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Entangled in Story: Narrative Ethics of Memory in Contemporary Irish Fiction

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13203192

The thesis is submitted to University College Dublin in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

Memory is not a static or innocuous representation of the past, but a continuing struggle over how best to understand, interpret, and communicate past events for present circumstances. This cultural preoccupation with the ethical work of memory has come to dominate the landscape of Irish fiction. Irish novels, written across a wide range of genres in the post-Celtic Tiger years, take on social, political, and cultural concerns about the way the past should be remembered. This thesis aims to investigate the way that conflicts of memory are depicted in contemporary Irish fiction, taking eight novels by eight different authors as case studies. I argue that these novels negotiate a narrative ethics of memory, whereby remembering as part of a community necessitates critical attention to, and responsibility for, the strategies used to construct, communicate, and respond to narratives about the past. The novel, as a complex narrative project, provides the ideal medium for thinking through the interrelation of multiple perspectives on the past, the communicative frameworks within which testimonies are produced and disseminated, and ethical concerns about aestheticizing painful histories. Through such narrative experiments, these authors explore the relationship between ways of telling the past and the creation of ethical environments for the present and future.
I hereby certify that the submitted work is my own work, was completed while registered as a candidate for the degree stated on the Title Page, and I have not obtained a degree elsewhere on the basis of the research presented in this submitted work.
INTRODUCTION

In an essay for the *London Review of Books*, Anne Enright draws on Sophocles’ play *Antigone* as a way of thinking about sites of contested burials in Ireland: in particular, the unmarked graves of hundreds of children at the Tuam Mother and Baby Home, discovered in 2014. Enright stresses that these burials primarily illuminate “the political use of the body after death” (“Antigone”) and, by extension, the political uses of memory. She suggests that the description of the mass grave as a “septic tank” - “the association with sewage, the implication that the bodies were not just carelessly buried, or even discarded, but treated like ‘filth’” (“Antigone”) - is what sparked outrage and public inquiry into the treatment of women and children at Tuam. Thus, Enright argues that the narration of these bodies is a mechanism of power, a means through which social values and official policies are negotiated. Textual analysis, it then follows, is “undoing the riddle of power” (“Antigone”).

Enright’s interest in the narrative components of memory, and the social and political functions of those narratives, crystallises a thematic concern in contemporary Irish culture, from Northern Irish peace-building initiatives such as Healing through Remembering, to contemporary art projects like *Asylum Archive*.¹ As these projects and Enright’s essay indicate, memory is not a static or innocuous representation of the past, but a continuing struggle over how best to understand, interpret, and communicate past events for present circumstances. And this cultural preoccupation with the ethical work of memory has come to dominate the landscape of Irish fiction.

¹ Healing Through Remembering promotes ethical standards for “storytelling and narrative work [as] the form of remembering most frequently offered as a vehicle for dealing with the past” (“Ethical Principles” 3). Vukasin Nedeljkovic’s *Asylum Archive* “creates a repository of asylum experiences” in order to facilitate “open… dialogue and discussion” (Nedeljkovic) about the degrading conditions of Direct Provision Centres in Ireland.
Irish novels, written across a wide range of genres in the post-Celtic Tiger years, take on social, political, and cultural concerns about the way the past should be remembered. This thesis aims to investigate the way that conflicts of memory are depicted in contemporary Irish fiction, taking eight novels by eight different authors as case studies. I argue that these novels negotiate a narrative ethics of memory, whereby remembering as part of a community necessitates critical attention to, and responsibility for, the strategies used to construct, communicate, and respond to narratives about the past. The novel, as a complex narrative project, provides the ideal medium for thinking through the interrelation of multiple perspectives on the past, the communicative frameworks within which testimonies are produced and disseminated, and ethical concerns about aestheticizing painful histories. Through such narrative experiments, these authors explore the relationship between ways of telling the past and the creation of ethical environments for the present and future.

**Memory Studies**

As a field, memory studies is concerned with “[h]ow past events are remembered, misremembered, understood, contested, forgotten, learned from and shared with others” (Kattago 1). While the parameters of this definition are deceptively simple – memory studies is, fundamentally, talking about the past - it also suggests what I consider to be the crux of this interdisciplinary study: memory is always in conflict. The past is never simply *told*. Its narratives are complex constructions, shaped by political, social, and individual concerns, and are countered, revised, bolstered, and supplemented by other versions. As this thesis contends, memory is an active, subjective process which, even in moments of private recollection, is socially informed.

Modern memory studies has its roots in the paradigm-shifting scientific work on memory from the early twentieth century. Maurice Halbwachs, in his 1925 sociological study *Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, introduced the term *mémoire collective* to denote the ways that all remembering is defined by social frameworks, both the literal social interactions in which memories are formed and recollected, and, metaphorically, the socially scripted patterns of thinking that shape individual perceptions. Similarly, psychologist
Frederic Bartlett argued for a reconstructive theory of memory in his 1920 study “Some Experiments on the Reproduction of Folk-Stories,” suggesting that memories are “distorted” according to the rememberer’s social schemata. When art historian Aby Warburg posited a parallel between early work in the neuropsychology of memory storage and retrieval – Richard Semon theorised in 1904 that memories are stored in the brain as engrams which are later activated by an *ecphoric stimulus* or associational cue (*The Mneme*) – and the use of symbols as a kind of cultural memory storage (*Mnemosyne*), the groundwork had been established for an interdisciplinary reimagining of memory as an active, subjective, and social project.

