

José Manuel Estévez-Saá*

***THE GHOST OF THE TROUBLES: CONFLICT AND
RECONCILIATION IN CONTEMPORARY IRISH
LITERATURE¹***

Keywords: The Troubles; *conflict; reconciliation; ghost; Habermas; Derrida; Northern Ireland; Edna O'Brien; Deirdre Madden; Bernard MacLaverty.*

Abstract: *I will use trope of the Ghost so as to refer to the haunting legacy of the troubles in Irish literature. Some examples of the spectral effects that can be detected and the spooky language recurrently employed will be provided. I can advance that in the novels I am studying what I detect is the rejection of homogeneous, realist, chronologically ordered accounts of the topic. In O'Brien, Madden and MacLaverty the topic haunts the text. The fragmented, inconclusive, repetitive, incoherent and sometimes even misleading narratives proposed symbolize the difficulties that writers and protagonists have when dealing with transgenerational conflicts.*

Only by means of revisions, active rearrangements, meticulous but provisional evaluations can personal and social knowledge be reconstructed and transformed in the journey towards relief from suffering, redemption and reconciliation. And in this purpose the trope of the ghost is especially appropriate, since ghosts similarly to the effect produced by narratives on the troubles attract as well as repel us. They produce an uncanny effect that subverts dichotomies such as past vs. present, life vs. death, good vs. bad. The figure of the ghost has been used by writers and artists not only in reference to folklore and superstitions but, especially throughout the twentieth-century, in order to deal with those issues that "troubled" human beings and have kept on "haunting" modern men and women.

Ghosts cannot be defined, as French philosopher Jacques Derrida told us (Wolfreys x). They play with and subvert and exceed traditional dichotomies such as absence vs. presence, past vs. present, present vs. future; and they function according to their own logic, that Derrida has named "hauntology" as different from "ontology", the traditional Western way of thinking: "This logic of haunting would be merely larger and more powerful than an ontology or a thinking of Being (of the 'to be', assuming that it is a matter of Being in the 'to be or not to be,' but nothing is less certain)" (*Specters of Marx* 10); "A question of repetition: a specter is always a revenant. One cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (*Specters of Marx* 11).

* University of A Coruña, Spain; jmestevezsaa@udc.es

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Despite the impossibility of delimiting and grasping the notion, one of the most comprehensive “descriptions” (lacking a better word) has been provided by Stephen Dedalus, one of the protagonists of James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, when the young character says: “—What is a ghost? Stephen said with tingling energy. One who has faded into impalpability *through death, through absence, through change of manners*” (*Ulysses* 9, emphasis mine). This trope of the ghost, understood in Stephen’s terms seems to me especially appropriate when dealing with the topic of the Irish troubles and the dichotomy conflict vs. reconciliation in contemporary Irish literature. As we are going to see, it is through “absence” or rather through “change of manners” that the “Troubles” have become a ghostly presence that keeps on haunting Irish literature.

The euphemistic term “troubles” is used to refer to the political conflict suffered by Northern Ireland that separates Catholic Republicans from Protestant Loyalists, a conflict that has affected and is still “troubling” the whole of Ireland, including the Republic and England. The most violent period spread over more than three decades since the 1960s with the emergence of the Ulster Volunteer Force, an illegal paramilitary organization, and it continued during the 70s and 80s. There have been several ceasefires in 1994, 1996 and finally it took place the long-awaited Belfast Agreement of 1998. Despite the ceasefires, the progressive decommissioning of the IRA, or the establishment of a self-government in Northern-Ireland on the bases of power-sharing, and the consequent and ostensible reduction of violence, sectarian animosity still separates nowadays Catholic Nationalists from Protestant Unionists.

One of the aspects of the conflict I find more unsettling nowadays is the contemporary debate on the legacy of the Troubles and the establishment of a Consultative Group of the Past² whose function is mainly to consult the community on how the Northern-Irish society has to deal with the legacy of the conflict as well as to make recommendations for the future and to promote reconciliation.

Among the recommendations of the group, appointed by the Secretary of State in 2007 and whose report appeared on 2009, it figures the organization of a Reconciliation Forum to aid victims and survivors, the celebration of an annual Day of Reflection and Reconciliation, the payment of an amount of money to the relatives of the victims, including the families of paramilitary members, etc.

