs or in prison, to watch the news in sessions that take on an air of ritualistic ceremony (Mallot 41). When McClure turns on a television in the pub, men stand up and “held their glasses and joined hands and their solemn faces seemed lit from underneath. . . their grave silence an act of devotion” (*RM* 141). The characters in *Resurrection Man* interpret and sometimes confuse what they see in real life with what they have seen in some form of media.

In one particularly shocking scene, a group of loyalist men in a pub watches Victor kill the mentally challenged Flaps, which Victor justifies with a fabricated charge that Flaps betrayed the UVF. Victor literally sets the stage for this killing. A simple wooden chair “the kind of chair to be found in police stations, court buildings, and other places designed to the specifics of public retribution” is positioned on a stage behind the bar with a single light shining down on it (*RM* 164). When Victor orders Flaps to sit in the chair, the witnesses to the shooting are unable to distinguish between what they are seeing in real life and the version of the Troubles they have assimilated through the television screen. Preparing the crowd for his performance, Victor speaks “in a style that his audience was accustomed to. The preacher’s formal madness. The voice pitched and

commanding. The audience now, attuned to themes of wrath and misery.” As he puts the gun to Flaps’s head, the audience is “convinced that this would be a spectacle of redemption and that Flaps would emerge from the ordeal, purged and godly.” Even when Victor pulls the trigger and kills Flaps, “it seemed a distant, televised roadside execution coming intact from a far-off war . . . No one moved. This must be a simulation of death, a poor rehearsal” (*RM* 165-166).

Real-life events are experienced as if through a camera lens and often seem less real than media-generated scenes. When Victor and his crew go on a killing spree in the Shamrock bar, they separate the Catholics and the Protestants, and begin shooting the latter, but:

Even in confined space the firing did not sound like shots, did not fit into the perceived idea of gunfire—the roar, the muzzle flash, the profound and vital noise that hangs in the air. The aimed shot, the squeezed trigger. A whole glamorous ethic was missing from this scene with masked men pointing guns that made a flat, non-lethal sound. (*RM* 140)

After the event, Victor and his men return to the Pot Luck bar, their usual haunt, and McClure, whose only concern is that “they hadn’t left it too late for the last news,” tells Victor they “were like heroes from a film by John Wayne” (*RM* 141). When Victor eventually tells Heather that he and his unit are the “Resurrection Men,” she can’t sleep and finds the night filled with “the distorted uneasy silence of a horror film” (*RM* 175). Like Sammy and his friends in Keenan’s *For the Good Times*, Victor and his followers liken themselves to movie and media celebrities, even as the conflict around them is mediated by television, radio, and newspaper reports. Their very self-perception is shaped by the hyperreal. Victor’s early identification with the heroes of gangster films gains the approval of his mother and is at the basis of the persona he adopts. His performative acts of extreme violence are carefully calculated to enhance his reputation as a ruthless killer.

The acquisition of a nickname for his gang (the “Resurrection Men”) reported in (and perhaps invented by) the press, provides the affirmation he craves. The spectacular cruelty of his violence works to cultivate and enhance his image as a man of power. Thus, when he is arrested and put in an identification parade, he turns to the lights and gives “a dangerous smile which he had practised in front of the mirror . . . a Cagney smile, elegant and derisive” (*RM* 83). When the charges against him are dropped, Heather is “disappointed for Victor that there were not journalists, the roar and press of men with cameras, the snatched interview . . . their absence was a kind of humiliation for him” (*RM* 109).

McNamee has been accused of glamorizing violence; this is probably because of the distanced lens through which such scenes are developed. However, Victor’s identification with the anti-heroes of gangster films is more likely intended as a criticism of the way violence has been glamorized in modern culture. Noir convention includes “the question of what constitutes a person’s essence actually put into play, presenting us with figures who act in dramatically excessive ways” (Mitchell 30). In Victor Kelly, McNamee creates a hollowed-out noir character whose identity is constructed through performance, dependent on the responses of others to his projection of power and his sadistic, murderous behaviors. The reader feels no sympathy for Victor because Victor feels nothing for anyone else; the “deadly vacancy in his eyes” reflects a man devoid of empathy (*RM* 41). His connections with others are driven solely by his need for validation. He trusts his mother, and it bothers him to think how hard her life has been, but even that connection seems more performative than based on real understanding:

“sentiment was the way he made sense of his mother” (*RM* 107). In the end, Victor Kelly is the opposite of glamorous—he is the very embodiment of negative affect.

THE ULTRAS

In the course of telling the story of Victor Kelly in *Resurrection Man*, McNamee points to the ways in which the media, under pressure from the government, carefully controlled its coverage of the news in order to manage public response to the violent events in Northern Ireland. In *The Ultras*, McNamee turns his full attention to the calculated modulation of excess negative affect in Northern Ireland as a proactive counterterrorist strategy employed by a number of governmental intelligence agencies during the Troubles. The novel illustrates an excessive state response to acts of terror that itself becomes terroristic and shows how affect itself can generate trauma (Atkinson & Richardson 3). The state, by killing or injuring individuals in response to terrorist actions, wounds the cultural, social and political fabric of entire communities it purports to defend (Richardson, “Excess of Affect” 321).

Ben Anderson has written about modalities of power that intensify and multiply affect through “an excess of techniques.” In particular, he examines how the concept of morale “emerged as an object for specific techniques of power as part of changing relations between state and the population” at the start of World War II (163).

McNamee’s novel portrays the tangled web of state intelligence agencies that used extreme measures to track and attempt to synchronize excesses of affect in an effort to assert their power and demoralize nationalist insurgents in Northern Ireland. The purpose of the state’s strategy was to circulate, distribute, and exacerbate the affects of

uncertainty and fear created by the ongoing violence; the result was to elevate those affects to communal anxiety and paranoia.

The Ultras, which Eammon Hughes calls “paranoid fiction” (139), is a novel “concerned with a period and a set of events that one might legitimately claim to be entirely ‘dark’—not just about what the ‘official’ record has nothing to report, but rather where the ‘official’ record is suspect and it is the very suspect nature of that record that is one of the subjects being explored” (D. Smith 267). A multitude of government intelligence organizations operated in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, among which were the Special Branch of the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the MI6 (Military Intelligence Section 6) division of the British Secret Intelligence Services (SIS), the British Intelligence Special Reconnaissance Forces and the Military Reconnaissance Force (MRF) and Special Air Services (SAS), which were surveillance groups attached to the British army (Dillon, *Dirty War*). Most of these agencies employed techniques outlined in the writings of Brigadier Frank Kitson, a British soldier who took command of the 39 Infantry Brigade, responsible for Belfast and headquartered at Thiepval Barracks in 1970 (Dillon, *Dirty War*; J. Hughes). Kitson authored multiple books on fighting insurgencies, including *Low-Intensity Operations* and the counter-insurgency manual, *Gangs and Counter-Gangs*. In these works, he draws on his experiences in fighting the Mau Mau rebellion in Kenya, and more broadly, on “the lessons of Britain’s colonial wars to elaborate a plan of action for coordinated political, military, legal and media operations against insurgents and subversives” (J. Hughes). Kitson’s approach includes four elements: 1) deterrence of public support for rebellion through coercion and by raising the costs of disloyalty (including death); 2) the use of covert operations based

on “turning” individual insurgents, creating “countergangs” or “pseudo-gangs,” and/or infiltrating insurgent organizations, as well as mass-screenings of the population, in order to accumulate masses of low-grade background intelligence—important sources of intelligence included informants and harsh interrogations of prisoners; 3) creating special paramilitary-like units within the army that basically functioned as state-sponsored terrorist organizations engaging in gang warfare—the Special Air Service (SAS) was one such unit; and 4) psychological operations, i.e. the manipulation of media through leaks, briefings, and spin. During his two-year posting in Northern Ireland, Kitson established a “framework of intelligence tactics of penetration of paramilitaries, abuse of prisoners and the psyops of disinformation, with ‘going in hard’ against the Provisional IRA and coercive control of the Catholic community” (J. Hughes). *The Ultras* features multiple characters, employed by intelligence agencies that operate independently and often at odds with each other, who rely on such tactics. For instance, in the novel, Robert Nairac, McNamee’s fictional version a real British soldier by the same name, claims to specialize in “low-grade intelligence” and refers to Kitson’s counterinsurgency manual as “the bloody bible.”

McNamee’s novel also alludes to a number of real-life covert operations. For example, the Four Square Laundry van that the fictional Erskine observes in the parking lot Theipval actually operated in nationalist areas in the early 1970s, had a hidden compartment in the roof for surveillance crews, and submitted the clothing it collected for forensic analysis before cleaning and returning it. Similarly, the Gemini Massage parlor operation, headed by Erskine in the novel, was a real one that recorded clients engaged in sexual activities with prostitutes in order to gather information and/or blackmail them

into spying. McNamee's Erskine does what Captain Colin Wallace testified to doing in real life: planting "stories of satanic ritual in the local press"; desecrating gravestones with obscene slogans; and, in an operation that may have inspired middle-sister's discovery of a decapitated cat in the ten minute place in Burns's *Milkman*, "A dead cat was eviscerated and thrown over the wall of a presbytery" (TU 151).¹³ Finally, the Miami Showcase Band massacre, a key plot point in McNamee's novel, was one of the most shocking events in the Troubles' thirty years of shocking events.

Robert Nairac, Real and Imagined

Like *Resurrection Man*, *The Ultras* is infused with borrowings from noir. The story is framed by the investigative efforts of the fictional Blair Agnew, a rogue ex-cop with a shady past. Agnew became entangled in the illegal undercover operations of being coordinated by Clyde Knox, an MI6 agent operating in the shadows of the police and the British military in Northern Ireland, and he was eventually arrested and convicted of accessory to murder. Now, post-prison, Agnew dedicates his life to amassing evidence that Captain Robert Nairac (McNamee retains the name of the real-life Nairac in the novel), with whom he interacted while participating in the violent, extrajudicial activities that led to his arrest, was present at the Miami Showcase Band massacre. Like the journalist Ryan in *Resurrection Man*, Agnew is "damaged goods" (TU 9). Divorced, he has a drinking problem; his troubled teenaged daughter, Lorna, suffers from an eating disorder and eventually ends her own life. He lives in a caravan in an unnamed,

¹³ Jenkins quotes extensively from Wallace's testimony, noting "Wallace described the black magic activities of his unit as one, and not the most important, of a broader black propaganda strategy aimed at smearing paramilitary organizations" (76).

neglected, nondescript location on the outskirts of town, its anonymity making it hospitable to noir's "dream logic . . . [and] its repetition of actions, fantasies and desires" (Breur 5). Agnew was a witness to the Miami Showcase Band murders and is convinced he caught a glimpse of Nairac there, but cannot prove it. The camper is filled with thousands of newspaper clippings, official government statements and secret documents, and photographs of the dead. No number of them will offer the proof he seeks.

The real Robert Nairac was an intelligence operative working for the British in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. In May, 1977, Nairac was taken from The Three Steps pub in south Armagh and murdered. Several days later, the IRA claimed responsibility for his death, but his remains have never been recovered. Nairac remains a very controversial figure as both a designer of and participant in undercover operations that were part of the "dirty war" being waged behind the scenes in Northern Ireland. The British Ministry of Defense (MoD) has not been forthcoming about the details of his role during the Troubles; it appears that he had ties with several different intelligence agencies and was involved in a number of controversial undercover operations. In January 2020, the solicitor for the widow of one of the band members claimed to have received MoD documents that suggest that Nairac *was* involved in the infamous July 31, 1975 murders of members of the Miami Showcase Band, confirming collusion between government forces and outlawed loyalist paramilitary groups in the killings of a group of young musical performers who had traveled to Belfast from the Irish republic (Young). However, the MoD subsequently denied Nairac's involvement in the incident (Bradfield). Nor has the IRA been forthright in the details of his disappearance and death; the failure to produce his body was atypical of IRA executions of British personnel and has left

lingering doubts about what actually happened to Nairac. Twenty-four-year-old Liam Patrick Townson was arrested and later convicted of Nairac's murder based on a confession that he subsequently denied making (Dillon, *Dirty War* 158). Despite repeated efforts to put the matter to rest, questions about Nairac's role and his death linger to this day.

In *The Dirty War*, Dillon wrote about various aspects, players and events of undercover infiltration, disinformation, and other psychological operations employed by the state during the Troubles, and many of the details of McNamee's plot align with Dillon's account. In *The Ultras*, McNamee retains Nairac's name and history. In his review of David Peace's novel, *GB84*, also published in 2004, McNamee wrote "[T]here are the cases where it becomes something akin to an artistic imperative to drag people into the light. People whose lives are masterpieces of obfuscation and evasion, of whispered conspiracies and cold-hearted myth-making. People like Robert Nairac" ("Handheld"). But McNamee is not offering the kind of purportedly nonfiction version of history that Dillon has written;¹⁴ instead, he purposefully undermines it by blurring the line between fact and imagination. Daniel Smith has noted that McNamee deliberately alters small, unimportant details (such as the model of Triumph that Nairac drives) and other significant details (such as which faction of the IRA he pretended to be part of) alike, thereby obviating any claim that his work should be considered "a historical corrective" (269). Like Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, with its gothic motifs, McNamee's

¹⁴ Jacquilyn Weeks offers a pointed critique of Dillon's claims to be offering an "objective" nonfiction version of history, which includes his stated determination from the beginning of his project to hold both sides equally to blame for the Troubles (which is a form of bias in itself), his detective story narrative structure, subtle shifts to judgmental language in describing evidence, and claims to know what was going on in the mind of a person he'd never met (333-34).

work is self-consciously interested in a kind of knowledge that is not accessible solely through facts. Through a hyperrealistic fictional account of events that incorporates the excessive negative affects of noir, McNamee suggests a different version of truth than historical “facts” alone can provide, i.e. one that lies in what he terms “the whispering around the edges, Don DeLillo's sinister buzz of implication” (McNamee, “Hand-held”).

Like many post-agreement novels, *The Ultras* features “multiple subject configurations . . . reflected in . . . characters that duplicate one another and narrative techniques that defy chronological movement and closure” (Heidemann 5). The narrative’s noir sensibility, in which “discourse seems driven by a veritable resistance to story, contributing to the larger pattern of defied meaning that underlies the frequent distractions that interrupt genre narratives” (Mitchell 34), features frequent shifts in time and viewpoint. As McNamee’s Blair Agnew gathers bits and pieces of the story of Nairac, the reader is taken into scenes from the past, sometimes from Agnew’s point of view, but alternately from the perspectives of David Erskine, Clyde Knox, and Robert Nairac himself. There are further *contrapuntos* in the voice of Agnew’s daughter, Lorna, who is fascinated by stories of Nairac.