These revolutionary ideas developed over the next several decades into what has been termed the “memory boom” of the 1980s and 1990s, which saw widespread debates about memory in the cultural, social, and natural sciences (Huyssen 5). In academic narrations of the field’s development, Pierre Nora and Jan and Aleida Assman are generally credited with galvanising the modern study of memory (see Erll’s “Short History of Memory Studies” in *Memory in Culture*). Nora’s *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory, the idea that monuments and other “landmark” events or people serve as placeholders for a more organic cultural memory, introduced a distinction between memory and history that continues to invite debate (“Between Memory”), while the Assmanns’ “Cultural Memory” – distinguished from “communicative memory” as a more ritualised commemoration of a “mythic” past (*Cultural Memory*) – has, in Erll’s terms, “proved to be the most influential approach of memory studies in the German-speaking world” (27).

However, the modern “memory boom” also developed amidst a host of other academic and cultural movements concerned with ways of telling the past. The “narrative turn” in the academy during roughly these same years, for example, saw the work of historian Hayden White and psychologist Jerome Bruner insist on the distinctly *narrative* qualities of, respectively, historiography and autobiographical memory (White, “The Value of Narrativity”; Bruner, “Life as Narrative”). Because modern memory studies harbours such a narrative preoccupation, I would suggest that these foundational innovations have made it difficult to think about the past as anything *other* than narrative. Outside the academy, the 1980s also saw the
so-called “Memory Wars,” a controversy originating in the American court system about the reliability of repressed and recovered memories of child sexual abuse. Psychologist Elizabeth Loftus, among others, used scientific studies on the malleability of memory to generate a widespread legal and social mistrust in memory’s truthfulness; as she somewhat sensationally puts it, “[O]ur grasp on reality is so provisional... [R]eality in fact is impenetrable and unfathomable because it is only what we remember, and what we remember is rarely the literal truth” (*The Myth of Repressed Memory* 4).

Finally, the medicalisation of “post-traumatic stress disorder” in the same era, along with developments in the field of Holocaust studies, produced a burgeoning interest in the individual and social experience of trauma that has become one of, if not the, defining focus of memory studies as we know it.² As Pierre Nora famously suggested, and as scholars of memory are fond of repeating, “Whoever says memory, says Shoah” (Nora, qtd. in Winter 5).

I give this overview in order to emphasise two things. First, it is important to recognise that many of the privileged concepts in the field of memory studies are products of their time. It is not that the conceptual frameworks of narrative, trauma, or even the nation are inadequate to the understanding of memory - certainly, this thesis draws heavily on all three - but that these interests are cultural predispositions and hardly the only ways to conceive the project of remembering. In fact, much recent work in memory studies has been devoted to questioning these interpretive structures. Richard Kearney suggests that “the linguistic turn to the text was often construed as a turning away from the flesh” (“The Wager,” emphasis in original), and he proposes a “carnal hermeneutics” to reintroduce embodied forms of knowledge into hermeneutic thought. Susannah Radstone critiques the “new theoretical orthodoxy” of trauma studies within the humanities (10). And Michael Rothberg’s “multidirectional memory,” promoting an “interaction of different historical memories [to] illustrate [a] productive,

² Traverso and Broderick write, “[I]t is possible to affirm that the emergence of trauma studies occurred when scholars engaging critically with the concept of trauma within Holocaust studies began to apply trauma-related debates - initially elaborated in unique reference to the Holocaust - to other catastrophic historical experiences. Since that development, the 1990s debates about how historical and political events, in particular catastrophic ones, connect with trauma and memory, both at the subjective and cultural levels, have increased in quantity, intensity, and complexity” (6).
intercultural dynamic” (3) counter to understandings of cultural memory as strictly nationalist and competitive, has fuelled a new wave of transnational and transcultural memory studies.

Second, I want to highlight that, even while many of the central tenets of memory studies - listening to victims’ stories, questioning Grand Narratives, remembering the horrors of the past so as not to repeat them - appear to add up to a sort of humanitarian ethics, the ethical trajectory of the “memory boom” is far from unified. While Kattago triumphantly states in her introduction to The Ashgate Research Companion to Memory Studies that “the witness... has become the authoritative voice of the past,” a shift in values “connected to waves of democratisation in Europe, Latin America and South Africa” (9), we also see in the cultural influence of Elizabeth Loftus a dangerous tendency to discredit, in particular, women’s testimonies3 on the grounds that “memories are flexible and superimposable, a panoramic blackboard with an endless supply of chalk and erasers” (3). As feminist philosopher Sue Campbell writes, “[R]ecognition of the multiplicity of social influences on our changing experience of the past can cast significant doubt on the reliability of persons’ claims to have been harmed... and it may continue to threaten inappropriately the credibility of those vulnerable to harm” (Our Faithfulness 50-1). The scientific discoveries and theoretical approaches of memory studies do not, in themselves, solve any ethical dilemmas about how the past should be experienced, narrated, or shared. Rather, they provide a set of conceptual tools for navigating conflicts about the meanings and values of the stories we tell about the past.

Irish Memory Studies
Within the field of Irish memory studies, a number of topics have become cornerstones of inquiry and debate: the Troubles in Northern Ireland, the

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3 Sue Campbell argues that the “Memory Wars,” and subsequent debates about “false memories” of sexual abuse, “fortif[ied] a theoretical consensus about the reconstructive nature of remembering in the context of a growing social skepticism about the epistemic fidelity of women’s projects of self-constitution. Some of the most publicly influential voices in these debates, for example, forensic psychologist Elizabeth Loftus and sociologist Richard Ofshe, explicitly encouraged this skepticism... and women who suffered sexual abuse have certainly felt its effects in, for example, the increased legal scrutiny of their therapy relationships... and in responses to their disclosures or suspicions of abuse” (Our Faithfulness 56).
Famine and subsequent mass emigration, Magdalene Laundries and other institutions in Ireland’s “architecture of containment”, and Easter 1916 and the legacy of British colonialism. Irish memory studies, like memory studies more broadly, has a tendency to focus on problems of memory. As Avishai Margalit suggests, there is a strong ethical justification for this “negative” focus:

> Why ought humanity to remember moral nightmares rather than moments of human triumph - moments in which human beings behaved nobly? [...] [T]he issue for us to sort out is what humanity ought to remember rather than what is good for humanity to remember. There is an asymmetry between protecting morality and promoting it. Promoting is highly desirable. Protecting is a must. (The Ethics of Memory 82-3)

In fact, as this thesis argues, devoting critical attention to painful and damaging memories allows for a productive reconsideration of what can and should constitute “good” remembering; while the categorical distinctions might appear transparent, they are, in practice, often difficult to disentangle.