Derived from this group, a Legacy Commission was appointed whose main target was to:

- Ensure ongoing dialogue and engagement with all sectors of society
- Encourage the collection of stories
- Encourage organizations to adhere to good storytelling criteria and influence funding criteria to support storytelling with reconciliation at its heart

² The Group was co-chaired by Lord Robin Eames and Denis Bradley, and it had eight members. Its two international advisors were a former President of Finland and Nobel Prize Winner; and a South African lawyer and advisor to President Nelson Mandela who is an expert in mediation and institutional transformation. The Group also had a legal advisor.

Promote memorial projects across Northern Ireland and explore and develop ideas for a shared living memorial. (13)³

First of all, I would like to signal the emphasis put on memory, stories and storytelling as a medium of handling the past, assuming its legacy and transforming it into a process of reconciliation.

It is precisely the purpose of my reflection to revise the function of literature, stories, memory and language in the process of conflict and reconciliation in relation to the Irish Troubles. And it is my intention to comment on the possibilities as well as the limits of language for this purpose.

If we begin with the term, we shall agree that the euphemistic “Troubles” is a ghostly term in itself, referring as it does to a dramatic confrontation that has separated for decades families, neighbors, and fellow citizens, and that has been materialized in cruel acts of terrorism. The notion points towards an existing conflict but avoids a more direct way of naming it –sectarianism, violence, Civil War or Terrorism. But terrorism is also a ghostly notion, as philosophers Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas acknowledged when interviewed on occasion of the September 11th terrorist attacks in New York (*Philosophy in a Time of Terror*). Both thinkers recognized the impossibility of identifying, determining, recognising and, therefore, analysing this “something” that we call terrorism. Therefore, Habermas speaks about “a caesura in world history” and asserts that “one never really knows who one’s enemy is” and that “The terrorism we associate for the time being with the name ‘al-Qaeda’ makes the identification of the opponent and any realistic assessment of the danger impossible. This intangibility is what lends terrorism a new quality” (Borradori 29). Jacques Derrida goes even further when he also mentions the impossibility of determining, identifying and naming what terrorism is:

We perhaps have no concept and no meaning available to us to name in any other way this “thing” that has just happened, this supposed “event”. [...] “Something” took place, we have the feeling of not having seen it coming, and certain consequences undeniably follow upon the “thing”. But this very thing, the place and meaning of this “event”, remains ineffable, like an intuition without concept, like a unicity with no generality on the horizon or with no horizon at all. (Borradori 86)

Therefore, Derrida speaks of “repetition” as our only recourse when confronting this “thing” that language cannot determine, or define: “repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it’s talking about”; “as if to exorcise two times at one go: on the one hand, to conjure away, as if by magic, the ‘thing’ itself, the fear or the terror it inspires (for repetition always protects by neutralizing, deadening, distancing a traumatism, and this is true for the repetition of the televised images)”.

The troubles have nowadays turned into a ghost that still haunts Northern Ireland and occasionally the Republic, a ghost that is far from having been exorcised.

³ “Proposals by the Consultative Group of the Past. Summary Report. The Legacy Commission”. Community Dialogue. Steps into Dialogue Project. <http://www.comunitydialogue.org>.

It is my intention to put some examples that affect literature and that I consider symptomatic of the ghostly status of the conflict in the contemporary Irish socio-cultural atmosphere.

In literature, it is a well-known fact that many writers, both from the North and from the Republic of Ireland, have dealt with this issue. Some relevant authors and works we can recall are Bernard MacLaverty's *Cal* (1983), Frances Molloy's *No Mate for the Magpie* (1985), Glenn Patterson's *Burning Your Own* (1989), Jennifer Johnston's *Shadows on Our Skin* (1991), Owen McNamee's *Resurrection Man* (1994), Edna O'Brien's *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), Robert McLiam Wilson's *Eureka Street* (1996), Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996), or Deirdre Madden's *One by One in the Darkness* (1996), to name but a few. The recurrence of the topic in Irish literature (both in the literature written by Northern Irish writers and in many works by authors from the Republic) surely has to do with the attempt at exorcising the trauma that Jacques Derrida mentioned.