McNamee’s David Erskine bears resemblances to and may be a composite of two important real-life figures who went public to try to expose some of the more outrageous activities of the time period: Fred Holyroyd, and Colin Wallace. Holyroyd was a member of the British intelligence community in Northern Ireland whose whistle-blowing was discredited by the fact that he was accused of domestic violence, removed from service, and spent time in a mental institution (according to him, under duress and precisely in order to undermine any testimony he might give). Wallace was a captain in the Ulster

Defense Regiment (UDR) who famously exposed the Kincora Boys Hostel sexual scandal and also refused to participate in an illegal black ops campaign aimed at British politicians. He resigned from service under pressure, was later wrongly convicted of manslaughter in the killing of a colleague's husband, and served six years in prison before the conviction was overturned. Although for many years the MoD consistently and systematically denied Wallace's claims about the black propaganda¹⁵ and disinformation campaigns he had run in the 1970s, the British government issued a parliamentary statement in the 1990s that admitted that much of what Wallace had said was true, and in fact Wallace was awarded compensation in the wake of an inquiry into the matter (Jenkins 73-74). In the novel, Erskine, like Holyroyd, is accused of domestic violence, institutionalized in a mental hospital, and like Wallace, is convicted of a murder that he denies having committed.

The novel's shadowy Clyde Knox seems to embody Kitson's philosophy, if not his persona. James Hughes writes that "Kitson proposed a 'chain reaction system' of intelligence-gathering whereby the accumulation of masses of low-grade 'background intelligence' (at this time kept in books and index cards but later computerised) would generate 'contact information', which would then expose the enemy for elimination" ("Kitson"). McNamee's Knox muses, "You didn't ask around. You never went for the direct route. Information that came to you obliquely was more valuable. It picked up nuances on the way. You found yourself acquiring peripheral wisdoms" (*TU* 36). McNamee follows this prescription in structuring the fragmented narrative of *The Ultras*—as the chapters move back and forth in time and between various viewpoints, the

¹⁵ Propaganda that gives the impression it was created by those it is meant to discredit.

reader, too, must piece together different story threads, arriving at what is at best an incomplete picture.

Paul Shanks has written about the use of “hypothesis and uncertainty as a narrative technique” in Beckett and Kelman (258). This phrase, although applied differently here, is an apt one to describe McNamee’s approach in *The Ultras*. Narrative authority is excessively undermined. As noted, McNamee anchors the novel in what are understood as historical facts, but alters other details (large and small) from the historical record, leaving the reader unsure where he has drawn the line between fact or fiction. Uncertainty is further exacerbated by the readers’ knowledge that the characters in *The Ultras* are frequently lying, but not necessarily knowing when. Dissembling and withholding of information are built into virtually all character interactions. The layering of perspectives and vignettes further suggests the absence of any ultimately true version of what happened. The reader thereby experiences a sense of the uneasy affects that were deliberately cultivated through psychological operations. Knox encourages the idea of multiple, competing intelligence agencies operating in the same small space, “laying false trails for each other.” He is convinced that:

[C]onfusion was important. A sense of unstable government was vital to good intelligence work. You wanted there to be shifting patterns, shadowy allegiances, overtones of corruption and sexual scandal. There were unexplained incidents of violence, widely witnessed, which were later denied on all main media. As a consequence people could no longer rely on their own perceptions ... forced to acknowledge tonal variation in the matter of their lives, attend to psychic currents, place meaning on certain patterns of the weather. (*TU* 36)

In *The Ultras*, disinformation is (as it was in real life) the stock-in-trade of state intelligence agencies operating in the north of Ireland. For the reader, as for the public living through the period and the historians who have since tried to answer questions about who did what, “the murk thins, thickens, thins again, but never clears”

(McCrystal). Ironically, the characters who are involved in perpetrating these false operations, especially Agnew and Erskine, are themselves ultimately traumatized by being unable to definitively know the “whole truth” of what happened.

Hyper-masculinity

McNamee’s Nairac, like Victor Kelly and like David Keenan’s Sammy in *For the Good Times*, embodies the hyper-masculine as defined by his culture. Nairac’s masculinity rests on so many tropes of British manhood that it rises to the level of parody: he is the ultimate British public school boy and brave military hero. As a young boy, he builds models of warplanes’ tanks, and military vehicles; he owns a German helmet with a swastika on it; he reads war comic books. His ophthalmologist father indoctrinates him at age eleven in the orderly language of the scientific and the rational by taking him to a butcher’s shop where they dissect the eye of a cow. There is no room for flinching as they engage in this procedure of clinically breaking down and identifying the elements of the blue eye, which Nairac sees as a “thing without mercy” (*TU* 7). As his father imparts the latinate vocabulary, its classical roots emphasizing the value of long tradition, Nairac learns “lachrimae meaning tears,” the phrase he will recall in the last moments of his life (*TU* 7-8). That same year he is sent to board at a Catholic public school for boys, where there is “a sense of exile, of male solitude despite the proximity” (*TU* 56). This is where his father intends him to learn to be self-sufficient, and where, when set upon by older boys shortly after he arrives, he silently absorbs their kicks and blows, adhering to his father’s dictum that “you did not show fear” (*TU* 57). Over time, he becomes skilled at an absurd number of pursuits: sailing, archery, fencing, rugby, rowing and fishing. He competes in motocross. “He went on climbing expeditions to the

Lake District. He knew how to take a bird's egg from a nest and keep it warm under his shirt" (*TU* 58). Nairac takes things to the extreme, so that wholesome pursuits begin to resonate with obsession and menace. At school, in the boys boxing club, he becomes the junior champion; he talks the other boys into fighting without wearing their protective headgear:

You would be sparring with Robert, trading punches, and you would find your face laid bare to the bone, the nose broken with the first punch, and then he'd hit you again as you stood with the gloves by your sides, feeling the cartilage being driven back into the nasal cavity. You had a sense of bone splinters being driven into the brain. You would look up to see Robert watching you from behind his gloves, his face blood-flecked, the eyes holding you, something feral in them, steady and unblinking and remorseless, watching you from a covert. (*TU* 58)

The extreme masculinity becomes dangerous, even toxic. When Nairac joins the local boxing gym, the owner describes him as a "pain merchant" who is only interested in "[h]ow much fucking pain you can hand out, how much pain you can take" (*TU* 59). Nairac "cultivate[s] a murderous narcissism" (*TU* 60.) He takes up shooting, killing foxes for local farmers and hunting hares. He takes up falconry, admiring the birds of prey. He joins the school Cadet Corps and travels to a military base near the border between East and West Germany. There, in a moment that foreshadows his time in Northern Ireland, he is seated in a tank looking at the rows of nearby chalets. What he sees "was framed by the driver's slit [and] [a] note of threat was introduced. The suburban feel of the place flooded with wary apprehension" (*TU* 81). On the same trip, in another vignette that both features masculine virtues and is laden with symbolism, he learns to set snares to trap animals, listening to descriptions of various types of traps delivered by Fullbright, a stocky Lancashire man who speaks in "wording that was rich, textured, prone to hyperbole" (*TU* 100).

Nairac's continuous performative hyper-masculinity while stationed in Northern Ireland begins to feel like a case of arrested development. McNamee, like Dillon, implies that the schoolboy cockiness is what leads to his ultimate downfall. His macho behaviors at the Northern Ireland military base at Theipval—drinking games, arm wrestling, and a brutal, drunken boxing match with his colleague Tony Ball—are both immature and dangerous. Erskine muses that Nairac and Ball see these juvenile displays of manhood “as a necessary adjunct to their profession” as military men (*TU* 120). At Castledillon near the border in South Armagh, Nairac claims to be working for 4 Field Survey Troop, a unit within British Army Intelligence Corps, which consisted of commandos trained in clandestine operations that involved surveillance, tracking down, arresting or killing members of the IRA. Nairac's development as a hunter has prepared him for this role, but he seems driven most of all by his desire to play to an audience. When he and Tony Ball stay in in the old mansion at Castledillon, with its “big-house decay,” it snows for two weeks, and Nairac insists, in a risible display of masculinity, that

[T]hey should be partisans. Like Tito's men with sheepskins around their shoulders, ammunition belts. They dragged logs from the woods and dumped them on the Persian rugs. They lounged about on antique French furniture and drank vintage wine from the cellar. They developed habits belonging to rude peasants. Tony Ball stood at the French doors and urinated into the garden. They went unshaven for days. They made lewd comments concerning the portraits of women in the drawing room. They spoke to each other in gruff, heavily accented English. (*TU* 165)

The play-acting that is at the core of Nairac's concept of manhood leads to self-delusion. He and Ball repeatedly drive through a working class Catholic housing estate “hoping to draw fire from PIRA elements,” Nairac insisting he can relate to the disaffected youths that they stop to talk with because he had attended a boxing gym in England (*TU* 164). He practices accents from various regions of Ireland, supremely

confident that he can pass as a native of several different parts of the country as needed.

He stalks people along the border, studying their movements in hopes that they might feel some “uneasy stirring at the level of the cerebrum, a level of apprehension” (TU 166).

Yet, eventually Nairac’s psyche shows signs of breaking apart, much like Sammy’s in Keenan’s *For the Good Times*. At Bessbrook Mills, another military base,

When he looked at himself in the mirror he thought he was starting to resemble one of the photo-fit pictures . . . There was something about his face that seemed badly put together . . . he felt an affinity with these men, with their composite selves. He told people he was Danny McErlean from Ardoyne. He told them he was a PIRA operative with street knowledge of small towns. (TU 235)

Ultimately, it is overconfidence in his constructed image that spells his doom.

Neither his impersonation of a Belfast accent nor his adopted PIRA identity fool the local patrons of the Three Steps Inn. Nairac mistakenly feels “that people instinctively liked him. That they saw him as goodhearted and open to the unconstrained evocation of masculine virtue. That they were drawn to his public school languor” (TU 4). Instead, he is taken from the pub parking lot and never seen again.

Language and Excess

In *The Ultras*, as in *Resurrection Man*, McNamee is very much concerned with the forces responsible for the creation of hyperreality, the excesses of morally compromised undercover operations, government corruption, and resulting traumatic affects. The intelligence agencies shown in the novel actively engage in creating mediatized versions of reality to deliberately alter public perceptions and influence individual and community affects and actions. The novel’s title, *The Ultras*, is itself a hyperbolic term that refers to the actions of those involved in psychological operations. It signifies the clandestine group of men with whom the fictional Nairac keeps company,

those Agnew calls the “heretic plotters, the outcasts coming in from the shadowlands . . . The forsworn brethren, the Ultras. Ultra meaning beyond. Ultra meaning extreme. . . They created secrets and forced everyone else to live in them” (*TU* 216).

Using ornate style and tortured structure to recreate the web of obfuscations surrounding these activities, McNamee self-consciously renders a hyperrealistic version of history, exaggerated in order to create a “more real” account of what happened. This novel, like *Resurrection Man*, features recurrent extreme juxtapositions of “objective” language with poetic prose. Precise descriptions, and military and intelligence jargon in *The Ultras* replace the clinical forensic descriptions in *Resurrection Man* and are similarly interwoven with philosophical poetic musings that add to the atmosphere of menace and despair. Agnew reflects on the area where Nairac was last seen:

You had a sense of a shadowy apparatus being brought into play, opening the whole episode to levels of meaning, giving structure to the dread that people felt, the shifting unease. The night along the border full of tec whisper, microwaves in the air around the hilltop listening posts, the antennae, the unexplained structures. (*TU* 13)

The denotative list of high tech equipment (“microwaves,” “hilltop listening posts,” “antennae”) offers a sharp contrast with the highly connotative language of affect: “shadowy,” “dread,” “unease”). Similarly, Agnew thinks back on a meeting he himself had with Nairac in Castledillon, where Nairac was based in the weeks before his disappearance:

The driveway was partly blocked by rhododendrons that had grown across it, the flowers overblown and pink and looking artificial, a sickly futurist hue to them . . . There were two Saracens parked at the rear, their engine bays open. There were piles of torn khaki webbing, a broken gun carriage, several dented helmets. Rain from a broken gutter spilled onto burst sandbags. There was a sense of armies in retreat, roads covered in discarded militaria. (*TU* 170)

Agnew's recollection of the scene combines a policeman's careful observation of physical details interspersed with affective reactions ("sickly futuristic hue" "a sense of armies in retreat"). *The Ultras* is as much about ambience and affect created by state terror as it is about the specific historical covert operations that it reimagines.

McNamee's frequent use of phrases such as "a sense of," "a feeling of" and "an aura of" highlight the atmosphere of defeat and moral decay in a society so immersed in deception that even those perpetuating the disinformation can no longer distinguish the truth from the lies.

However, in *The Ultras* McNamee also introduces another voice in a very different register. The simple language of Lorna, the adolescent daughter of Agnew, is natural and unself-conscious, with run on sentences and an intimate conversational tone; it sharply contrasts with the language of artifice that characterizes every other voice in the novel. Roisín Ingle notes that Lorna, "provides heart and humanity in a world that is often both heartless and inhumane" ("Body"). It is possible to read Lorna and her relationship with her parents as representative of the Northern Irish community traumatized by ongoing strife. The family is broken, "unable to talk to each other, but are still fascinated with each other to the extent of searching for hidden answers" (D. Smith 274). Thus Angela searches for Lorna's diary and exhorts Agnew to do the same, hoping to prevent her from self-harm, while Lorna scours newspaper clippings about her father's past and shares her father's obsession with Nairac. The futility of this information gathering, this archiving of detail, is echoed not only in Agnew's failed efforts to pin down Nairac's story, but also in Nairac's own frustrated attempts to map the border. Ultimately, no one is saved by the accumulation of data; truth remains elusive.

Caught in the war between her parents, Lorna, like Amelia and her friends in Burns's *No Bones*, develops an eating disorder, a traumatic affect expressed materially, i.e., as "constituted by the rupturing of relations between the body and the world" (Richardson, "Traumatic Affect" 333). One night on the way to the caravan, she describes to Agnew what it was like for her when she witnessed her parents fighting, how she would sit at the top of the stairs and pray that they would stop and that they would not get divorced. Then she adds about her current state, "I'm not saying it's your fault I'm not saying that I'm not so shallow that I blame what's going on now on past trauma the counsellor said that I know it's time for me to look forward and be resolute" (*TU* 228). Lorna's dismissal of her own trauma and sense that she needs to forget that and just move forward eerily echoes the "fresh start" imperative of the Good Friday Agreement. Such an approach proves fatal for Lorna, and McNamee's reexamination of traumatic episodes from the Troubles reflects post-agreement fiction's rejection of forgetting as a curative for a post-Troubles Northern Ireland.