Given this focus on Ireland’s memory problems, it is perhaps unsurprising that the primary framework of Irish memory studies is trauma. As Emilie Pine argues, “[T]raumatic memory has become the dominant way of seeing, of understanding, and of communicating, the Irish past” (The Politics of Irish Memory 5). In many ways, the trauma framework seems a natural and appealing lens for the study of memory in Ireland. First, victim support for survivors of the Troubles and institutional abuse is often narrated in terms of trauma. Graham Dawson argues that an “orthodox discourse of trauma has flourished in policy and practice concerning provision of support for victims of Troubles-related violence” (86). The Ryan Report, in delineating the reasons for establishing the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, explains that “it was felt that a Commission could begin a process for victims of abuse... so that they could work through their pain and trauma” (1.64). Second, the therapeutic strategies of trauma - narrativising the traumatic experience, recuperating individual agency, the pop psychology language of “working through” and “closure” - are highly adaptable, and promote a comforting
belief in “the ‘healing’ potential of storytelling in relation to the trauma of a still-present past” (Dawson 88).

However, the ubiquity of trauma in narrations of Ireland’s past carries its own problems, as well. Dawson, drawing on Susannah Radstone’s work, argues that the medical discourse of trauma disguises the social and political forces underlying Troubles-related problems of memory (87). Furthermore, its distinction between the “passive victim” and the “privileged position [of] the trained cultural analyst” (Dawson 85), who has the knowledge and authority to interpret the traumatic experience, normalises a highly problematic institutional power dynamic whereby survivors are further alienated from their own stories.

While I do use trauma theory in this thesis, especially where the novels I consider explicitly draw on the trauma paradigm, my overall analysis of these texts utilises a deliberately broad spectrum of theoretical approaches: from performance theory to gender studies, psychoanalysis to moral philosophy. In this way, my own work addresses a wide range of memory problems - not just the “traumatised,” but the politically disenfranchised and the culturally marginalised - as well as a variety of “solutions.” Most of these strategies are conceived as narrative projects, not in the narrow sense of “integrat[ing]” the traumatic experience “into a completed story of the past” (Caruth “Introduction” 153), but attending, for example, to the cultural narratives or schemata which enable certain kinds of stories to be told, or to the establishment of a collaborative and equitable approach to narrating the past.

The Problems and Potential of Memory as Narrative

Given the subjective, reconstructive nature of memory, one of the most important reconceptions of memory in recent years involves its reliance on narrative structures. Narrative informs both the ways the past is told and also, perhaps less obviously, the ways that our individual and collective lives are experienced. Jerome Bruner explains,

We seem to have no other way of describing ‘lived time’ save in the form of a narrative. […] But the issue I wish to address… is this: eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic
processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very ‘events’ of a life. (“Life as Narrative” 692-4)

These two interrelated “levels” of memory narratives correspond to the distinction that narrative theorists have identified between so-called “thick” narratives and broader narrative frames. James Phelan writes, “At one end of a wide spectrum are narratives offering thick descriptions... concrete details of time, place, character and event... At the other end of the spectrum are narratives that stand above the myriad details of experience, using the mode’s finite means in the service of abstraction and simplification” (“Narratives in Contest” 167). Given this plasticity of the narrative form - narrative is, essentially, the act of “interpreting [events’] causes and consequences in relation to other events we consider related” (Kafalenos ix) - it is difficult to imagine any form of experiencing, understanding, or communicating the past that is not influenced by a narrative sensibility.

Of course, as I have mentioned, current directions in memory studies inform us that memory is clearly not reducible to narrative: it is also sensory and embodied. Even so, I argue that critical attention to these extra-narrative components of memory do not overturn our thinking about narrative so much as expand it. For example, Kearney’s recent work on “carnal hermeneutics” suggests that a hermeneutic approach to the body illuminates the ways that forms of sensory remembering, much like linguistic ones, can be understood as interpretive activity organised within larger causal networks of meaning. “[W]e are constantly reading flesh, interpreting senses, and orienting bodies in passion and place” (“The Wager of Carnal Hermeneutics” 17, emphasis in original).

Similarly, while a narrative understanding of memory has informed a contemporary humanitarian ethics - the importance of listening to marginalised voices, of allowing a multiplicity of memory narratives, and of questioning dominant cultural and political narratives about the past is by now well recognised - these basic orientations are estimable though considerably more complicated in practice. Further critical thinking about a particularly narrative ethics illuminates both the problems and the
possibilities of telling stories about the past within communities. For instance, Margalit notes that “[m]aking the traumatic, repressed communal memories open, explicit, and conscious... is said to have healing power,” although “memory breathes revenge as often as it breathes reconciliation, and the hope of reaching catharsis through liberated memories might turn out to be an illusion” (5). In other words, the therapeutic potential of the narrative construction and exchange of memories is highly contingent: which types of narratives, then, and which structures of dialogue and debate, actually promote ethical remembering?