I will pay special attention to the cases of Edna O'Brien, Deirdre Madden and Bernard MacLaverty. We are referring respectively to an author from the Republic and to two Northern Irish writers. They are considered as representatives of the best literature that is coming from both frontiers of the island. Edna O'Brien is one of the most outstanding as well as polemic contemporary writers from the Republic of Ireland. Since the publication of the controversial *The Country Girls*, the writer has not avoided dealing with the most painful, traumatic and polemic issues that affect her native island. Thus, besides exposing sexuality, criticizing the Church, or denouncing violence, she has also approached the Irish conflict. In her novel *House of Splendid Isolation* (1994), O'Brien narrates the relationship between an Irish Republican Army terrorist (McGreevy, known as the Beast) and the elderly Irish woman (Josie O'Meara, an embittered Roman Catholic widow) who is his hostage. Edna O'Brien has never hidden her sympathies with political leaders such as Dominic "Mag Dog" McGlinchey –leader of the Irish National Liberation Army-, who inspired her novel *House of Splendid Isolation* and whom she has described as a "grave and reflective man", and she has also written in very positive terms about Gerry Adams for the *New York Times* in 1996, to whom she referred as "thoughtful about things, not bloodthirsty" (Cook).

The beginning of her novel is already symptomatic of the ghostly atmosphere and the haunting quality of the topic to be dealt with:

History is everywhere. It seeps into the soil, the sub-soil. [...] I hear messages. In the wind and in the passing of the wind. [...] or it could be these murmurs that come out of the earth. The earth so old and haunted, so hungry and replete. It talks. Things past and things yet to be. [...] Maybe it is that the dead do not die, but rather inhabit the place. (3)

This novel was written in 1994. In 2011, Edna O'Brien published a new collection of short stories significantly entitled *Saints and Sinners*. I have studied and commented elsewhere on these stories and assessed the evolution to be detected in her attitudes towards her fellow Irish men and Irish women. My conclusions were that eighty-

years-old O'Brien is more sympathetic and sensible to human foibles. We denote a more commiserate and less acrid attitude in her relation with Ireland and the Irish, always the main focus of her novels and short stories. Among the stories in *Saints and Sinners*, O'Brien includes at least one that deals again with violence and politics. It is entitled "Black Flower", and deals with an ex-convict, as a sort of elegy for an Irish Republican Army prisoner who is freed only to be murdered. The technique of O'Brien's story and her way of handling the topic of violence and sectarianism has changed a lot, from the realist presentation of the theme in her novel to the inconclusive, evasive, suggestive and symbolic treatment in the later composition. In "Black Flower" we are told the story of the ex-convict from the perspective of a friend of his, a woman who used to go to the prison to teach painting to the convicts. She gets on well with Shane, the Irish Republican prisoner, and they agree to meet once he is released from prison. The narrator and her tale are full of gaps that neither she nor Shane seem to be able to fill in. Despite their obvious friendship they have problems of communication. Shane was not in fact able to react when he was informed about the assassination of his wife and that his baby died soon afterwards. At a given point in the story the narrator tells that "He could not say what he most wanted to say" (75), and the meager account the reader receives of Shane's political stance is that "He had fought for what he believed in, which was for his country to be one, one land, one people and not have a shank of it cut off" (69). When asked by the narrator about his future plans now that he is a free man, their dialogue is full of gaps:

'Do you think you'll go back to ...'

'The fight isn't over... isn't done,' he said grimly. (*Saints and Sinners* 72)

Similarly, the governor of the prison seems unable to explain to the narrator the perils that await Shane once he gets out:

As he spoke she recalled the shiver she had felt as the governor told her that there were many people who wished Shane dead.

'You mean the Brits?'