Like middle-sister in Burns's *Milkman*, Lorna wishes to stay under the radar; her anorexia is a way of disappearing. Her desire to hide makes her feel that she can understand Nairac in a way her father cannot. *The Ultras* ends with an entry from Lorna's diary, which Agnew manages to find only after it is too late. It is Lorna who, through her diary and her suicide, provides insight into the destructive nature of the secrecy and covert operations of the state during the Troubles:

I can't help thinking about Robert I look at his photograph and I look into his eyes. I can't see anything there. Maybe that is the meaning of the word ultra. That you are ultra secret and do not give anything away no matter what. That they look and look and look and cannot find you. When I was small I hid in the dark and they called but I did not come out. Each to his own Robert had to learn his own secrets I had to learn mine but I think his secrets were about killing people lots of

people and mine are just sad secrets a bit pathetic really that you learn to stop them getting near to you to stop them feeding you when you don't want. That to wear big clothes to hide you. That to drink water then more water to fill you and clean you clean as a whistle on the inside. To hang your hair over your face to hide you. That to hide you that to hide you. (TU 255-56)

The extreme secrecy and silences that permeate the works of Deane, Burns, and Keenan under study in this thesis are very much present in *The Ultras*. Everyone in this novel is hiding, and the intersections between the public and the private, the tensions between truth and silence, are once again forefronted. The covert agents—Nairac, Erskine—hide themselves and hide the truth (and perhaps, hide the truth from themselves). In the private sphere, members of Agnew's family also seek refuge in excessive, secretive activities—Lorna in her eating disorder, her mother in alcohol, Agnew in his futile pursuit of the truth about Nairac. The results—murder, suicide, mental breakdowns, alcoholism—are the familiar double-sided causes and results of individual and communal trauma and traumatic affect.

SUMMARY

Both *Resurrection Man* and *The Ultras* deal with extreme historical figures about whom many questions remain. The novels raise further questions, not only about the individuals and their actions, but about the extent of government collusion in abetting and/or suppressing information about those actions. Like other fiction written from 1994 onwards, McNamee's work features "a backwards look . . . and a sense that the present political situation rests precariously on a foundation of lies, guilty secrets and amnesiac evasions" (E. Hughes 139).

McNamee's employment of the noir sensibility, with its cinematic overtones, has led to accusations of exploitation and glamorization of violence. Yet Breu argues that

precisely because the management of affect is linked to specific historiographical frameworks, the negativity of noir works especially well when dealing with sites of social and interpersonal antagonism (10). McNamee uses noir to portray not only the historical forces of sectarianism, violence, and subterfuge that drive Victor Kelly's cold rage, but the cynically calculated ways in which the narratives around them are crafted by those in power and distributed by those in the media. A noir sensibility also informs *The Ultras*, where the range of morally corrupt psychological operations is mind-boggling, and the antagonisms are multi-directional, aimed not just toward insurgents but existing between the perpetrating agencies themselves.

Still, there is no doubt that McNamee's novels raise difficult questions about the relationship between ethics and aesthetics, especially because they present such highly stylized fictionalized versions of identifiable real-life victims of torture. Richard Haslam, a Belfast native himself, contends that by extending the voyeurism of the characters to the third-person narrator, and by referring to the traces of bloody violence in the city as part of its attraction as a "dark and thrilling beauty," the narrator—whom Haslam refers to as "the implied author"—*Resurrection Man* "does further violence to the Butchers' real-life victims" (208).

In an essay entitled "Walking Girl," McNamee wrestles with this ethical dilemma, ultimately taking refuge in the imperative of the art:

I've been at this for a long time, this suborning of people into fiction. I've written five novels based on real events and peopled them with the actual players, fit them in with an architecture which is part real and part fictional. I explain it by saying that these stories demanded to be told that way. I still believe that. But there is something else. I seem to need a certain amount of edge in the telling, a scent of blood if you like, something that could blow up in my face. I've started to wonder how real the risk is. The blood on the floor never belongs to me. When I populate the books with those who lived the events I am writing about, it is their

heart at risk, not mine . . . I woke up one night thinking about sin. I went to the dictionary and looked up the word. *A moral offence or shortcoming*. That seemed to fit what I was doing better than anything else. To intrude on the stuff of other's lives is a personal moral offence, and I'll answer for it in those terms. We can slip into the assumption that the writer has a hand in the moral settings of society. That you lead so that others might follow. That isn't the way it works. I don't write for, to or at anyone. I hum the tune because it is there to be hummed. That's the height of it . . . The writing is good. The story works. It never occurred to me then or now to ask whether the piece of art was worth it in terms of the pain it might cause to others. It wasn't that I was unaware of what I had done, but I was borne along by the imperatives of the work. Thomas McGuane talks about an elaboration of soul, and that is as good a description of writing as I can find. Whether the act of writing, the sin of it, costs you all or part of that soul seems to be beside the point. ("Walking Girl" 257-260).

McNamee's willingness to call his work a moral offense while still claiming a kind of "art-for-art's-sake" justification does not obviate the need for further reflection on the imperatives of art and the ethical boundaries of testimony by the witness of trauma. Richardson points out in his discussion of the ethics of writing fictional accounts of torture and trauma, "Not every witness to terrible events is an eyewitness ("Gestures" 104). Lenny Murphy (Kelly in McNamee's fictional account) and Robert Nairac were part of McNamee's lived history; he grew up as a member of the Northern Irish community that was deeply affected by media coverage of their activities and their deaths. Nonetheless, "[t]o approach torture in language or image is always to engage in an act with ethical implications" because torture itself is premised on either a lack of ethics or the twisting of ethics to justify "necessities" of threat, security, or power" (Richardson, "Gestures" 116). Richardson argues that writing about the trauma of torture can be an ethical act, as long as one is writing *against* the torture. Perhaps the strongest defense for McNamee's detailed imagined portrayals of the suffering perpetrated by and against characters based on real people is one he hasn't made—it lies in bearing witness. Richardson turns to James Dawes, the author of *Evil Men*, who argues that:

The encounter with the literary other is ethical knowledge because it helps us see ourselves as the other, to see how we, too, come into being through mutual vulnerability and constraint, to feel rather than simply know the debts we owe to one another. It is ethical knowledge because of what it starts, because it surprises and often confounds us, unsettles the certainties that we cling to and that limit us, opens us to difference and, ultimately, to the demands of what remains beyond us. (43)

In real life and in fiction, the acts of Lenny Murphy/Victor Kelly were acts of terror. Terrorism is, by nature, spectacular, i.e., spectacle that is designed to overwhelm through its violence. Nairac represented another form of terror, one perpetuated by the state when the government response seeks to control the civilian population via psychological operations causing paranoia and compromising the truth. While the moral ambiguity remains, McNamee's stylistic approach to depicting real incidents of extreme violence is a form of excess that in its self-consciousness exceeds even the already excessive nature of a terrorist act and forces us into an epistemological space that opens us up to new, undeniably horrifying truths about the possibilities of evil.

CHAPTER FIVE: *COUNTRY* BY MICHAEL HUGHES

*Heroes. Victims. Gods and human beings,
All throwing shapes, every one of them
Convinced he's in the right, all of them glad
To repeat themselves and their every last mistake,
No matter what. . .*

—Seamus Heaney, *The Cure at Troy*

Country, published in 2019, is Michael Hughes's reimagination of Homer's *Iliad* as a story of the Troubles set in County Armagh in 1996—or, more accurately, a story of the Troubles reimagined as the *Iliad* in which, comparing the exploits of a small group of rural Irishmen to the acts of the epic heroes of ancient Greece, Hughes magnifies a local tale to a contemplation of the universality of war. The novel is set in the area of rural Northern Ireland where Hughes grew up, just over the border from the Irish Republic. South Armagh was popularly referred to as “bandit country” because it was a stronghold of the Irish Republican Army (IRA)¹ and a place where the British had little hope of control despite a massive security presence there. The porous nature of the border allowed IRA paramilitaries operating in the north to slip away into the Republic where the British and Northern Irish security forces had no jurisdiction. Over the course of the Troubles, the heavy British army presence made South Armagh “one of the most fortified and observed areas of Western Europe” (“The Surreal Reality”); it was considered, relative to the size of its population, the most dangerous county in Northern Ireland throughout the Troubles (Nash 58). Hughes has said he turned to the *Iliad* to find a “way

¹Technically, the Provisional Irish Republican Army, referred to in the novel interchangeably as the IRA, the PIRA, or the Provos. The Provisional IRA formed by splitting from the existing “Official” IRA in 1969 over a disagreement in how to respond to the violence that had broken out in the north. When the Official IRA declared a ceasefire in 1972, the Provos continued to embrace an aggressive military stance and were thereafter referred to simply as the IRA.

into” writing about war as he tried to come to terms with the violence and death that were the backdrop of his childhood in a highly militarized area of Northern Ireland (“Co. Armagh author”). *Country* is a novel about men who fought in the Troubles, the stories that motivated them, the powers that manipulated them, the atrocities they committed, and the suffering they endured in the name of a cause.

A story of war is necessarily a story of excess, as war itself is an extreme situation in which human beings engage in the ultimate form of violence: killing large numbers of each other. *Country* incorporates multiple forms of excess, topically, thematically, and stylistically. Hughes’s story involves a steady stream of violent action propelled by complicated motivations and men who are willing to martyr themselves for their cause. They are men who, like tragic Greek heroes, pursue glory and honor only to end in ruin; constantly under duress, they frequently behave in extremely brutal and inhumane ways.

Stylistic excess is built into the structure of the novel through Hughes’s grandiose reconceptualization of a small band of farmers-turned-warriors as comparable to the great amassed armies of the Achaean kings at Troy. The literary transposition lends itself to Hughes’s thematic explorations of the relationships between war, manhood, and mythologies as manifested in late twentieth century Northern Ireland. The novel’s intertextuality engenders a variety of linguistic excesses, but those are outstripped by its entertaining and highly energetic colloquial language which is overloaded with wordplay and jokes that convey a multiplicity of meanings. Moreover, *Country* is rife with paradoxes involving contradictory extremes: loyalty and betrayal, sacrifice and selfishness, courage and terror, idealism and cynicism, glory and degradation, nobility of spirit and downright pettiness.

In 1996, a ceasefire had been in effect in Northern Ireland for two years, and the peace talks had started, but the Good Friday Agreement (GFA) was still two years in the future. As leaders on both sides worked to find a compromise, there was skepticism and bitterness within the ranks of the IRA over abandoning the armed struggle. After a quarter of a century of war, to give up without achieving a united Ireland was a bitter pill to swallow for some republicans. At a rally outside Belfast City Hall in 1995, when a crowd member called out “Bring the IRA back,” Gerry Adams famously (or infamously) felt compelled to reassure his audience, “They haven’t gone away, you know.”² Fionna McCann (among others) has pointed out that while many felt Adams’s remark was provocative, it was hardly realistic to expect that Northern Ireland would “transform overnight into a haven of peace” or for “the actors of that conflict ... to just disappear” (147). In *The Long Game*, investigative journalist Aoife Moore describes the difficulty Sinn Féin faced in trying to establish itself as a legitimate political party with a seat at the negotiating table, rather than simply acting as the political mouthpiece of the IRA, because of the divided feelings within the ranks over whether to abandon paramilitary action. Similarly, there were many paramilitaries on the unionist side, to say nothing of British soldiers, who felt that any compromise with those rebelling against the power of the state was not only unacceptable but immoral, and that the IRA must be crushed to ensure the security of the union with Great Britain.

Hughes sets the action during this tenuous period leading up to the GFA; his main characters are part of a small unit of hardline IRA men who are not ready to give up “the

² This exchange has been reported repeatedly in newspaper articles about ongoing issues in Northern Ireland ever since. A recording of the moment can be viewed on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AY3ddrc6WjE> (retrieval date 28 April 2021).

long war.” These skilled paramilitary operatives have been called together by the Officer Commanding (OC) of the battalion for a special mission. The mission, as it turns out, is to blow up a British fort. Although the OC claims that the operation has been sanctioned as a way to break the ceasefire, whether this is true is unclear. He’s certainly planned it, at least in part, in retaliation for the betrayal of his younger brother by his wife, who has been revealed as a “tout” (informer) after absconding to England with her British handler. Honor is at stake; and just as Homer begins the *Iliad* with infighting among the leader and best warrior of the Achaeans, Hughes opens the novel with bitter dissension between the OC and his best assassin, the Border Sniper.

Hughes ties the novel firmly to 1990s South Armagh with references to historical events and cultural touchpoints, even while he commits in full to his strategy of keeping his text tightly bound to Homer’s poem—as McNamee says in his review of the novel, there “is to be no shrinking” in this adaptation (“*Country* by Hughes”). Some reviewers have complained that this “too faithful retelling” stifles character development (“*Country*”). Various critics have similarly faulted the *Iliad* for lack of character development; Hughes follows in the footprints of Homer, whom classical scholar Bernard Knox contends “gives us only what is necessary to his purpose” (47). The purpose, for both Hughes and Homer, is larger than the story of their tragically flawed heroes as individuals; instead, the narratives challenge the reader to consider what the stories of those men, occupying the role of the warrior, reveal about war itself.

THE *ILIAD* AS SUBTEXT

Homer’s epic serves as a fitting subtext for the story in which Hughes reveals the hollow promises and destructive results of several intersecting mythologies that underlay

the Troubles: mythologies of Irish republican nationalism, of British imperialism, of masculinity, of heroism, and of war itself. In choosing to adapt the *Iliad* to his own purposes, Hughes is part of a long tradition of Irish writers using ancient Greek works as a vehicle to discuss contemporary Irish history (Kiberd). During the early decades of the twentieth century, as Ireland established its identity as an independent nation, Yeats, Synge, and Russell (AE) all turned to the Greek texts in their efforts “not only in advancing a cultural nationalist agenda but also in providing pointed commentary on Irish sociopolitical problems and on evolving definitions of national identity” (Hennessey 12). The late twentieth-century Troubles in Northern Ireland have also inspired a “multiplication of rewritings” of classical literature (Impens 5). Hughes, along with his fellow Irish writer, Colm Tóibín, have joined a growing number of contemporary international novelists engaging with the mythology of Greek epics.³ Justine McConnell sees this as a post-Cold War phenomenon related to “the flexibility of epic, the uncertainty over the authorship of the Homeric epics, and the unfixed nature of oral traditions,” qualities that seem to lend themselves to crossing generic and cultural boundaries (5-6). By drawing on the *Iliad*, the oldest of shared Western war stories, Hughes positions his novel as both a story specifically about Ireland and a story about any place undergoing war.

Hughes’s close adherence to Homer’s account of the Trojan war features many one-to-one character counterparts and a correspondence of key scenes. Not every conflation works perfectly, but the *Iliad*’s main characters — Achilles, Apollo, Helen, Thetis, Menelaus, Agamemnon, Paris, Hector, Andromache, Priam, Nestor, Odysseus,

³ Tóibín’s 2017 novel, *House of Names*, tells the story of Clytemnestra, the wife of Agamemnon.

Diomedes, both Ajaxes, and Patroclus— are all recognizable (helped along by suggestive names) in the 1990s south Armagh of *Country*.