In thinking through these ethical questions, I draw extensively on the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, whose work on memory, narrative, and ethics has considerably shaped the arguments of this thesis. Ricoeur, building on a narrative understanding of memory and identity, develops a framework of the self that is profoundly interpersonal: “[T]he life history of each of us is caught up in the histories of others... By narrating a life of which I am not the author as to its existence, I make myself its coauthor as to its meaning” (Oneself as Another 161-2). Based on this framework, Ricoeur’s ethical vision centres around “a model of memory-exchange... of taking responsibility, in imagination and in sympathy, for the story of the other” (“Reflections” 6-7). Through engaging in this “complex intertwining of new stories which structure and configure the crossroads between memories” (“Reflections” 7), Ricoeur suggests that narratives of the past can be revised and new trajectories can be imagined for the future. For instance, he imagines forgiveness as “a mutual revision” of the past (“Reflections” 10), effecting an “appeased memory [which] does not seek to forget the evil suffered or committed. It seeks rather to speak of it without anger” (“Memory, History, Forgiveness” 11). And by bringing this creative energy to narrative projects of memory, Ricoeur proposes a hopeful vision of the future: “[T]he past is not only what is bygone... it also lives in the memory thanks to arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted. [...] The past is a cemetery of promises which have not been kept. It is a matter of bringing them back to life” (“Reflections” 8-9). Ricoeur’s work on the narrative dimensions of memory thus provides a clear and complex framework for navigating ethical dilemmas about the past.
Towards a Narrative Ethics of Memory

What I propose in this thesis, therefore, is a narrative ethics of memory: a critical analysis of the ways that narrative works - how its forms and structures of representation produce social, cultural, and political effects - and can be used to address situations of contested or painful memory. This argument rests on two basic principles. First, narratives both express and influence power relationships: the former, in the ways they represent agency and causation; and the latter, in the ways they circulate, shaping the world they represent. Given narratives’ primary concern with patterns of cause and effect, Kafalenos argues that “narratives of many genres are often explorations of power: the power of intentional actions in relation to the power of random forces, and the power that causes a... disruption in relation to the power that a [protagonist] needs to resolve it” (67). Furthermore, in much the same way that, as Bruner argues, the narratives we tell about our past eventually structure our experience of the present, Foucault famously imagines power as the circulation of narratives: “Discourse transmits and produces power,” he writes; “[I]t reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it” (The History of Sexuality 101).

Second, imbalanced or unstable power relationships are the site of ethics. Ricoeur argues that personal responsibility, as the decision to act according to ethical principles, derives from “the appeal coming from fragility” (“Fragility and Responsibility” 16). Fragility, which he understands as “both what is perishable through natural weakness and what is threatened under the blows of historical violence” (15), calls for action by virtue of an intrinsic relation... with the idea of responsibility. [...] We feel... required or enjoined by the fragile to do something, to help... The appeal, the injunction, and also the trust which proceed from the fragile, result in its being always another who declares us responsible... Another, by relying on me, renders me accountable for my acts. (17, emphasis in original)

Responsibility, and hence ethics, can be understood as a response and intervention into unequal relationships of power.
Taken together, these two principles suggest that narratives are uniquely suited to a particular type of ethical enquiry. Adam Zachary Newton, in his ground-breaking monograph *Narrative Ethics*, concisely delineates three means by which narratives inherently engage in ethical questions. He writes, 

“...comprises: (1) a narrational ethics (in this case, signifying the exigent conditions and consequences of the narrative act itself); (2) a representational ethics (the costs incurred in fictionalizing oneself or others by exchanging “person” for “character”); and (3) a hermeneutic ethics (the ethico-critical accountability which acts of reading hold their readers to).” (18)

These tenets of narrative ethics, I suggest, can work to address some major problems of memory. For example: What is the role of empathy in ethical remembering? What responsibilities do we have to the others who become part of the stories we tell about the past? And, finally, what responsibilities do we have as witnesses, both to “real world” events and to the narratives we encounter? Thinking about narrational ethics - the rights and responsibilities of those in a rhetorical situation: tellers, listeners, and witnesses, as well as the “remediation” of these narratives and exchanges as they are repeatedly circulated in new media (Erll and Rigney 4) - can help address questions of how to approach contested memories, how to balance a search for truth with respect for the individuals involved, and to what extent one is responsible for imaginatively engaging with the perspectives of others. Representational ethics, concerned with “the gains, losses, and risks taken up when selves represent or are represented by others” (Newton 18), can aid in thinking through the relationship between narrative causalities in textual representations and power relationships in the “real world.” And hermeneutic ethics, in its attention to the ways that narrative encounters can, and sometimes *should*, change our thoughts and practices, provides a way of imagining the ethical implications of our roles as witnesses.

In *Love’s Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum argues that the novel is an especially appropriate medium for the exploration of ethical values. Given the “organic connection” between form and content, Nussbaum contends that “certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in
the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist” (4-5). A philosophical stance on the centrality of emotion to human cognition, for instance, cannot be convincingly argued in purely logical language (7). In the texts I analyse in this thesis, I argue that the authors utilise the particularities of the novel’s narrative form - including shifting perspectives, disrupted timelines, and reinterpreted generic frameworks - in order to develop a narrative ethics of memory that prioritises, for example, narrative multiplicity, revision, and questioning dominant social frameworks.