'Them and his own ... feuds ... feuds... Put it this way, he'll always be a wanted man,' and he raised his arms to fend off questions. (*Saints and Sinners* 67)

At the end of the story, we witness the violent murder of Shane, without getting to know if his assassins were the Brits or his own people. The story does not judge either Shane or his death. A strange black flower that the narrator saw seems to symbolize Shane when we are told that "The petals were a soft, velvety black, with tiny green eyes, pinpoints, and there was something both beautiful and sinister about it" (64). The ambivalent symbolism of the flower and of the protagonist of the story applies also to the end of the tale:

There would be another death to undo his and still another and another in the long grim chain of reprisals. Hard to think that in the valleys murder lurked, as from the meadow there came not even a murmur, the lambs in their foetal sleep, innocent of slaughter. (*Saints and Sinner* 76)

What we detect in this text by O'Brien is, first of all, the continuing need of the writer of, once again, dealing with the topic of politics, violence and terrorism in Ireland. It seems to be a topic that still haunts the author and her work. The story itself has a ghostly quality and it is as important what is said in the text as the gaps that refer to missing information. Not only Shane the protagonist is a ghostly figure that uncannily attracts as well as frightens the narrator, but the narrative itself plays with and subverts the dichotomy presence vs. absence. The reader detects an author and a narrator intent on presenting a story that refuses to be told in conventional terms, a story that does not find an appropriate language that would convey the ambivalences and complexities inherent in the topic and in the protagonist: the beauty of the text as well as the cruelty of what it exposes, the humanity of Shane at the same time as his progressive alienation as victim and perpetrator of violence, his recently acquired freedom and his doomed entrapment, his condition as a living man destined to an impending death, the persistence of a understated conflict and vague attempts at an apparently impossible reconciliation.

Northern Irish writer Deirdre Madden gained popularity and literary recognition with the publication of her novel *One by One in the Darkness* (1996), in which she told the story of three sisters and the development of their lives after the violent assassination of their father. The novel, therefore, deals with the troubles in an overt way and describes the sisters' different ways of assuming the familial tragedy and their attempts at overcoming the subsequent trauma. Madden's literary career, after this success, has been oriented to what we can call more universal topics. She has focused, for instance, on the figure of the artist and in particular of the woman artist. Her novels have become intimate reflections on identity issues as well as metaliterary reflections on the condition of the artist and of art in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Thus, it could be certainly argued that she is, to a certain extent, departing from the Irish issues that had been her main concerns in her early literary career. However, the ghost of the troubles resurfaces once and again in novels that no longer focus on sectarianism in Ireland. This is the case of her, up to now, last novel *Molly Fox's Birthday* (2008), a novel centered on the artistic life of its protagonists, a nameless female narrator who is striving to write her next play, the actress that gives title to the novel and an art-historian male friend of both women. It is a highly intimate text in which the protagonists deal with the difficulties of knowing each other, the problems they have with their own selves and, given these musings on identity and subjectivity and taking into account that they are artists, they also reflect very much on characterization, the possibilities and limits of characterization.

It is precisely in the context of these musings on issues related to identity and subjectivity and on how to come to terms with them, that the ghostly figure of Billy is mentioned. As the reader discovers, Billy, known to all the protagonists, was murdered because of his Loyalist paramilitary activities. He resurfaces in the text as a ghostly figure that haunts them and that they certainly find it difficult to exorcise:

And yet when we made the series and I wrote the book, his was the one death that I couldn't bring myself to address. [...] Billy was killed. But it's also highly likely that he himself killed people too. He was deeply involved in Loyalist paramilitary activity.

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There's not the slightest doubt about that. Coming to terms with the idea that he was murdered was one thing. That he killed people, innocent people, is something else entirely. [...]

'It's great that the book is dedicated to him', I said, and he laughed.

'I suppose so. What kind of expiation is that? The best I could manage, but it would have been meaningless to the Billy I remember. Maybe I did it for myself. That's one thing the making of this series convinced me about –that memorials of any kind have more to do with the living than with the dead.' (*Molly Fox's Birthday* 197)

Billy represents one of the most spectral memories that the characters share, and the mere allusion or inclusion of such a character in Madden's last novel is also another instance of the author's spectral obsession with a topic that she had tried to remove from her fiction but that keeps on haunting her.