The first section of *Country*, “Crisis,” aligns very closely with the first books of the *Iliad* in which Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces, and Achilles fall out over the fate of Agamemnon’s *nikatērion*, or honor-prize, Chryseis, and his subsequent demand for Achilles’s honor-prize, Briseis. In *Country*, Pig, the IRA unit OC, rejects the initial requests from “Crisis” Cunningham, the Protestant farmer who is his landlord, to send Cunningham’s infatuated fourteen-year-old-daughter home in return for “bagful of cash. . . the keys to his own Merc. . . [and] the promise of a prize bull” (*CTY* 4), just as Agamemnon rejects the offer from Chryses of “a priceless ransom” for his daughter (Hom. *Id* 1.14). Cunningham’s (nick)name – being a near homophone for Homer’s character Chryses, as well as serving as the chapter title denoting the calamitous argument that opens the text—is an example of linguistic excess as a way in which Hughes adds multiple layers of meaning into the connections between the texts. Pig’s actions lead to the illness of his men after Cunningham calls in a favor with “a certain individual” who cuts off power and water to the farm, causing the men to grow sick from drinking unfiltered rain runoff (in the *Iliad*, a plague is sent by Apollo). The local parish priest, like the prophet Calchas in the *Iliad*, is able to shed some light on the situation, declaring things will not improve until the girl is returned to her father. Pig reluctantly sends her home, but only after petulantly insisting he will have Achill’s girl, Brigid, in her place.⁴

⁴ Hughes’s choice of a Catholic priest in the place of Homer’s seer is an interesting echo of Joyce’s conceptions of poet and seer in *Finnegan’s Wake*, and of poet and priest in *A Portrait of the Artist*

An examination of the opening passages of the *Iliad* and *Country* illustrates just how Hughes closely marries certain important scenes from the two texts. Here are the opening lines of the *Iliad*:⁵

Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles,
Murderous, doomed, that cost the Achaeans countless losses.
Hurling down to the House of Death so many sturdy souls.
Great fighters' souls, but made their bodies carrion,
Feasts for the dogs and birds,
And the will of Zeus was moving toward its end.
Begin, Muse, when the two first broke and clashed,
Agamemnon lord of men and brilliant Achilles. (Hom. *Id.* 1.1-8)

Hughes's novel begins:

Fury. Pure fury. The blood was up. Lost the head completely.

Achill, the man from the west. The best sniper the IRA ever seen. All called him Achill, but his name was plain Liam O'Brien. After the da, Big Liam O'Brien, who came out of Achill Island and bore the name before him. So the son was called Achill in his turn, though he was born and reared in Castlebar and he'd never set foot in the place, for the da always said it was a fearful hole.

What was the start of it? The whole wrecking match, that sent so many strong souls roaring down to hell, dogs chewing up the guts ground into the road, birds pecking at the splattered bits of their brains. The way London wanted it to go. The way it always is.

Here's what. Pig and Achill fell out. The OC and the trigger man. Bad, bad news. (CTY 1)

Due to Achille's divine heritage (he is the son of the sea nymph Thetis and the mortal Peleus), his outsized anger, like his fighting skills, borders on the superhuman; it will ultimately wreak destruction on his allies as well as his enemies. Hughes's

as a *Young Man*, i.e., of the idea that all three (seer, poet, and priest) function as the "mediator[s] between this world and the otherworld." (Tymoczko, *Ulysses* 187).

⁵ In his presentation to the Classics Society of Northern Ireland, Hughes noted that he started with the Fagles translation and used several translations over the course of developing his novel. This thesis uses the Fagles translation for citations from the *Iliad*.

counterpart, Achill, is similarly plagued by self-absorption and displays a wrath not unlike the “godlike, lonely, heroic fury” of Achilles (Knox 46). Right from the start of *Country*, then, the reader can anticipate that Achill’s fury will be disastrous for his comrades as well as his foes.

Hughes’s diction in this passage simultaneously evokes and undercuts the epic tenor of Homer’s verse. The *Iliad* begins with the Greek word μῆνιν (*mēnin*), which has been translated into English variously as rage, wrath, fury, and anger. Hughes too, begins, with a single powerful word to indicate Achill’s excessive anger, but then moves quickly to the colloquial “Lost the head completely.” Similarly, the subsequent account of the sniper’s genealogy begins with a tone elevated to that of a formal recitation by its inverted order — “All called him Achill”— followed by a simply stated truth — “his name was plain Liam O’Brien.” This shifting between the grand and the prosaic draws the reader’s attention to the contrasts that are a key dynamic of the story. Hughes repeatedly pokes holes in the shining armor of honor and glory that glosses the myths of war and its heroes, forcing the reader to look at the lived reality below the gleaming surface. Like Homer, he points out not only flaws and frailties of men at war, but the unseen forces whose agendas are often quite different than those in the thick of the battle. In the *Iliad*, the gods fight among themselves, using humans in a proxy war in which their own stakes are far less serious; after all, they are immortal, and will not die. In this modern telling, Hughes substitutes the political class for the meddling, immortal gods; for men like Achill and Pig, the traitorous “West Brit Shinner⁶ suits and ties” are politicians calling the shots without risking their lives on the battlefield (*CTY* 17).

⁶ In other words, a politician from the Sinn Féin party who was behaving as if British rather than Irish in the eyes of Pig. Tymoczko writes that the pejorative term “West Briton” became popular during the

Hughes's imagery of "dogs chewing up the guts" and "birds pecking at the splintered bit of their brains" is more graphic than Homer's "carrion / feasts for dogs and birds." Through the extreme gruesomeness of the image, Hughes forces the reader to see the truly disturbing nature of carnage, eliminating any romanticism around war. As he told an interviewer, "You hear about people getting shot, but it's all a bit clean-cut if you don't actually witness it. There's no clean, 'nice' way of killing someone, whether it's by a bomb or a bullet" ("Co. Armagh author").

Hughes uses a self-consciously heavy-handed play on words in designating his counterpart to Achilles, Achill, by linking his father, "plain Liam O'Brian," to Achill Island, the largest of the small islands off the coast of Ireland. What is more subtle, but worth noting, is the excess meaning that the name carries: Achill Island is part of the *Gaeltacht*, a region in which Irish language is still spoken as the first language. Separating Liam from the island by a generation is symbolic of most of Ireland being separated from its own language by just a handful of generations.⁷ The loss of the Irish language is widely considered part of the traumatic legacy of British colonialism, yet its causes were complex and involved complicity by Irish speakers motivated by economic incentives. Joyce points to this in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, taking his own

Irish cultural revival at the turn of the twentieth century, signifying a failure to "differentiate Irish life and culture from those of England," the goal that led to the founding of Sinn Féin, the Irish for "We Ourselves" (*Ulysses* 15-16).

⁷ One factor in the loss of Irish language was the dramatic decrease in population during the Irish famine known as the Great Hunger, which lasted from 1845-1851. During a six-year period, "over one million people died and an even greater number emigrated . . . thus cutting the population by over 25 percent" (Kinealy 2). By 1851, the census reported that only five percent of the population spoke only Irish, with eighteen percent knowing both Irish and English; this was a steep decline from the time of the 1841 census which showed more than half of the Irish population knowing and speaking Irish (William Smyth 17).

poke at nationalist mythologies when Stephen Daedalus tells Davin, “My ancestors threw off their language and took another. . . They allowed a handful of foreigners to subject them” (203). As previously mentioned in this study, in *Reading in the Dark*, Seamus Deane also shows the Irish language issue to be a complicated one. Hughes uses irony in describing Achill, one of the last remaining areas where Irish is spoken, as “a fearful hole,” simultaneously acknowledging the loss of Irish language and gently mocking the romanticized vision of Irish-speaking rural Ireland that became an enduring part of republican mythology through the Celtic Revival at the end of the nineteenth century.

Incensed and humiliated when his commander seizes his war prize, the greatest warrior withdraws his support and announces the battle is not his: Homer’s hero protests he has no quarrel with the Trojans, but is only there to defend the pride and honor of the Atrides;⁸ Hughes’s Achill laughs at the idea that the unit has been called together for a tactical operation just waiting on the nod from Belfast and instead calls it “pure personal vendetta, dirty country shite, and not a damn thing to do with uniting this land” (*CTY* 15). Achilles and Achill each swears not to partake any further in the battle to reclaim a wayward wife, boasts of his importance to victory, and vows that when the offending leader inevitably comes to beg him to return to the fight, he will not do so. The remainder of the first section of *Country* corresponds directly with scenes from the *Iliad*, as Achill turns to his old neighbor Therese for a solace and help in making the leader feel his loss more sharply. Theresa (Thetis) sets some wheels in motion with London (in lieu of Zeus). Pig sends men to take Brigid from Achill, and the stalemate between the two men is firmly established.

⁸ Atrides refers to the sons of Atreus, father of Agamemnon and Menelaus.

The plot continues to unfold in parallel with the *Iliad*. Theresa prevails on her London contact to make the IRA squad suffer for their humiliation of Achill, and things get so bad that Syd (Odysseus) leads a small delegation to Achill, carrying offers of riches from Pig, and presses him to return to the fight. Achill will not be appeased; he flatly refuses their overture, but his friend and living companion, Pat (Patroclus), is distressed by this breach of honor and loyalty. After members of the squadron are injured, Achill lets Pat take his body armor and go out in his place, masquerading as Achill in order to frighten the enemy into backing off. The British SAS man, Henry (Hector), kills Pat. Achill, initially mad with grief, settles into a cold rage, and agrees to reenter the battle. He kills Henry in revenge for Pat's death, taking Henry's body with him in order to desecrate it. It is only in the final moving scene when the father-like figure of Bernard King (Priam) comes to beg for Henry's body back, that Achill, finally, touched by their shared experience of loss and grief, overcomes his rage and finds his humanity again.

Because mythology is inherently hyperbolic, Hughes's allegiance to the epic necessarily entails amplifications and exaggerations of various kinds. Hyperbole infuses *Country* both as figure of speech and figure of thought. Layering the mythological and the modern exceeds the boundaries of the real and introduces, by implication, elements of Tymoczko's notion of the "hyperbolic fantastic" into Hughes's story. Intertextuality endows his characters with some of the larger-than-life quality of the Homeric heroes to whom they are linked, heroes who, like the Celtic heroes Tymoczko describes, "glimmer between the natural and the supernatural [and] . . . inhabit the line between the two" ("Hyperbolic" 106). The Homeric layer carries with it many more elements that the modern reader experiences as excessive in ways ranging from the monstrous to the

ridiculous: supernatural interventions, the hyperbolic treatment of women as chattel, the overblown rhetoric of honor, the furious gestures of revenge, the gruesome descriptions of violence, the unending deaths, and the (at times hilarious) absurdities that such excesses produce. Hughes leverages plot and character correspondences, along with clever word play, to double and redouble potential readings in an excess of meaning that communicates the complexity of the conflict in Northern Ireland. While it is not necessary to know the *Iliad* in order to appreciate *Country*, being familiar with the story line prepares the reader for the death and destruction to come and allows the reader to maintain a little emotional distance that helps, somewhat, in absorbing the shock of Hughes's unsparingly vivid descriptions of violence. It also adds to the leavening, but pointed, humor woven through the tragic story; the *Iliad*-savvy reader delights in spotting the correspondences in the texts and appreciates the obvious sense of fun with which Hughes creates so many of them.

IRISH MYTHOLOGY

While Homer's epic is the basis for *Country*, there is some evidence of what McConnell observes about recent novels that have adapted the epics, i.e., the "Greek myths merge and combine with folklore from other times and places" (3). In a discussion hosted by The Classical Association in Northern Ireland, Hughes noted that he did not study the Greek and Roman classics at school, but that he did grow up with Irish mythology and legends.⁹ He melds the two mythological traditions at various points in *Country* as he explores the role of myth in motivating men to fight. The power of story is

⁹ At the time of this writing, a recording of this discussion is available on YouTube. See the Works Cited entry for The Classical Association in Northern Ireland.

a central theme in the novel; in a moment that underscores the novel's self-reflexivity, the narrator points out: "The stories we tell ourselves are just as important as the facts" (*CTY* 104). Throughout, Hughes, like Keenan and McNamee, emphasizes the role of cultural narratives in promoting affective patriotism and nationalism in conjunction with ideas about identity.

One important reference to Irish mythology in the text is the comical allusion to the *an seanbhean bhocht*.¹⁰ She appears to Pig in a "funny old dream;" he recognizes her as "the owl woman you'd see in them drawing and paintings about the Celts and the druids. The woman in the long dress who was always crying at the grave" (*CTY* 195). This is Mother Ireland, the old hag who, according to legend, will transform into a beautiful young woman when the rightful king is restored and Ireland is freed from its bondage. Although he presents the appearance of "owl woman" in a humorous way, Hughes uses the absurd faith Pig puts in this "visitation" to portray an important reality: the Mother Ireland figure has served as a potent symbol for generations of Irish nationalists. She has her roots in the Sovereignty goddess of Irish mythology, and she was closely associated with Irish nationalism during the 1916 Easter Rising that led to Irish independence. The 1916 "Proclamation of the Irish Republic" opened with a clarion call that read: "In the name of God and of the dead generations from which she receives

¹⁰ In Irish, the "poor old woman;" frequently anglicized in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to the "Shan Van Vocht." Scholars distinguish between myths, legends, and folktales in various ways, often by subject matter. For instance, myths may be defined as stories dealing with the activities of the gods, legends with the feats of quasi-historical figures, and folktales as stories of everyday people that include supernatural elements. However, such distinctions are contentious, and "mythical types" frequently appear in folklore (Ellison 131). The *Iliad* contains both legendary heroes (purported to be real, but unsubstantiated) and mythological deities. The *an seanbhean bhocht* is a figure of Irish folktales, rather than mythology, but as will be noted, her origins are in the ancient myths featuring the Celtic gods and goddesses. For a further explanation of the history of this figure, see the discussion of Bronagh McDonagh in Anna Burns's *No Bones* in chapter two of this dissertation.

her old tradition of nationhood, Ireland, through us, summons her children to her flag and strikes for freedom.” Thus, it was not just the rebel leaders, but Mother Ireland herself who was calling for the Irish people to rise up in the tradition of those who (vainly) sacrificed their lives in the past for Irish freedom (Kearney 127).

After his dream, Pig wakes up “feeling a thousand per cent,” ready to take on the British army (CTY 195). Hughes pokes fun at Pig’s earnest beliefs in the supernatural forces at play and in his membership in sort of a global fraternity of “freedom fighters” as he gathers his lucky gear, gifted from insurgents around the world: a necklace from some ANC¹¹ visitors, a scapular from some Basques, and his lucky skull ring from a “header”¹² from FARC.¹³ Pig is energized by his dream “and on that day he knew, he knew with no shadow of a doubt, they would win. When that fight was done, they would be free at last” (CTY 197). Pig is, of course, wrong.

But Pig dreams of being added to a list of Irish revolutionaries that spans two centuries: “Robert Emmet. Wolfe Tone. Charles Stewart Parnell. Padraig Pearse. Michael Collins. Dan Breen. Bobby Sands” (CTY 197). Pig also acknowledges to himself a core truth about military culture: that fighting for a cause is only part of what motivates warriors, and “anybody [who] says they didn’t fight as well for their glory, to be remembered as heroes, had never lifted a weapon in anger” (CTY 197). In revealing the

¹¹ African National Conference – the liberation movement that opposed apartheid in South Africa and became the governing party when Nelson Mandela was elected in 1994.