In essence, the critical work performed in this thesis involves reading these novels as ethical projects, a form of ethical criticism which, at first glance, might appear to be somewhat too prescriptive. While such concerns about the general scholarly project of ethical criticism have been more fully addressed elsewhere, I would like briefly to attend to two apprehensions about this approach to literature which most directly inform my work. First, the distinction between ethics and morality speaks precisely to the very real concern about the flexibility of the framework shaping one’s values and behaviours. Though the nuances are subject to ongoing philosophical debate, one might reasonably distinguish between “ethics as ethical sensibility or orientation and... morality as codes of rules (‘specific obligations governing concrete situations in a social context’)” (Buell 14). Rather than promoting specific values, therefore, my analysis seeks to address the complexity of the dilemmas which necessitate value judgements, as well as the strategies used to implement those values, and the consequences arising from their conflict with other ethical orientations.

Second, another concern about the project of ethical criticism involves the distinction between ethics and politics. While the difference between these terms is perhaps even more contested than that between ethics and morality, it revolves around the “vexing problem of the relation or distinction between the personal and the socio-political” (Buell 14). In other words, some consider ethics to be the domain of private moral deliberation, to the detriment of interpersonal and systemic contexts in which those personal decisions are made. To such concerns, I can only reference, once again, the

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4 See, for example, Michael Eskin’s “Introduction: The Double ‘Turn’ to Ethics and Literature?” and Lawrence Buell’s “In Pursuit of Ethics.”
work of Ricoeur, whose ethical philosophy begins with an understanding of the self that is, at its core, interpersonal. Within this thesis, I consider the individual and social “problems” of memory to be inextricable from one another, and I bracket my engagement with all of them under the term “ethics.”

Thus, while I do not consider this work, reading novels as ethical projects, to be overly prescriptive, I do acknowledge that, as with any critical lens, it is limiting. Along with Phelan, “I do not want to adopt... Newton’s idea that narrative is equivalent to ethics because that seems not to recognize all the other things narrative is as well” (Living to Tell about It 22, emphasis mine). That being said, I believe this approach to be a valuable framework for these novels especially, as I have chosen texts which foreground ethical dilemmas about understanding and communicating past events. More generally, however, while it would be reductive to claim that narrative is only, or even primarily, concerned with ethical issues, I also believe that the assessment of ethical values constitutes a fundamental, though often overlooked, component of human storytelling. As Marshall Gregory writes,

> the arc of a particular plot is also the arc of a particular ethical trajectory. The plot shows how people in stories become the persons they turn out to be, and our participation in their movement from Point A to Point B and beyond involves us in assuming beliefs, having feelings, and making judgments that, once we have made them, exert pressure on the ethical trajectory of our own lives. (99, emphasis in original)

Thus, within this thesis, I begin with the deliberately narrow focus of particular ethical questions in order to interrogate the texts’ broader engagements with the narrative structures of both genre and socio-political constructs.

**Narrative Ethics of Memory in Contemporary Irish Fiction**

The novels under consideration in this thesis were written in Ireland’s post-Celtic Tiger era, between 2007 and 2014. These years have seen intense debate on a number of social issues involving practices of cultural memory. The crash of the Celtic Tiger in 2008, often figured as a “communal trauma”
(Erikson), prompted a retrospective reevaluation of the narratives underlying Irish collective identity. The 2009 findings of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse, commonly known as the Ryan Report, detailed the abuse and neglect of children endemic in state-funded and Church-operated institutions throughout the twentieth century, encouraging public conversation about a history that had been largely ignored in Irish society. Similarly, the public inquiry into the abuse of women in Magdalene Laundries, culminating in a published report and formal state apology in 2013, also revealed the extent of women’s marginalization - in body and in narrative, as they were hidden away in institutions and their stories were not heard. Northern Ireland’s Haass talks of 2013, organised to address disagreements about parades, flags, and the legacy of the Troubles, ended without resolution, indicating the persistence of dividing lines between Northern Ireland’s disparate communities of memory.

All of the primary texts I analyse in this thesis respond to one or more of the above problems of memory, although I have organised my chapters according to two different approaches. The first two chapters focus on genre - particular narrative approaches to these problems, namely detective fiction and life writing - while the latter two chapters focus on the problems themselves - the crash of the Celtic Tiger and witnessing institutional and clerical abuse. While the arguments of each chapter address the role of narrative ethics in responding to these problems, I have organised the chapters in this way to give equal emphasis to both what is remembered and how it is remembered. Therefore, the first two chapters illustrate how similar narrative techniques can be used to different ethical ends, while the latter two chapters demonstrate contrasting narrative techniques for similar problems. In each chapter, I perform a close reading of two novels in order to illuminate their particular ethical arguments, as well as a comparative analysis of their respective approaches.

The first chapter considers how two contemporary Irish detective novels - Brian McGilloway’s *The Nameless Dead* (2012) and Tana French’s *In the Woods* (2007) - negotiate the ethical aim of finding the truth about the past while balancing the often conflicting demand of respecting the individuals who produce incompatible memory narratives. Debate about
memory’s reliability has taken place largely within a judicial context, which has influenced perception about the goal of memory - “the truth” as a single, authoritative narrative - while simultaneously dismantling the authority of the individual rememberer to make truth claims: witness testimony is perceived as unreliable when weighed against “objective” forensic evidence, even though the act of interpreting that evidence is also a narrative project. Furthermore, many scientific accounts of memory render influence on individual memory as distortion, whereas memory is best understood as social. Therefore, establishing “truth” requires an ethical arbitration of difference between conflicting memories. McGilloway’s The Nameless Dead suggests that this gap is best bridged through empathy, while French’s In the Woods questions the necessity of empathetic engagement, positing instead an ethics of dissonance and a responsibility to reevaluate one’s own narratives.