Bernard MacLaverty is another well representative writer from Northern Ireland. He has written novels and short stories. Similarly to the case of Madden, it was a novel on the troubles that gave him popularity. It was on occasion of the publication of *Cal* (1983), a very violent novel that describes the difficult life of the Northerner Catholic young man that gives title to the novel. The novel was adapted to film and Van Morrison wrote the soundtrack of the film version. All these circumstances undoubtedly contributed to make it one of the most representative novels on the topic. MacLaverty denounced in that work the entrapment of young men and women in Northern Ireland when the troubles were at their peak. In an interview MacLaverty acknowledged that coming from Northern Ireland as it was his case, it was difficult to avoid the topic since it was a circumstance one had to live with. Notwithstanding, his posterior literary career has demonstrated that the author has at least tried to overcome these initial concerns. One of his most successful and technically brilliant novels is entitled *Grace Notes* (1997). This novel is, in my opinion, a masterpiece. It has received very positive reviews but has not provided him with the same popularity and wide audience as *Cal*. And I find this quite significant. *Grace Notes* tells the story of a Catholic young woman, Catherine MacKenna from Northern Ireland who suffers a personal crisis when she breaks with her boyfriend, finds herself pregnant and finds not solace among the prejudiced sectarian attitudes of her family. Therefore, she opts for concentrating on her pregnancy and on developing a musical career as composer. The novel does not deal with the troubles or socio-political conflict in Northern Ireland in an overt way. Nevertheless, as it happened with O'Brien and with Madden, the topic haunts the narrative. Catholic Catherine wants to integrate the Lambeg drums⁴ in one of her musical compositions and this option instead of being assessed in musical terms is politically used by the press:

'A Roman Catholic using Protestant drums. The Lambeg angle.' Miss Bingham rolled her eyes.

⁴ A Lambeg drum is a large Irish drum, beaten with curved malacca canes. It is used primarily in Northern Ireland by Unionists and the Orange Order traditionally in street parades held in the summer, particularly on and around 12 July.

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‘They wanted to make a whole thing of it,’ said Catherine. ‘I said I just liked the sound.’

‘Good for you.’

‘But they *are* a great sound –they inspire intense feelings. Really complicated rhythms.’

‘That wouldn’t interest the press. All they want to get is a story about cementing the divide, or bridging the sectarian gulf.’ (*Grace Notes* 105)

The Lambeg drums are used by Catherine as cultural symbols that she is able to appreciate as such and wants to integrate in her musical composition. However, her move is interpreted in political terms. Something similar is happening with the well-known Murals in Northern Ireland nowadays.

In any case, the presence and allusion to the Lambeg drums functions as the spectre of a conflict that haunts an author, MacLaverty, and a novel, *Grace Notes*, that tries to avoid localisms and that favors more universal concerns: maternity, the woman artist, and the process of artistic gestation in itself.

The point I am trying to make is that these Irish writers are earnestly trying to overcome conflict and point in their fictions towards reconciliation. But it seems that they are not able to avoid in their texts the past and the troubles, but they look for new ways with which to deal with them. Traditional realist narratives do no longer seem appropriate, and punctual references haunt their literary works.

Trauma studies have offered us very appropriate and sound reflections on the literary treatment of personal and collective traumas, and the Northern Irish troubles are, undoubtedly, an intergenerational trauma. Michelle Balaev has rightly noticed that the traumatic experience maintains “the ability to interrupt consciousness and maintains the ability to be transferred to non-traumatized individuals and groups” (151). This, of course, applies very well to the case of Ireland and the Irish, and the traumatic legacy of the Troubles for the new generations. The first lesson that trauma studies have offered is related to the imperious need of recreating, repeating the traumatic episode. This effort is carried out once and again even though it has been also noticed that traumatic experience precludes knowledge and, hence, representation: “The origin of traumatic response is forever unknown and unintegrated; yet the ambiguous, literal event is ever-present and intrusive” (Balaev 151). Therefore, theorists on trauma have pointed out this inherent ambiguity, the inherent need of repetition and representation of the traumatic experience and its unavoidable unspeakable and unknowable nature (Caruth, Balaev, and others).

This seems to be the stance and the conclusion reached by the three Irish authors mentioned, O’Brien, Madden and MacLaverty. On the one hand, they do not or cannot avoid the legacy of the troubles. They have inherited the traumatic experience and it haunts their stories and their language. They earnestly try to exorcise these phantoms by conjuring them with words, but words and language falters them. They do not contemplate any more the use of realist representational narratives and they have had recourse to other types of narratives that signal the ghostly quality of the experience, and the haunting effect it produces.

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