¹² Slang for a crazy person or “headcase.”

¹³ *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, or Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army – a paramilitary group that operated in Colombia from the middle of the twentieth century until 2016, when it declared a ceasefire. It disarmed itself the next year and redefined itself as a political party.

motivations of his characters, Hughes reflects the historical reality that the late twentieth century Provisional IRA felt a “profound identification with the heroes of Easter Week” and that the militant nationalists of 1916— as well as their predecessors in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—were in turn inspired by the mythological deities and heroes of Ireland, including Cú Chulainn, and Fionn mac Cumhaill¹⁴ and his band of warriors, and the Fianna¹⁵ (Kearney 126-27). Old Ned, the elder who advises Pig’s squad, acts as the bridge between the 1916 rising and the Provisional IRA of the Troubles and intervenes in the argument between Pig and Achilles:

“I was born when this whole island was still ruled by the British Empire! I was on operations when you men were sucking bottles of milk, aye, and when some of your mummies and daddies were sucking bottles of milk! I pulled triggers in the Border Campaign in the fifties alongside men who’d fought in the GPO. I was moving families out of their burned houses in Belfast in sixty-nine, and I brought the first weapons into the Bogside in the back of my own bread van. I was among the heads they came and asked in eighty-one whether to keep on with the hunger strike, or throw in the towel. And now I’ve had the army Council drive up and ask me one by one whether to banjax these talks, or let the Shinnners have their head.” (CTY 19-20)

The nationalist mythos, with its roots in Irish legend and its cycle of uprising, failure, and commemoration has its parallels (and likely its roots) in “Christian notions of martyrdom, apocalypse and ritualistic commemoration,” as well as in Hellenic cult-sacrifice (Kearney 133). Martyrdom, an excessive form of sacrifice, is very much on the mind of the men in Pig’s unit. Syd says “We have to keep our own selves in shape, so that we can better get justice for the martyrs to our cause, and make sure they didn’t die

¹⁴ Often Anglicized as Finn McCool, a legendary hero in early Irish texts who was not a deity, but was “associated with gigantism” and had “mythological antecedents” (Tymoczko, “Hyperbolic” 118). In *Country*, the character Diamond McDaid is described as “near seven foot, and built like Finn McCool” (50).

¹⁵ The Irish nationalist revolutionary Fenian movement in the nineteenth century was named for the Fianna.

in vain. We need only one call. All or nothing” (CTY 256). Ned insists that Pat be honored “the same as any of the greatest martyrs of our cause” (CTY 298).

There are some striking similarities between the Greek and Irish heroes of myth. Thus, Hughes’s Achill bears resemblance to both Achilles and the mythological Irish warrior, Cú Chulainn, who, like Achilles, was the offspring of a mortal and a god; this likeness provides another connection between Achill and the “hyperbolic fantastic.” In his 1900 publication, *Cuchulainn: The Irish Achilles*, Alfred Nutt details the commonalities of the ancient Greek and Irish heroic ideals as embodied by Achilles and Cú Chulainn: they are the best warriors of their race, each displaying “superb and fiery courage, passionate and irresistible energy, fierce and utter devotion to the standard of honour recognized by himself and his fellows” (Nutt 36). Further, both are boastful, both are able to single-handedly defeat large numbers of enemies, both are filled with wrath when they fight—Cú Chulainn is famous for his *ríastrad*, a warp-spasm that turns him into a monster during combat—and both are predestined to glory but also to an early death.

Achill’s lineage is not divine, except perhaps in the sense that as an IRA warrior, he sees himself as the descendent of the mythological Irish heroes. While weeping over the body of Pat, Achill does mention a son in Scotland whom he barely knows, which may be intended as an echo of the story of Cú Chulainn, who also had a son in Scotland—a boy he tragically killed in battle, not knowing who he was until it was too late. More importantly, Achill shares the fighting prowess, ego, rage, sense of honor, and willingness to embrace an early death in exchange for honor and fame that characterize both Achilles and Cú Chulainn.

MYTHOS OF WAR AND MANHOOD

In *Country*, as in David Keenan's *For the Good Times*, the hyper-masculinity that was part of republican paramilitary culture is on full display. The militarist Irish nationalist mythos has a deep connection to concepts of masculinity. "Manly" traits and values such as honor, patriotism, bravery, and duty became attached early on to the republican armed struggle, as indeed they have been and continue to be in the mythos of war in many parts of the world. During the Troubles, militarized masculinity was prominent among state forces such as the Northern Irish police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), and the Ulster Defense Regiment, a division of the British army, as well as in both loyalist and republican paramilitary organizations (Ashe 237-38). For militant nationalists, there was an especially strong association between "the achievement of Irish masculinity and violent struggle" because British colonialism carried with it ideas about the feminization of Irish men. Stevens, Brown, and Maclaran write:

Aside from religious and cultural differences Ireland's 'feminine' nature was enmeshed in English discourse on Ireland. It was visualized as a weak, ineffectual woman that needed to be controlled by a strong, resolute man (Britain). The intrinsic femininity of the Irish race was well documented throughout the 19th century by British commentators on the Celtic race, notably Ernest Renan and Matthew Arnold, both writing in the 1860s. Matthew Arnold observed that 'the Celt is peculiarly disposed to feel the spell of the feminine idiosyncrasy; he has an affinity to it; he is not far from its secret'. Arnold was following in the footsteps of his contemporary Ernest Renan, who had earlier pronounced that the Celts were 'an essentially feminine race'. (408)

In response to British imperialist discourse that portrayed Ireland as feminine and weak, Irish republicanism perceived and defined independence in terms of manhood. In his 1913 essay, "The Coming Revolution," Patrick Pearse wrote "We must accustom ourselves to the thought of arms, to the sight of arms, to the use of arms. We may make mistakes in the beginning and shoot the wrong people; but bloodshed is a cleansing and a

sanctifying thing, and the nation which regards it as the final horror has lost its manhood” (Pearse). Similarly, when the Provisional IRA was formed (splitting from the existing “Official” IRA in 1969 in response to what was seen as an anemic reaction to the violence in Northern Ireland), their leaders issued their first statement, which included the line, “We will show by our actions that we are the essence of Irish manhood” (qtd in Ashe 238).

The framework of the *Iliad*, which is itself very concerned with both proper and excessive male behaviors (Graziosi and Haubold 60), also provides Hughes with an opening to explore the ways in which a war-based definition of masculinity quickly becomes overblown and crosses the line into misogyny. In fact, Feay notes that Hughes’s “narrative is even more aggressively masculine than the *Iliad*” (“From Troy”). The homosocial nature of the battalion is a *de facto* marginalization of women. Hughes translates Homer’s female war prizes into Provisional IRA fan girls and then goes on to amplify their degradation when Pig refers to them as “the Provie sluts” (CTY 11). Pig, of course, also demands Achill’s “girl,” Brigid, in exchange for sending Cunningham’s daughter home to her father. Achill, more worried about his pride than losing the woman he has been living with, retorts, “Easy come easy go, you take the girl. I give her to you. But that’s my own decision” (CTY 22). The over-the-top idea of this exchange in which the woman has no agency (and indeed, moves in with Pig, as instructed) taking place in the 1990s, is of course, a wild exaggeration which, by its very extravagance, allows the reader to understand the affective hyper-masculinity present in militarized groups during the Troubles.

The theme of toxic masculinity runs through the novel: various women are referred to as “bitches” in the text, and women are often discussed in crude terms related to their physical appearance and or sexual activities. Whenever Pig berates the men in the squad for cowardice, he refers to them as women. Achill weeps when Brigid is taken away, but this, too, is because of his vanity. He asks his old neighbor Theresa Flanagan (a not-quite stand-in for Thetis, quasi-mother figure, casual provider of oral sex, and double agent) to have her British contacts hassle Pig’s squad in revenge for taking Brigid and thereby humiliating Achill. He is full of self-pity, complaining the boys at school always said no one could love him, that his mother abandoned him for the drink (surely a pun based on the fact that Homer’s Thetis was a sea nymph), but when Theresa asks if Achill wants Brigid back, he replies, “She can go and jump. I got what I needed out of her” (CTY 26). When he decides to rejoin the squad after Pat’s death, Achill makes a speech in which he says, “Till the day I die, I’ll never understand how Pig and myself came to this over a woman. I wish to God she’d got the first bullet in her back, rather than any of you men come to harm” (CTY 252).

Like Keenan’s IRA man, Sammy, in *For the Good Times*, Achill appears incapable of sustaining a meaningful relationship with a woman. Pat is his only true emotional connection, just as Tommy was the only person Sammy seemed to truly love. Achill’s relationship with Pat is ambiguous, despite the narrator taking great pains to assure us early on that, although rumored to be lovers, “the only love between the was one man needed to be a big brother, and another man who needed to be one” (24). As well as alluding to the long-running debate of the relationship between Achilles and

Patroclus in the *Iliad*,¹⁶ Hughes's portrayal of Pat and his relationship with Achill highlights and challenges the narrow definition of gender that permeated the ranks of the IRA during the Troubles. Hughes deliberately plays with the stereotype of a gay man when Brigid wails over Pat's corpse, "Lovely, lovely Pat. You were the best of them. . . You told me the best was up ahead, for I'd be the wife of this man Achill. . . the wedding would be the last word. You'd organise it all yourself. Sure the times we used to sit and pick out flowers and dresses and trousseaus and table favours . . ." (CTY 258). Similarly, Achill's exaggeratedly maudlin moaning over Pat humorously undermines the hyper-masculinity of the IRA:

"It used to be you, Pat, laying out the food on the table, and fussing and footering at your wee biscuits and buns, and making sure I had enough in my tummy before I'd go out on a job. The heart of me wants nothing to pass my lips. It wants nothing only you. It wouldn't be worse news if I heard my own father was dead, who's at home there weeping for a son who's risking his life for the sake of some culchie bitch. Nor it wouldn't be as bad if the child of mine I hardly know, over there in Scotland, was dying or dead. Before this, I wanted nothing only for me to die here, fighting the good fight, and you to go and bring that boy back to Castlebar, Pat, and let him hear the man his father was. I used to lie in bed dreaming of that over and over, and it gladdened my heart. . . God forgive me, Pat, but I'd sign away the whole republic itself if I could have you back here to watch me do this today . . . I'd happily offer up my own life to bring your smiling face back. I'd offer up the lives of every man here." (CTY 259).

Achill's speech, while over-the-top, also addresses the reality of loss for those engaged in the war in Northern Ireland, even as it highlights one of the central broken promises of warrior culture. The story of war in Western culture is "almost always a story of male bonds" because friendships "humanize and temper the terrible ferocity of war, injecting into mass warfare a hint of the culture's values: loyalty, love, community,

¹⁶ Knox observes that this controversy seems to have arisen from later Greek sources, as there is no evidence of a homosexual relationship between Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad* (53).

sacrifice, valor” (Cole 138). Such a picture of brotherhood can have a powerful affective attraction for recruits and help to keep morale up—in fact, loyalty to each other is the strongest motivation for soldiers to overcome their fear in war (Herman 22).

Unfortunately, the promise of sustaining comradeship in war is a false one, if only because war so often destroys the very friendships it has fostered through death (Cole). This painful loss of friendship as a result of war is clear when Pat is killed. Although Pat is not much of a fighting man, he is a member of the unit, filling a support role, and “everybody loved Pat” (*CTY* 241). Of course, because his death was a combat one, he becomes yet another martyr for the republican cause.

The infighting within Pig’s squad further undermines the notion of idealized friendships during war by showing the very human conflicts and tensions that arise between men fighting on the same side. Additional meaning is attached to the quarrel between Achill and Pig when one considers that, by Homeric standards, the rupture between Achill and the rest of the unit can also be understood as the result of excessive masculinity on the part of Achill. Barbara Graziosi and Johannes Haubold argue that in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, masculinity is determined by men’s behavior towards other men, rather than towards women (73), and that solidarity between men during times of war is of paramount importance (68). By this measure, Achilles’s (and Achill’s) decision to engage in individualistic behavior and abandon his comrades constitutes a display of excessive, rather than proper masculinity (Graziosi and Haubold 67).¹⁷

¹⁷ Graziosi and Haubold base this on an analysis of how Homer employs two different ancient Greek terms related to masculinity depending on the behaviors of the men toward their comrades.

One of the notable aspects of the *Iliad* is that Homer doesn't take sides. While he focuses mainly on the quarrel within the Achaean army, he also tells the story of the Trojans fighting the war. So too, Hughes provides glimpses of the motivations, sacrifices, disillusionment, and trauma of British soldiers stationed in Northern Ireland, making clear that a conflation of war with manhood, as well as the hopes and fears felt by men involved, are shared across cultures, whose warriors exhibit many of the same virtues and vices. The fourth section of *Country*, entitled "Henry," is about the British Special Air Service (SAS) captain, Henry Morrow, a soldier who is nearly as skilled as Achill. It is Henry who kills Pat and against whom Achill swears revenge. Achill and Henry are the twinned opponents—the Achilles and Hector—of this narrative, destined to meet and fight until one of them is dead. If, as the narrator says, "Achill loved to kill, when he thought it deserved" (CTY 18), then for Henry, "the stuff he'd always loved was the battles, the bloodier the better" (CTY 141). His patriotism is every bit as strong as Achill's: "Standing up to fight for your country. It's all he ever wanted to do" (CTY 141). And Henry, too, wants to follow in the path of the legendary glorious warriors who went before him, as he imagines himself, "a knight . . . a redcoat . . . up flying a Spitfire" (CTY 141). Most of all, he embodies the spirit of the twentieth-century British soldier, inspired by the mythology of an imperial past. He sees himself as "the line of civilization, standing at the edge of what Britain was supposed to be about, holding back the chaos, taking on the enemy" (CTY 141). He, too, is convinced his cause enjoys "the moral high ground" (CTY 245).