The second chapter reads Sebastian Barry’s The Secret Scripture (2008) and Joseph O’Connor’s Ghost Light (2010) as genre-blurring experiments between autobiography, biography, and fiction which address the fundamentally narrative and social dimensions of personal identity. Narrative, as the essential tool for organising, collecting, and cohering the self, is also what makes it circulable among others. These two novels engage with what James Smith terms Ireland’s “duty to remember” (91) the women left out of the Irish story. These women have not only been forgotten by history, but, having their stories misnarrated by others, their own narrative agency has also been disabled. This chapter considers the interpersonal negotiations of power in the construction of self-narratives, and how narratives gain social power by being accepted as truth. Reclaiming narrative agency is figured as sharing the autobiographical project with another, in an ethical partnership or with a responsible witness.

Chapter three focuses on the crash of the Celtic Tiger, where Ireland’s economic collapse, represented as a communal trauma and narrative crash, reveals traditional, culturally dominant social narratives as inadequate to present circumstances. Donal Ryan’s The Spinning Heart (2012) and Anne Enright’s The Forgotten Waltz (2011) use the image of the family home to discuss traditional narratives of family which are disrupted, devalued, and threatened by the collapse of the housing market. The protagonists of both
novels struggle with the inheritance of family structures, both literal and figurative, which they no longer want, and through this struggle, they reimagine the family unit. Ryan figures the patrilineal structure of Irish society as a traumatic past which perpetually repeats itself, though he suggests that this narrative can be productively revised. Enright also critiques patriarchal narratives, though on the grounds that they obscure women. Instead, she proposes a maternal genealogy, a more flexible framework which uses the past creatively to accomplish change and hope for the future.

Finally, chapter four argues that novels about institutional child abuse since the publication of the Ryan Report move the conversation in a new direction: rather than using “anti-nostalgia” which “allows contemporary audiences to distance themselves from the implications of what they are seeing” (Pine 48), they focus instead on how media coverage has changed the ways that testimonies are produced and witnessed, and why abuse continues to happen despite widespread knowledge about the causes and conditions of such abuse. Paul Murray’s *Skippy Dies* (2010) and John Boyne’s *A History of Loneliness* (2014) consider the challenges of ethical witnessing, both individually and as a society. Murray imagines witnessing as a *re-vision* of the past, rethinking earlier assumptions with the clarity of hindsight and a new perspective gained through awareness of the narrative schemata structuring our perception. Some narrative frameworks, he proposes, facilitate ethical witnessing, while others obscure the traumatised subject. Boyne suggests that mass media structures its audience as a particular kind of witness; the media witness is largely passive and analytical. This kind of witnessing is often problematic but promises productive potential: with an attendant reconception of social responsibility, the media witness’s “detached” position enables the imagination of new avenues for social intervention.

The stories that these novels tell about memory and history, like “the Magdalene story” (“Antigone”) that Enright discusses, represent the effort to make sense of the past as a complex and interpersonal narrative project, “people maddened by information, misinformation, lies and ledgers” as well as “the voices of the women” (“Antigone”) who represent the marginalised, silenced, and forgotten. Ricoeur writes that “the impediments imposed to the work of memory... become in their turn the opportunity for uses and abuses of
forgetting” (*Memory, History, Forgetting* 428-9), so that the work of memory becomes animated by an ethical imperative: “[I]t is justice that turns memory into a project” (*Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting* 88). In what follows, I will demonstrate how the projects of memory undertaken in contemporary Irish fiction imagine the fulfilment of these ethical trajectories.
CHAPTER 1

“GIVE THAT CHILD A STORY”: EMPATHY AND COLLABORATIVE REMEMBERING IN IRISH DETECTIVE NOVELS

At first, I could not reach him. He leaned forward a little more, his fingers brushing the tips of mine. With an effort, I shifted my position towards him, until I felt him grip my hand and the tug as he tried to pull me from the mire.

Brian McGilloway, The Nameless Dead

I will come back to this story again and again, in any number of different ways.

Tana French, In the Woods

Introduction

Sherlock Holmes, perhaps the most well-known and influential literary detective, famously pronounced, “[W]hen you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth” (Doyle, “The Sign of the Four,” emphasis in original). While Holmes’s unique skills “grant him the authority to tell a truth that is otherwise undiscoverable” (Thomas 1-2), this kind of confidence in the detective’s ability to find and explain “the truth” is complicated in the contemporary Irish detective novels of Tana French and Brian McGilloway. Detective Rob Ryan’s opening lines in French’s 2007 novel In the Woods, for example, inspire more doubt than confidence: “What I warn you to remember is that I am a detective. Our relationship with truth is fundamental but cracked, refracting confusingly like fragmented glass” (3). McGilloway’s Inspector Benedict Devlin, meanwhile, begins The Nameless Dead (2012) by discovering the remains of numerous murder victims that he is legally prohibited from investigating: “The Commission’s task... was not to investigate the killings or to establish motives for them... no forensic analysis would occur, nor would notes be passed to the police” (13). The basic narrative arc of these novels remains relatively true to the “objective of most detective stories” (Thomas 4); the detective, in the end, successfully “tell[s] the story of a past event that remains otherwise
unknown and unexplained by fixing the identity of the suspect and filling in the blanks of a broken story” (Thomas 4). As this chapter argues, however, French and McGilloway suggest that finding the truth about the past necessitates a complex narrative project, utilising empathetic but critical dialogue to navigate the social power dynamics which influence which narratives are made to function as true.