Hughes gives Henry modern British colonialist credentials: Henry saw his first action in the war over the Falklands, fought under the Thatcher government. He is every

bit as fierce as Achill—the narrator’s use of the term “savage” to describe Henry is a poke at British imperialism, mirroring the way Henry’s ex-commander and father figure, Bernard King (Priam in the *Iliad*), refers to the Irish fighters. King’s use of the word reflects the historic British portrayal of the Irish people as “savages” (Gott; Lengel). Henry started his military career in a paratrooper unit that was “raring to fight, gumming to kill. And kill they did. Young Henry was up there with the worst of them. Five Argentines himself at Goose Green. No mercy . . . He was a machine . . . He was fearless” (*CTY* 139). When he moved from the paras to the SAS, Henry became an undercover operative in the mode of the real-life Robert Nairac.¹⁸ Now Henry is behind a desk and longing to get back into the thick of things. Like his counterparts in the IRA, he sees his military service as a higher calling that takes precedence over everything else. When his mother phones to tell him his wife, Anna, is in a state of distress and has flown from England to Belfast to see him, his immediate response is, “Stupid cow” (*CTY* 150). Anna, who foresees his death, pleads with him to get out of Northern Ireland, which she sees as a losing cause. He concedes that most likely “this is all in vain,” and that actually, Northern Ireland has “the right to its own destiny” but then goes on to give an impassioned speech about his duty. Like his counterparts in the IRA unit, he links his manhood to his cause, telling her:

“I can cope with the thought of you living as a soldier’s widow. What I can’t accept is you living as a coward’s wife . . . we can’t just surrender. Do you realise what that would mean? Everything this country has built up over a thousand years, down in flames. Respect for democracy, the rule of law, facing down those who threaten those values. That’s what it means to be British. If we surrender our principles, then they really have won. . . But no one will say I gave up the fight

¹⁸ For further information on Nairac, see the discussion of Eoin McNamee’s novel, *The Ultras*, in the previous chapter of this dissertation.

before we brought the bastards to heel. I serve my country, and I tell you. I won't shirk my duty." (CTY 152-153)

The irony is, of course, that in the moment of confrontation with Achill, it is Henry's fear that will define him as he tries to run away, and then begs his enemy for mercy. Until then, pride, ego, and a sense of honor motivate Henry, so much so that they allow him to push doubts about the legitimacy of his mission aside, in a mirror image of his IRA counterparts.

BETRAYAL

As is the case with the novels of Deane, Burns, Keenan, and McNamee under study in this thesis, the theme of betrayal looms large in *Country*. In parallel to the *Iliad*, the impetus behind this local battle is a betrayal with a woman at its center. There may be debate over whether Helen was abducted by Paris or went of her own volition, but in *Country*, there's no doubt—Nellie leaves of her own free will. What imbues Nellie's decision with the kind of political repercussions attached to Helen's removal to Troy is that she has been acting as informer to the British for quite a while before escaping. Hughes, rather than condemning Nellie, shows what McNamee calls her "structured descent into the servitude of informing, the soul measured out and undone" ("*Country* by Hughes"). Nellie's betrayal is at once personal, local, and national. Her betrayal of her husband, Dog, becomes something larger when she gives up the identities of all of the members of the unit, and of course, it also represents a larger betrayal of her Irish identity. Yet Hughes, like Homer, builds ambiguity into Nellie's position that leaves room for sympathy.

Having turned to a (Protestant)¹⁹ friend for help when she finds herself accidentally pregnant, Nellie is aided in getting abortion pills at a British barracks by the friend's father, who is a policeman. Of course, this assistance comes at a price; she is blackmailed into informing on local IRA activity. When she tries to stop, the police continue to extort her by threatening exposure, but they sweeten the deal by paying her. She's thrilled to get the money, which she begins saving in hopes of getting out of Northern Ireland altogether. She takes full advantage of her beauty to become friendly with members of the local IRA. Finally, she sees her chance to escape: by rekindling her old relationship with Dog, she will be able to leverage her information for more money and leave sooner. She plans on a short fling, but Dog is determined to marry her, and soon she soon finds herself giving way to community pressure to agree to a wedding. The marriage is a disaster from the start: in a wry note, Hughes tells us she spends most of their honeymoon in Donegal "staring out at the rain while he went and caught up with various old friends in the area and came stumbling back in a three in the morning" (*CTY* 86). Soon thereafter, she meets a new handler, "an army fella" whose nickname is Paris, and begins to work on him, flirting with him while hinting that her husband suspects her, even that he's abusing her (although neither of those things is true). Eventually, Paris makes arrangements and takes her to England. Once there, she negotiates a new identity, housing, and a job in exchange for in-depth information about Dog's IRA battalion, information which she shares with Henry Morrow's old boss, Bernard King.

¹⁹ This is mentioned by Hughes and is significant because of the polarization of the community. In fact, the friend swears Nellie to secrecy about her father's occupation.

Hughes's poignant portrait of Nellie's deepening involvement in spying for the state forces in Northern Ireland is, as McNamee writes, "authentic" ("*Country* by Hughes"). Informers are often portrayed with hostility in Irish literature, but Hughes gives a more nuanced picture of the corruption of Nellie. The British relied on informants as a tool to defeat the insurgency in Northern Ireland just as they had in other colonial states such as Kenya, Malaya, and Cyprus, and the majority of those who informed on the IRA, from within their ranks, their support systems, or their communities, were tempted or blackmailed by the authorities, rather than ideologically motivated, to do so (Dudai 52-54).²⁰ Nellie's personal circumstances, and the religious and social norms around abortion, conspire to make her vulnerable to the initial pressure from her friend's father; once she takes the first step, the potential community stigmatization and the IRA's harsh punishment of informers make it almost impossible for her to reverse course. She knows how Pig thinks, a philosophy he has made clear to the reader during his row with Achill: "As far as I'm concerned, any individual that gets in bed with the enemy is a traitor to their county, be it my brother's woman or the West Brit Shinner suits and ties" (*CTY* 17).

Hughes draws attention to other kinds of betrayals, real and perceived. As mentioned, a peace settlement that does not include a united Ireland feels like betrayal to men like Pig and Achill. Those negotiating behind the scenes on behalf of the republican cause are well aware of the questions it raises about the damage the conflict had inflicted on the Northern Irish community, including those who had perpetrated the violence:

If Sinn Fein and the IRA accept any deal that falls short of a united Ireland, then what the fuck had the last twenty-five years been for? Was it all a waste, the

²⁰ For more information on counterinsurgency practices in Northern Ireland during the Troubles, see the discussion of Eoin McNamee's novel, *The Ultras*, in the previous chapter of this dissertation.

agony and the bloodshed these men had inflicted, never mind what they'd suffered themselves?

Now any fool could see the answer was a big fat Yes, but there was no way they were selling that to the rank and file. . . The one thing that had held the IRA together so far as the blind belief in armed struggle as the only viable means to achieve full thirty-two-county independence. (CTY 103).

In *Country*, London is, like Mount Olympus in the *Iliad*, the ultimate seat of power. Zeus is not all that concerned about who wins the Trojan War, but constantly confronted with the wishes and demands of the other gods, he negotiates deals with them throughout the story. Similarly, Hughes's euhemerized powers in London are to some extent ambivalent about what is happening in Ulster but are, nonetheless, by the 1990s, deeply involved in trying to balance the conflicting desires and stipulations of multiple domestic and international parties involved in trying to resolve the conflict.

Hughes uses parody to highlight the differences in the lived experience of the Troubles between those fighting and those deciding the terms of the conflict (and often ordering the violence) with a brief episode in which the parties negotiating the peace deal play a game of football (soccer). The match includes unionists, nationalists, and representatives from London, Dublin, and America, and even Sinn Fein, who was not supposed to be there. Hughes describes how they symbolically work out their aggressions in an aggressive but essentially friendly game with no harm done is to anyone beyond "the odd bruise, and the odd scratch," then adds, with pointed irony, "These men played hard. The women did too. But it was worth it" (CTY 266).

Hughes's warriors suffer other, more direct, experiences of betrayal. Pig is counting on getting the credit (glory) for breaking the ceasefire on behalf of the "Higher-ups" within the IRA who want to continue the fighting. Thus, his reaction to hearing the

news reports of the bombing at Canary Wharf²¹ is one of outrage at what he feels as a personal betrayal:

Pig was raging he didn't know. That was what hurt the most. Stabbed in the back. It was like they didn't trust him. Like everything he had done for his own side was turned to shite. . . the needle was dug in his heart, betrayed by the Higher-ups, He was supposed to be the one to end the cessation, and they let that other crowd do it. Kept him in the dark. He felt like a total cunt in front of the squad. The whole townland. (*CTY* 167)

Similarly, it is Pig's betrayal of Achill, after years of loyal service, that Achill takes hardest when Pig "steals" Brigid. He explodes at the idea of rejoining the unit in exchange for Pig's offers of Brigid back, along with other gifts:

"Let me tell you something. I've thought of nothing for myself this last nine years. More. Like a mammy bird feeding crumbs to skinnies in the nest and going hungry herself. I gave up sleep, and saw friends killed, and got wounded myself, all for the sake of the pride of these men here, these Northern men . . . I planned and executed operations that have left Pig looking like the best OC there ever was. He gets the glory, and when I take out a security van or a cash machine, I hand the lot over to Pig. And I know he keeps the half of it, or more than the half. . . Things are done the way they're done. And right enough, he gave what he gave to us, each man got his share. I asked no more. But then, out of all of us, and including the bastards who've done nothing for him, and including even the cunts who've schemed to bring him down, out of all the volunteers in this brigade, he comes to me, who's done nothing this nine years only on his orders and for his glory, and he takes my precious wee girl off me." (*CTY* 182-83)

Henry, too, is betrayed. In the last moments of his life, he realizes that his higher-ups are not going to rescue him. Like Pig, he comes to the conclusion that he is no more

²¹ The IRA ceasefire was broken on 9 February 1996 by a major bombing at the South Quay (near Canary Wharf) in the London docklands in which two people were killed and more than a hundred were injured; some £150, 000 in physical damages to the infrastructure were sustained (McCarthaigh). The operation was a protest against the demand for decommissioning of weapons as part of the peace process; a process in which, at that point, despite having been promised a seat at the table in 1994, Sinn Fein was not allowed to participate, because the IRA had not agreed to decommission weapons. Peace talks were interrupted for some months, but when they resumed in June, the decommissioning requirement for Sinn Fein had been dropped, and they were allowed to participate.

than a pawn for someone else's purposes—showing again the essential similarities between warriors on every side of a conflict:

He saw it now. London. Polly. They were hanging him out to dry. He knew too much. Getting flaky. Dead men tell no tales. A glorious martyr, to pile on the pressure, give them an edge in the talks. A poster boy who couldn't spoil the story.

The fucking spooks, the fucking politicians. Moving the pieces on the board, doling out life or death with a flick of the wrist. Not one of them was in harm's way. Not one of them could ever die this death. He was charged to defend their will, their country's honour, but all he could ever defend was his own life. It wasn't their blood on the road. It never would be. They didn't understand.

No, they understood. They didn't care.

A deal had been done. Men of their word before men of mercy. The long game. (CTY 282)

The promises of fame, brotherhood, and a noble cause that inspired these men to martyrdom are revealed to better serve the interests and agendas of those in power than those who do the fighting for them. As a weary Achill reflects, "Death looks like glory to a young man. Get a few more years on you, and glory starts looking a lot like death" (CTY 185).

Finally, the mythos of war is countered in the novel by the reality that most of these men, as dedicated as they are to the fight, are conflicted about giving it up, and most long for peace. Throughout the novel, there are many references to this desire to be done with the war, but the earliest is perhaps the best example of the wish for a peaceful life. When Pig decides to test their commitment by pretending the IRA has declared a permanent cessation of operations in favor of a political solution, it's greeted with euphoria, not just by the men in the battalion, but by the community as a whole.

Word went round the townland like wildfire, a mega session on at the Ships. In half an hour, every wannabee and hanger-on and balloon was there, jumping up and down to Bryan Adams Summer of '69 like a culchie wedding. Even some of

the squad got dragged along, caught up in the fun. It spilled out in the street, cans and congas, Rock the Boat in the middle of the road, everybody dooting their horns as they drove by. Big smiles and wide eyes. Like weans in the tuck shop. You could see where it was leading. Dumps opened, balaclavas burned. Peace prizes handed out. Handshakes at the White House. Good suits and stripy ties at Stormont. (CTY 42)

The response from the highest levels of IRA leadership is immediate. Pig is to put a stop to it at once, as the armed struggle is the only leverage they have to try to enter the peace talks. The irony is clear: these men must continue to fight and die to give their leaders a seat at the peace table.

The British warriors, too, wish to be away from war. Panda—the young British soldier who undergoes a nervous breakdown and believes a transmitter has been put in his head “to get him messages direct from London”—notes that among his colleagues, “Everybody wants a way out, as long as they can save face. No one actually wants us here. Least of all us” (CTY 106).

TRAUMA

The traumatic nature of warfare has been widely recognized since Freud’s groundbreaking studies of World War I veterans; in fact, his theories about trauma were developed in good part through his work with those soldiers. His discoveries about the mechanisms of trauma, including the reexperiencing of traumatic events (through emerging memories or reenactments of events), the repression of memory (willful forgetting) that can lead to a general emotional numbing, and increased arousal or reactivity (loss of temper control, hypervigilance, or extreme susceptibility to being startled), and negative mood/cognition symptoms such as guilt or shame remain at the heart of our understanding of the effects of traumatic events, now called Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or PTSD (Luckhurst 1; NIH). While fictional representations of trauma

often feature retrospective accounts and recovered memories, the onset of traumatic symptoms usually occurs soon after the traumatic event (NIH).

Hughes focuses on men in the thick of paramilitary and military operations, and he depicts the excessive nature of war, with its extreme horrors, in highly graphic scenes that help the reader see that his characters' everyday witnessing of and participation in deadly violence constitutes exposure to a steady series of traumatic events. While the characters themselves do not think about their experiences in terms of trauma, it is clear to the reader that many of them display symptoms of PTSD.

For instance, both Dog and Henry exhibit Freud's practice of "willful forgetting," i.e., the deliberate repression of traumatic memories in order to protect the psyche. This repression, along with emotional numbness, is essential to their ability to continue on fighting. Yet, as part of what Herman calls the "central dialectic of trauma," repressed memories try to emerge and must be willfully forgotten again if they are to be avoided (1). Thus, Dog, laid up after being attacked by Panda, struggles to keep his traumatic memories at bay:

Dog hated being wounded. All the sitting around. Fuck all to do. He always ended up thinking. And he really hated thinking.

There was one particular incident always went round and round Dog's head, was it the right thing to do. And the trouble was, that started him thinking was the whole thing the right thing to do. If all them ones on the TV that called men like him a thug and a heartless monster knew the half of what was in his head. Tore himself up some nights with guilt and worry. (CTY 116)

Similarly, Henry actively represses memories, noting there is "plenty to forget. There were things he'd seen and heard he would never tell another living soul. Stuff he wouldn't know how to start to describe. Things he'd done himself, that made his stomach cramp and his head spin when he thought about them. So he didn't think about them"

(CTY 140). Henry strives to maintain emotional numbness, not allowing himself to feel, even when with his wife and child. Instead, holding his baby son up high, he pretends to engage emotionally but reminds himself to remain detached: “She needed a display of affection. He gritted his teeth behind his own smile. Couldn’t risk cracking the shell. Not today. Keep all that out” (CTY 156). When he does let down his guard, it is debilitating: “He held her close. Both of them. Made himself, for her. Told himself he couldn’t resist. Let himself feel it, just for a moment. Then wished he hadn’t. Knew it was poison, to the man he needed to be” (CTY 157).

Diamond McDaid displays symptoms of trauma related to the witnessing of his father’s humiliation by a British soldier and to his father’s subsequent PTSD symptoms of rage. After the incident, McDaid’s father “beat the tar out of him. He was never the same. Some wee cog knocked out of joint” (CTY 114). Through McDaid, Hughes both introduces an intergenerational dimension to the trauma experienced by those living through the Troubles and portrays the affective nature of trauma itself, that is, its “worryingly transmissible” dimension (Luckhurst 3). McDaid’s penchant for violence is likely the result of his own trauma history (Neller and Fabian).

But the character who is most traumatized, and whose response to trauma is most in view in the novel, is Achill. The origins of his tendency to explode into rage are never explained in the novel. Regardless, viewed through the lens of modern psychology, the acute onset of symptoms of PTSD is immediately apparent when Achill receives the devastating news of Pat’s death. He quickly channels his initial pain, guilt, and sorrow into fury, and revenge becomes his way of coping with Pat’s death. Just as Homer’s Achilles lashes Hector’s body to a chariot and drags it through the dirt in the *Iliad*, Achill

ties the body of Henry to his car and drags it up and down the roads for days, until he dumps it in the bathroom drain in the pub for the men to urinate on. The grim absurdity of his actions (along with the fact that the body, somehow, is none the worse for wear and tear after this treatment) is disconcerting. The excessive nature of Achill's response "pushes the boundaries of reason towards impossibility and expresses more than the "truth" warrants in order to constitute and to communicate alternate realit[y]" (Ritter, *Re-imagining* 4). In this case, the reader has a new understanding of the almost inhuman depth of his hatred and rage toward Henry.

Achill's display of Pat's corpse in the local pub, *The Ships*, also excessive, is both comical and grotesque. Hughes brings together, in humorous fashion, the burial rites of ancient Greece and Irish funeral practices of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, including a resonance between the funeral games of the epic and the "wake games" that James Mooney describes as, while "degraded," still being enacted in 1888 (276). Hughes rewrites the scene in which Achilles displays the body of Patroclus by playing on Irish traditions of holding wakes in pubs, a practice that can be linked to the great number of deaths along the roads during the Famine.²² Hughes, of course, exaggerates the wake scene to the level of the absurd, with echoes of Joyce in the funeral of Pat, when Achill sits Pat's corpse up at the bar to observe the proceedings, places "a flat pint" in front of

²² The Coroner's Act of 1846, relying on the fact that the local public houses had cool beer cellars, allowed coroners to order that corpses found on the roads be taken to and stored at the nearest public house until an inquest could be held (Coroners (Ireland) Act, 1846 (9 & 10 Vic.) c. 37 section xxxvi). Over time, many rural publicans took on the services of undertakers, having both the room to host a wake and a plentiful supply of alcohol. The practice has waned since the 1960s—the Coroner's Act of 1962 repealed the whole act of 1846. A hundred or so pubs still provided undertaker services in Ireland in 2010 ("Traditional"; "Why Pub Owners").

him, and settles down to have a long conversation with him. Unlike in the case of Finnegan, however, there is no awakening for Pat.²³

The appearance of Pat's ghost in Achill's dream, as well as reflecting Homer's plot, can be read as a sign of Achill's mental state; the appearance of ghosts is, as previously noted in this study, a common trope of trauma in the modern novel. Pat tells Achill, "There is no peace waiting for you, nor for me. Our peace is finished with . . . A bloody killer is coming for you" (CTY 292). When Achill awakes from this dream encounter, he is startled to see the killer staring at him. The shouts of the other men stop him from shooting the "ugly face" in front of him, and only then does he realize he is looking at himself in the mirror behind the bar. Achill's immersion in violence and his implacable anger have made him monstrous, and his recognition of who he has become begins in this moment.

It is shortly after this, when Achill is confronted with the grief of Bernard King, who has come, under orders from London, to beg for the return of Henry's body, that the wall of anger around Achill's heart is breached at last. Seeing the man kneel before him and kiss his hand, breaks through the barrier. Knox writes of the *Iliad* that it is in this meeting with Priam that Achilles achieves "his final recognition of human values" (61). The magnitude of such an act of humility, and its relevance to what was required of the parties involved during the process that led to the GFA, is captured by the Northern Irish poet, Michael Longley, in the last lines of his sonnet, "Ceasefire": "I get down on my knees and do what must be done / And kiss Achille's hand, the killer of my son" (13-14).

²³ The scene also evokes popular accounts of pranks at Irish wakes involving corpses in which someone would cut a rope used to tie the corpse to a board (to keep the body flat against the effects of rigor mortis) so that the body would suddenly sit up (Harlow).

The significance of King's act is not lost on Achill. They kneel together and weep. When Achill orders that Henry's body be prepared for King, Hughes lightens the solemn scene with Achill's down-to-earth speech to his men: "Get in there and lift that body out of the bogs²⁴ and give it a scrub . . . Dress it up in my good suit here, and get it in the boot of his car before he sees it, for that might snap him altogether" (*CTY* 311). Yet beneath the humor, in that final clause, is the acknowledgement of the tenuity of this moment of suspended hostilities, a metaphor, of course, for the peace talks happening in the background.

LANGUAGE AND EXCESS

Homer's epics emerged from oral tradition, the written versions of stories told by bards for centuries before they were written down, and as such meld well with the Irish bardic tradition which, due to the island's geographical isolation, lasted much later than in most of mainland Europe. The garrulous, unnamed narrator of *Country* is clearly an expert storyteller, one who values the art of a narrative that is both witty and gritty. The informal Hiberno-English, spoken in a broad country accent and full of slang, local references, and direct addresses to the audience, creates the effect of a tale being told in front of a fire by a *seanchai*²⁵ who relishes the recitation. The conversational tone is often ironic, but its banter-like feel lends intimacy rather than distance to the narration (Leech 144).

²⁴ Toilets.

²⁵ Irish language story-tellers and historians in the oral tradition, they served as repositories of Irish culture and were part of the Irish aristocracy before the collapse of the Gaelic order in the seventeenth century.

Much of the humor in the work comes from the narrator's lively rendition and gossipy editorializing. When Achill and his OC are engaged in their opening war of words, for instance, the narrator explains how the others listen in tense silence, "Oh, this was trouble. This was crossing a line. But not a one budged till they saw what way the wind would blow." Then he immediately breaks the tension, adding, "And besides, nobody wanted to miss a word. However the thing fell out at the heel of the hunt, this would keep them going for months. Years, maybe" (*CTY* 14). In other words, the witnesses already anticipate the pleasure of telling a good story about the argument later, just as the narrator enjoys this recounting. It is, in their eyes, a legend in the making.

The exuberant voice of the narrator sets the break-neck pace of the novel. The writing crackles with high tension and a deep, dark fury, while at the same time featuring humor that derives from colloquialisms and local idioms. The narrator's periodic admonitions to the reader to stay tuned—"What you need to understand is this," or "Wait now till you hear the rest"—build suspense. Hughes pays special attention to the sound of language. Alliteration and assonance give a poetic quality even to the rough content of comments like "And if you'd heard him. Guldering and gurning. Gnashing and spitting. Rounding on the lot of them," or "Oh, the blood was up now. This famous fury bulling in his belly. You could near hear it." The rhythmic prose carries the sound of the modern bard: "And that was the start of it. A terrible business altogether. Oh, it was all kept off the news, for the sake of the talks and the ceasefire. But them that were around that part of the country remember every bit. Wait now till you hear the rest" (*CTY* 22).

Hughes employs a variety of other linguistic excesses, including long-winded speechifying by several of the men in the squad. There are high-flown monologues by

Pig, Ned, Syd, and even Diamond McDaid, but it is Achill who gives the longest speech as he rebuffs Pig's offer of reconciliation—it lasts for four full pages. The highly colorful narrative can be wickedly funny as Hughes uses verbal irony throughout the text, such as when Dog talks with a man he suspects to be an undercover British army officer; when the man claims to be a tourist tracing family history and “rather hoping to find a few graves,” “Well, you’ve come to the right place’ says Dog. “Graves is one thing we have plenty of” (*CTY* 119). But this is a story of war, and the depictions of violence can be sickeningly graphic, as in the description of Panda's death: “The bullet split the top of his nose between the eyes. It cracked his shiny teeth. The hard lead cut off this tongue at the root. It smashed his jaw. It gouged a ragged hole under his chin. The black leaded down behind his eyes” (*CTY* 109).

Hughes's narrative also showcases his remarkable versatility in capturing the speech of characters from outside the mini-culture of the squadron; when depicting scenes of the politicians or of Henry and other British characters, for instance, Hughes adeptly changes speech patterns and register, as he does in this short exchange between Henry and King about the impending arrival of Polly:

“Not my greatest fan. We had a run-in last time. Perhaps he's the forgiving sort.”

“No match for you, I'm sure.”

“Kind of you to say. Let's hope we never find out,” (*CTY* 173)

Hughes employs many more formal techniques of excessive language. The novel is divided into seven sections, each comprising a series of chapters (there are ninety-two in all) that are best described as vignettes, each section focused mainly on one character's story. While the narrative perspective is fragmented by these multiple points of view, it is the fragmentation at the level of syntax that is most striking in this novel. In writing about

literature and trauma, Felman and Laub quote the French poet, Mallarmé, who tied the rise of free verse, with its radical use of fragmentation, to the breakdown of historical political and social orders when he wrote, “They have done violence to verse” (18). This “fragmentation—a breaking down, a disruption and a dislocation—of . . . language,” they argue, comes to express a different historical crisis after the Holocaust, i.e., “*The breakage of the verse enacts the breakage of the world*” (25).²⁶ An association of fragmentation with murderous inhumanity and social disorder seems particularly pertinent to Hughes’s approach; the story that is fueled with anger and graphic descriptions of violence is full of fragments. For example, when the British soldier, Panda, sees Dog and impulsively decides to seize his opportunity, the prose takes on the rhythm of breakage:

Panda drove around. He knew who. Watched the house. Waiting . . . Panda drew the car up alongside. Kept it ticking over. Loaded his weapon down low, heart thumping. One round in, two, three, four. Another for luck . . . He raised the revolver. Gripped it tight in both hands. Squeezed the trigger. Something exploded. His head. Fuck . . . He only saw the gun. Tried to duck. Too late. (CTY 109)

Hughes’s prose, like that of Burns and Keenan, also features the list-like structures that Tymoczko traces back to the poetics of excess in ancient Irish poetry (“Hyperbolic” 116). Hughes frequently combines these “lists” with fragmentation—that is to say, items are almost always separated by full-stops (periods) rather than commas. This is seen in a passage describing the “plague” visited on the unit while Pig refuses to send the daughter of “Crisis” Cunningham home. Pig issues orders that none of the battalion may leave their base, and the narrator describes their predicament:

²⁶ Italics in the original.

Fucked, every man jack of them. Stuck on that wee farm at the back of beyond. No plan B neither. Nobody knew they were there, do you see. They daren't send word to the local Shinnars, for fear it might leak out what they were scheming at. Petrol nearly done. Fags running low. The mobile phones out of juice. Rationing the Calor.²⁷ Three days. Four. Living on stale biscuits and mouldy bread. Hoking through the bins for any owl bit of real grub. Drinking dregs of rainwater. Half of them sick as dogs by the end of the week. Puking up their rings, sweating and raving. (CTY 6)

The long list of woes shows their growing misery over the course of the week; the picture of their suffering moves from the relatively minor and frankly amusing inconveniences of running out of cigarettes and not being able to use their cellphones to actual illness. The tragi-comic tone of the passage conveys something of the absurdity of the situation even while acknowledging that it is also dismal. This sensibility runs through much of the novel thanks to the high-spirited voice of the narrator; the humor serves to help the reader absorb some of the shocking violence that the characters are willing to commit. It also emphasizes the banality of the lives of these warriors, undercutting the glorification of war.

Finally, in one further example of fragmentation and listing, Hughes creates a mimetic expression of affect during the blur of events after Henry's death: "Henry's funeral was long, and tough. Dress uniforms. The Last Post. Cameras poking their noses in. Max wailing to be picked up. Anna dizzy with exhaustion. Just get it over with. Please God, don't let it be over yet" (CTY 92).

One of the most notable aspects of the novel is its superabundance of wordplay, a technique Tymoczko calls "paradigmatic of Irish tradition" and which she contends is:

A form of liminality occurring at the lexical level of the text. Such ambiguous language, defying reason and classical logic, whether for purposes of humour or visionary utterance, puts the audience into a fantastical epistemological space.

²⁷ A portable heater that runs on a cylinder of gas.

This verbal strategy of invoking excess meaning is a rhetorical counterpart to [other] hyperbolic connotations. (“Hyperbole” 114).

Hughes invests many words with what McAteer terms “linguistic excess,” i.e., a multiplicity of meanings (*Excess* 258). This is most obvious in points of connection to the *Iliad*, especially in names of people and places. Sometimes, the wordplay is sound-based—the two Ajaxes of the *Iliad* become two Jacks, Diomedes becomes Diamond McDaid—while at other times it is based on function or role, as in the punned name of the pub, *The Ships*, or the substitution of Bernard King for Priam, King of Troy.

In some cases, Hughes’s words carry even more excess meaning. For instance, the target of the operation, a British army base at the ruins of Castle William. The ruins, along what was a tourist trail, have lost the “W” on the sign identifying it, so that the locals have taken to calling it “Illium”—an inside joke for those readers who know that Ilium is the ancient name of Troy.²⁸ However, the name of the base holds additional significance that is specific to Ireland. The narrator points out that the origin of the name is uncertain – it might have been named for William of Orange, or “King Billy,” a historical hero to unionists in Northern Ireland. William’s defeat of the Catholic James II and his Irish and French troops at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690 was a major event in Irish history, and marked the beginning of what is called the Protestant Ascendancy, a period that lasted until the early twentieth century when most of the island obtained independence.²⁹ Images of William are still prominently featured during the annual

²⁸ “Iliad” means, literally, “a story about Ilium.”

²⁹ The term denotes the social, political, and economic domination of Ireland by elite members of the “Established Church,” i.e., Church of Ireland and/or Church of England in a country where the vast majority of inhabitants were members of the Catholic Church. It should be noted that many of the descendants of the Scots planters in Ulster were Presbyterians, not Anglicans, and were often shut out of positions of power. However, they retained economic advantages by virtue of being Protestant.

Twelfth of July Orangemen³⁰ parades and bonfire celebrations throughout the north. On the other hand, the narrator says, it might have been named for the Fitzwilliam family, descendants of the earliest (Catholic) Anglo-Irish settlers who, in the popular phrase, became “more Irish than the Irish themselves.” Hughes uses the debate over the origin of the name to represent the competing claims of unionists and republicans to the history of Northern Ireland. However, it should also be noted that Achill’s real first name is Liam, the Irish equivalent of William, a deft and deliberate irony on the part of Hughes that undercuts the differences between the men fighting this war and reminds the reader of their shared identity as human beings.