The “current explosion in Irish crime fiction” (Burke 9) might be attributed, at least in part, to its tendency to engage in social critique. Fintan O’Toole suggests, for example, that “[t]he problem posed by Irish crime is not, as in the classic detective story... the struggle to uncover the truth, but in the refusal of the community to act on what it knows” (“From Chandler”). If “Irish Studies has tended to associate crime fiction with literature of the Celtic Tiger” (Cliff 33) and its subsequent social disruptions, the development of the genre has also been posited as a response to a number of other contemporary issues: “Veronica Guerin’s murder. The end of the thirty-year ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland... The rise and rise of criminal gangs, and soaring gangland murders. The declining reputations of the Church and the political, legal, and financial institutions” (Burke 9). The wealth of Irish crime fiction addressing such topics suggest a generic commitment to unravelling the “truths” of systemic injustice alongside the investigation of individual crimes. In its engagement with this type of social commentary, Irish crime fiction bears a critical similarity to contemporary Scandinavian crime fiction, which is generally recognised as being “centrally and enthusiastically engaged in a critique of the... welfare state” (Robbins, “The Detective is Suspended”). Bruce Robbins persuasively argues that the terms of this critique are not as self-evident as popular opinion might have it, positing instead that the genre’s thematic preoccupation with systemic injustice becomes the subject of rigorous scrutiny in each textual iteration: “In order to see [its] progressivism, you have to look at the texts themselves, not just as symptoms

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5 See, for example, Ken Bruen’s Jack Taylor series, which frequently features critiques of the Catholic Church (especially The Magdalen Martyrs (2006) and Priest (2007)); the mystery thrillers of Alan Glynn (Winterland (2008), Bloodland (2011), and Graveland (2013)), which connect Celtic Tiger Dublin to an international network of political and financial intrigue; and the strong tradition of crime novels set in the fragile peace of post-Agreement Northern Ireland (a few examples include Colin Bateman, Eoin McNamee, Claire McGowan, Adrian McKinty, and Stuart Neville).
of the Zeitgeist but... as works of art, in strenuous dialogue with themselves” ("The Detective is Suspended"). In applying this type of analysis to Irish crime fiction, I argue that the genre is very often the site of meaningful ethical debate about topics of widespread social and political concern.

Not only is Irish crime fiction considered by some to be “the nearest thing we have to a realist literature adequate to capturing the nature of contemporary society” (O’Toole, “From Chandler,” emphasis mine), but its tendency to address “unhealed historical scars” (Mannion 2) - socially contentious past events including, as in McGilloway’s novel, the Troubles and Ireland’s architecture of containment - indicates an awareness in such works of the complex relationship between past and present, and an interest in reevaluating the ways that the past is narrated and understood. While detective fiction is, as I have mentioned, generically concerned with “tell[ing] the story of a past event” (Thomas 4), an “unhealed” past necessitates a retelling. While these characteristics are especially prominent in contemporary Irish crime fiction, in fact, it might be argued that they are idiomatic of crime fiction more generally. For example, Bruce Murphy identifies the “transhistorical mystery” as a subgenre of crime fiction which features “shift[ing] back and forth in time” (247) as the detective investigates an historical event with contemporary ramifications, while John Scaggs provocatively claims that “all crime fiction is trans-historical” (125) given the “fundamental duality” of the genre. As Todorov writes, crime fiction “contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation” (44). Moreover, given these narrative and temporal trademarks of the genre, Scaggs also argues that “Crime narratives... are, by default, metanarratives. They are narratives about narratives, or stories about reconstructing and interpreting the story of a crime” (142-3). As such, crime fiction is ideally suited to a reading which emphasises the narrative ethics of memory.

As this chapter will argue, the contemporary Irish detective novels of Brian McGilloway and Tana French are concerned with painful histories that have already been narrated - often in numerous and conflicting versions - but which continue to haunt. Read through the lens of memory studies, I suggest that these novels imagine the detective’s investigation as a memory project:
addressing the process of recollecting and narrating the past, McGilloway and French explore various ethical strategies for remembering with others in an attempt not simply to find “the truth” but to find “healing.”

**Memory, Forensic Sciences, and the Generic Development of Detective Fiction**

Ian Campbell Ross, as he traces the “long history” (14) of crime fiction, observes that “[c]hanging times result in changing methods of uncovering the truth” (16). The development of detective fiction as a genre coincided with the advancement of forensic sciences in the nineteenth century (Thomas 3), and both of these movements speak to a growing mistrust in the reliability of memory as a means of accessing the past. In his *A Treatise on Judicial Evidence* published in 1825, Jeremy Bentham catalogues the various types of evidence that may be used in a court of law, and painstakingly reviews the “proving power” of each. Of the memory of witnesses, he writes,

> Forgetfulness is not the only defect to which memory is susceptible; there is another - erroneous recollections, *false recollections*, if we may give them that name. Without the least intention to depart from the truth, without the slightest consciousness of his error, a person may have a supposed recollection, false not only in some circumstance, but false throughout. (25, emphasis in original)

Rather than seeing in these pitfalls the ultimate unreliability of personal testimony, Bentham explains with confidence and precision how a judge might still determine the truth. The sheer number of such potential “transgressions of testimony,” however, indicates a certain amount of anxiety concerning memory’s reliability, and the enormous responsibility placed on the expert who must “read” the witnesses.

The innovations in forensic science were a kind of remedy to this imperfect system, providing courts of law with what is perceived to be a more reliable access to the past. Such forensic developments of the nineteenth century include an early prototype of the lie detector, the use of photography in criminal profiling and identification, and fingerprinting technology (Thomas). Although the lie detector was intended to allow the judge to have
greater certainty when “reading” the witness or suspect, the lie detector in fact helped to destabilise the reliability of testimony even further: “What their sensitive mental instruments reveal to us more often than not is that we all lie, and that all our lies are not even evident to ourselves” (Thomas 32).