SUMMARY

Margaret Reynolds, in a critical analysis of the recent works of Australian writers David Malouf and Chloe Hopper, writes “The *Iliad* comes down to us from a long ago past, from an oral tradition, from a culture that is gone, from a way of life that has vanished. But through chance, and through scholarship, because of fashion, or the treasuring of specific cultural values, the *Iliad* speaks to us still, makes us still” (208). Rewriting the *Iliad* as a metaphor for the Troubles is fitting because the ancient epic is, along with other Greek classics that have been adapted by Northern Irish poets and playwrights, “particularly well suited to the period, as a dramatization of the irreconcilable antagonism between two incompatible visions of the world, and of the fatal consequences thereof when compromise cannot be reached” (Impens 170).

³⁰ The iconic stature of William among Irish Protestants long predates the Troubles of the late twentieth century. Over the course of the eighteenth century, upper-class Anglicans formed Orange Clubs named for him, and in 1795, the Orange Order was founded by Belfast linen workers, creating a sectarian social club for working class Protestants (Cathcart 42-44). The Orange Order has been active in Northern Ireland ever since and was closely associated with militant unionism during the Troubles.

Hughes's novel reminds us of the universality of war, showing both the dedication and sacrifices men make in such an enterprise, and the horrendous violence they inflict on each other and the community. Beneath the extremes of chest beating and anger, of absurd humor and grotesque violence that run through this novel, Hughes gives the readers glimpses of the traumatized human beings on both sides of the divide in Northern Ireland who dedicate themselves to what they (mostly) believe to be a just cause. He makes clear that despite their commitment to violence as a means to an end, most of them also secretly long for peace, and he shows their buried humanity at different moments in the text.

By using Homer's epic, with its hyperbolic mythological components and depictions of extremes, as the framework for *Country*, Hughes imbues a modern novel with implied and explicit elements of the hyperbolic, that is to say, with forms of exaggeration that are "manifestly unnatural, over the top, remarkable, extravagant" (Tymoczko, "Hyperbolic" 105-107). His incorporation of other forms of excess such as parody, linguistic excess, absurdity and the grotesque functions to "force . . . [the reader] to see beyond a statement of 'truth' or fact and discover alternative, re-interpreted truth(s) within the statement itself" (Ritter, *Re-imagining* 6).

Hughes's turn to excess highlights the extremes that characterized the Troubles, illustrating the complex influences that drew men to war, and the difficult decisions faced by those who had dedicated themselves to a cause during the fraught time period when the fate of Northern Ireland hung in the balance. Christopher Johnson has noted that historically, hyperbolists have come to the fore in "moment[s] when crisis and change are the norm" (17). For the soldiers on both sides of the Troubles, the choice between the

possibility of peace or the certainty of more death and destruction was complicated by the sacrifices and losses they had endured, and by the stories they had told themselves in order to carry on. Through the use of the hyperbolic, Hughes creates an epistemological disorientation that opens his readers up to the possibility of new understandings of and empathy for the men who fought in the Troubles and of the ways in which the dire circumstances of war deepen and expand the best and worst of human qualities.

Ultimately, *Country* communicates the same message about the tragic wastefulness of war, any war, that the *Iliad* has provided to readers for centuries. Achilles is fated to die not long after the *Iliad* ends; and the chances of Achill surviving are, by his own account, small. Hughes acknowledges that ennobling values such as honor, pride, and loyalty, as well as the thrill of the fight, can be true motivations for those who dedicate themselves to armed conflict. He also forces the reader to confront the brutal and inhumane conditions of war, and the failings of men, that break faith with those ideals. Just as Homer's epic ends with the funeral of Hector, *Country* ends with the funeral of Henry. Homer believed that war was inevitable. The final words of Hughes's novel explicitly acknowledge an unwelcome truth about the politics behind every war: "Someday. . . The higher-ups would settle it, find the middle course. Until then, we live and die here below . . . The way it always was. The way it has to be" (CTY 314). In the context of the Troubles, a middle course was found in Northern Ireland, and formalized in the GFA twenty years before Hughes's novel was published. Yet, the republican calls for a united Ireland have not ceased, nor has the unionist resistance to such an idea. The peace, which continues to consist more of an absence of violence than a true reconciliation between the two communities, has held so far. Like the other novelists

discussed in this study, Hughes rejects the notion—expressed in the GFA’s rhetorical erasure of the past—that reconciliation can be achieved by repressing rather than confronting memories of the Troubles; and like them, he renders personal trauma and communal traumatic affects accessible through multiple literary configurations of excess. Perhaps most importantly, in bearing witness to the suffering endured by so many as a result of the Troubles, *Country* reminds its readers of one grim alternative to an imperfect peace.

CONCLUSION

"Moderation is a fatal thing. Nothing succeeds like excess."

—Oscar Wilde *A Woman of No Importance*

SUMMARY OF ARGUMENT

This dissertation has examined the aesthetics of excess in novels about the Northern Irish Troubles written by five different authors. It proposes that this aesthetics, and an accompanying poetics of excess, are deliberately employed by these writers in order to represent the experiences of a population who lived through thirty years of steady violence during the last decades of the twentieth century. My analysis of excess in Troubles fiction has been developed by considering the intersections of Irish history, theories of trauma and traumatic affect, linguistic theories of the hyperbolic, and poetics in Irish literature dating back to ancient Irish mythologies and medieval verse forms.

The phenomenon that is euphemistically referred to as the “Troubles” was in fact a thirty-year period characterized by violence, terrorism, a heavy British military presence, multiple militant paramilitary organizations, and a massive state surveillance apparatus, all of which inundated the newspapers, and radio and television airwaves. Its roots lay in a long history of the British colonization of Ireland, and specifically, the settler plantations in the province of Ulster, as well as the more recent history of the formation of Northern Ireland. The state was designed around an imbalance of power, in which the oppression of its large Catholic minority was intended to provide security to its majority Protestant population. When the Troubles erupted, the country comprised the “front lines” of a war that was waged in city streets and rural countryside. As the conflict dragged on, the normalization of these extreme conditions resulted in recognized

traumatic psychological responses such as emotional numbness, paranoia, and rage; further, the mediatization of terrorist acts, whether perpetuated by insurgent or state forces, resulted in a contagious “excess of affect” that impacted even those not directly involved in violent traumatic events; finally, other affective elements in the militarized culture, such as hyper-masculinity and extreme sectarianism, in combination with intergenerational and historical trauma, compounded the impacts of the crisis on those living through it.

Theories of the trope of hyperbole, or excessive exaggeration, date back to the studies of rhetoric in ancient Greece and Rome. While Aristotle viewed hyperbole with suspicion and disdain, Quintilian and Longinus recognized its power to communicate what is beyond the capability of more literal description. Webb, Johnson, and Ritter have discussed its invaluable abilities to express the ineffable in religious texts, as well as its centrality to certain literary styles, such as the Baroque and the grotesque. Tymoczko has noted the “hyperbolic fantastic” as a defining element of early and medieval Irish literature that retains its importance to modern Irish writers, while McAteer has examined the presence of excess in modern Irish poetry and fiction.

In regard to the recent proliferation of literature about the Troubles, Eoin McNamee has written, “What it says is this: it can be told as many ways as you like, the 30 years of war can bear as many meanings as you can layer on to it and still feel beyond human precedent” (“Troubling Truths”). Building on the body of scholarship about hyperbole—the often-maligned trope of exaggeration that in fact serves as a unique pathway to new truths—I examined the hyperbolic in the work of several different authors of Troubles novels in light of the idea that hyperbole is *required* in order to

express ideas that are so complex that literal language will not suffice to express and maintain the irresolvable opposition of the real and the impossible that reside within them; that is to say, by challenging and destabilizing our notions of reality, the hyperbolic unlocks our thinking about a situation which is so far outside normal experience that it threatens to elude understanding. In this view, hyperbole, with its “pushing beyond” the limits of the literal truth, involves a disorientation of the reader—Baudelaire’s *vertige de l’hyperbole*—in preparation for a necessary reorientation of perspective to help us see what we otherwise cannot.

Furthermore, this dissertation examined additional forms of exaggeration that feature prominently in the novels of the Troubles under study here, including verbal irony, understatement, euphemism, and lacunae (gaps), all of which are part of a larger poetics of excess which seems to emerge in this work. Other elements of that poetics which are present in these works include lists and list-like structures that create intensification or express emotional intensity, an unusual emphasis and attention to sound (meter, rhythm, lyricism), vivid imagery and figurative language, digressions, fragmentation at the syntactical level, wordplay and multiplicity of meanings, often through allusion, and the incorporation of humor that comprises parody, absurdity, and farce. The novels under study, characterized by self-consciousness and an awareness of themselves as artistic expressions of that which it strains the ability of language to express, are self-reflexive fiction that is paradoxically historical in nature, what Linda Hutcheon has called “historiographic metafiction.” This study has asserted that by employing excess in representations of the Troubles, these novelists allow readers to

recognize more complicated truths that are revealed by the obvious exaggerations or diminutions in their work.

This dissertation discussed in detail how five authors have turned to the excess in its many forms in order to communicate the overwhelming complexity of the lived experience of the Troubles; their texts feature topical, thematic, structural, and linguistic excesses in an effort to depict a time and place in which life *is* war. While each writer employs exaggeration and excess in their own way, there are commonalities in these texts that draw not only on shared history, but also on a shared literary culture. All of these novels were published as the Troubles were winding down, beginning with the IRA ceasefire in 1994, or after the signing of the Good Friday agreement in 1998. They each reflect an effort to understand the communal trauma of recent history.

Chapter one focused on Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, which was published in 1996 as the peace talks got underway. Deane's retrospective novel offers a window into life during the mid-twentieth century in the city of Derry and provides insights into the root causes of the Troubles, including the destructive legacy of the British colonization, and subsequent partition, of Ireland. This dissertation showed that Deane's use of the melodramatic tropes and poetics of Gothic sensibility serves to communicate the traumatic affects, including excessive silence and paranoia, that festered in the systematically disempowered Catholic community during the decades leading up to the Troubles.

Chapter two considered Anna Burns's three novels—*No Bones*, *Little Constructions*, and *Milkman*—which were published over the course of twelve years and are characterized by searing depictions of the extremes of life in Ardoyne, one of the

hardest-hit communities in Belfast during the Troubles. This study has demonstrated that the range of literary excess in her novels works to give the reader an understanding of the relentless pressures on those trying to navigate life in violence-torn working class urban areas in the 1970s. Burns's language is at the forefront of her employment of excess and is an example *par excellence* of how hyperbole helps the reader to understand an almost unimaginable way of life where the line between public and private violence is erased, and trauma is ubiquitous.

Chapter three discussed David Keenan's 2019 *For the Good Times*, with its audacious range of stylistic experimentation and long litany of violence and deaths. The novel, which I described as containing an excess of excesses, is Keenan's vehicle for communicating the humanity at the core even of those who commit unthinkable violence. This dissertation explored how his radically unconventional mélange of genres, graphic descriptions of violence, and high-speed narration combine to reveal the trauma of his main character and uncover complicated truths about men of violence.

Chapter four explored forms of excess in two novels by Eoin McNamee. McNamee's *Resurrection Man*, the earliest novel in this study, was published in 1994 as the ceasefire took effect; *The Ultras* was published ten years later, after the Good Friday Agreement was in place. Both novels deal with events that transpired during the 1970s. In them he depicts two very extreme real-life figures from the Troubles, incorporating the extreme poetics of noir and exploring themes of hyperreality, hyper-masculinity, toxic sectarianism, extreme violence, and the surveillance state as sources of traumatic affect. This study has shown that McNamee employs stylistic excess as a way of challenging

any “official” version of historical events and proposing instead the possibility of multiple (excessive) alternate truths.

Chapter five examined the use of the hyperbolic in Michael Hughes’s 2018 metafictional novel, *Country*, which conflates the story of a small unit of IRA men in South Armagh in rural Northern Ireland in 1996, when the peace talks are just getting underway, with Homer’s epic poem, the *Iliad*. This dissertation has explicated how Hughes employs excess through the layering of multiple mythologies, including Greek, Irish, nationalist, and British imperialist mythologies, as well as mythologies of war and manhood. Hughes includes many other elements of the hyperbolic, both topically (e.g., rage, violence, loss, martyrdom, the supernatural) and stylistically (e.g., wordplay, fragmentation, parody) in his examination of war and what it costs those who wage it.

IMPLICATIONS

Clearly, the presence of excess in literature is not limited to fiction about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. Instead, the understanding of how excess, in its multitudinous configurations, functions in these literary novels suggests its usefulness in a wide range of other literature that incorporates exaggeration but for which excess, as understood here, is not currently a significant part of the lexicon. For instance, the kinds of extremes this dissertation examines—topical, thematic, stylistic, and linguistic— are often present in literary representations of trauma; this suggests that there is room to explore whether an aesthetics of excess (in terms of silences and outpourings of words) might exist more broadly in such works.

Ritter’s presentation of the functions of hyperbole, i.e., to move the reader through the impossible towards the possible, to act as a “lie on the side of truth,” and,

thereby, through disorientation, to reorient the reader's perspective, would seem to have particular relevance for examination of postmodern literatures that are concerned with the inadequacy of language to represent the truth. When one considers hyperbole as a figure of speech that resides at both ends of Johnson's expressibility spectrum, the silences of Beckett are every bit as excessive as the stream-of-consciousness of Faulkner. The lens of excess as a form of the hyperbolic trope, expanded by considerations of other forms of excess such as parody, irony, and euphemism, can offer new insights into how such extreme representations give us access to previously unconsidered truths. An examination of the hyperbolic can be extended to representations of traumatic affect. Thus, the corporeal ghost in Morrison's *Beloved*, seen not just by Sethe but by an entire community, might be interpreted as a manifestation of the excess of affect caused by the prolonged terror and trauma of slavery. An aesthetics and poetics of (affective) excess may also be useful when one considers its presence in other narratives with roots in the historical trauma of American slavery such as Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*, or Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*.

Johnson and Ritter have demonstrated that the hyperbolic plays an essential role in Baroque and Grotesque literatures. Other genre studies that focus on bodies of work in which exaggeration and excess are endemic, such as those touched upon in this dissertation, the Gothic and noir, might benefit from further examination of the dynamic of hyperbole. Those engaged in particular areas of critical studies, such as post-colonial literature studies that feature magic realism, may consider whether the role of the trope of hyperbole has potential to offer new insights into why we so readily see the supernatural as an expression of the traumatic real in such works.

In short, the lens of excess in all its many manifestations offers possibilities for powerful analysis when married with the tropological theories of the hyperbolic. It would seem to be particularly apposite in analyses of literature that deals with personal or historical trauma, traumatic affect, and historiographic metafiction that depicts social order corrupted by violence and other abuses of power, but I would suggest that, in fact, it has potential relevance to the critical study of all fiction, and for that matter, of poetry or drama.

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