At the same time, these new technologies for solving crime endowed the detective with epistemological legitimacy, allowing Sherlock Holmes to claim that “[d]etec[t]ion is, or ought to be, an exact science” (Doyle, “The Sign of the Four”). By extension, this exactitude suggests that the detective’s explanation of the crime is also undeniably, scientifically true. This confidence in early detective fiction served a cultural function: detective fiction arose amidst late-Victorian anxieties about urbanization, anonymity, and the unknowability of others’ minds (Rzepka 37-43). The early literary detective thus offers readers reassurance of the power of science and logical reasoning to make sense of the past and of each other. Robin Winks explains that

detective fiction is what some of its disparagers say it is: conservative, almost compulsive in the belief... that one may in truth trace cause and effect, may place responsibility just here, may pass judgment, may even assess blame, and in its determination not to let us forget that there is evil in the world and that men and women, individual men and women, do it. (10)

While the courts’ shift away from personal testimony, and towards the material evidence enabled by forensic science, began in the nineteenth century, Elizabeth Loftus argues in her 1979 text Eyewitness Testimony that the court system in the United States still gives undue credence to witness memories, despite a century’s worth of work by psychologists on the ways that memory functions - and might potentially malfunction - in a court of law (xi). Recent work in cognitive psychology posits a “reconstructive” model of memory, understood as “an active process whereby various strategies are used during the process of memory retrieval to rebuild information from memory, filling in missing elements while remembering” (Colman, “Reconstructive Memory”). In other words, memory is an active, creative, and complex web of cognitive functions rather than a literal recording of past events.
As a research psychologist, Loftus became an expert witness and activist during the “Memory Wars” of the late 1980s to early 1990s, during which time a large number of patients in various forms of therapy claimed to have recovered repressed memories of childhood sexual abuse years after the alleged crimes⁶; as she puts it, “I am considered an authority on the malleability of memory. [...] I take the witness stand and speak my academic truths, cautioning the court that our memories are flexible and superimposable, a panoramic blackboard with an endless supply of chalk and erasers” (The Myth of Repressed Memory 3). Her research on memory’s “malleability” includes work on the distorting effects of leading questions during witness interviews (Loftus and Palmer, “Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction”), and the incorporation of outside information into witnesses’ memories via the “misinformation effect” (Loftus and Hoffman, “Misinformation and Memory”). She argues that while there is no scientific evidence to suggest that memories can be repressed and later recovered, there is ample evidence that memories are highly susceptible to suggestion, especially in the various methods of recovered memory therapy (Myth of Repressed Memory 7). As memory is fundamentally reconstructive, she argues, it is also inherently unreliable. Although she acknowledges the emotional and judicial gravity of traumatic experiences, Loftus remains adamant that “this is not a debate about the reality or the horror of sexual abuse, incest, and violence against women. This is a debate about memory” (Myth of Repressed Memory xi).

The debate about memory’s relationship with truth, however, and whose testimonies are validated by the legal system, is clearly not only about memory. In fact, as feminist philosopher Sue Campbell argues, in characterising the debate as one of memory, with an emphasis on “objective” science, Loftus actually “displace[s] significant social and political dimensions to successful remembering” (Relational Remembering 17). The scientific framework, in other words, leaves no room for a meaningful discussion about the role that emotions and interpersonal connections play in acts of

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⁶ The “Memory Wars” involved thousands of victims (both the survivors of abuse and those who were falsely accused), occupied media attention from tabloids as well as academic journals, and still remains hotly contested (see Colangelo, “The Recovered Memory Controversy,” 2009).
remembering, as these components are imagined primarily as *distorting* forces. It elides the fact that the “authorised” explanations of past events, offered by detectives, expert witnesses, or judges, are also narrative constructions analogous to “reconstructed” memories. And it obscures the power dynamics of what Foucault describes as a “régime of truth”:

> Each society has its... ‘general politics’ of truth: the types of discourse which it accepts and *makes function as true*; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true. (“Truth and Power” 131, emphasis mine)

Determining “the truth” about the past, then, can never be the “exact science” that Sherlock Holmes once claimed it to be; rather, it involves negotiating the effects of subjective values, emotions, relationships, and politics. Successful remembering is an ethical achievement.

If early detective fiction reflected a Victorian confidence in science and reason, contemporary detective fiction, though it retains much of the same generic framework and almost always resolves with the detective finding “the truth,” often acknowledges the subjective complexity of reconstructing past events. For example, while detective stories like Sherlock Holmes tend to value the genius of the individual detective, contemporary literary detectives are often dependent on a network of others, both the assistance of fellow team members and the testimony of citizens. Brendan Riley writes that the “twenty-first century detective,” by relying on a team rather than individual logic, reflects the “new paradigms of thought afforded by the new modes of communication common in networked culture” (921). The “networked detective” also reflects an increased awareness of the social dimensions of remembering. Campbell writes that “memories are formed, supported, undermined, narrated, and tested in a variety of relational circumstances” (*Relational Remembering* 200). Maurice Halbwachs suggests that even private acts of remembering are shaped by social frameworks (*Les cadres sociaux de la mémoire*). While arguments about memory’s
“suggestibility” tend to construe influence as distortion,7 anthropologist James Wertsch has developed the concept of “distributed memory” to illustrate how individuals working together can produce a fuller and more accurate understanding of the past than might be possible if working independently.8 Though the reconstructive model of memory is often used to characterise individual memory’s shortcomings as failures, these “faults” merely indicate the inadequacy of the individual rememberer; in practice, people rarely remember in total isolation.

As this chapter will demonstrate, the contemporary literary detective as a model rememberer can only uncover the “truth” by successfully navigating a network of different stories and explanations about the past. The successful arbitration of diverse perspectives, and of the dissonant narratives about the past to which those perspectives give rise, requires an ethics of how to acknowledge, understand, and respond to the unique experience of the other. This chapter explores the different ethical models developed in Brian McGilloway’s *The Nameless Dead* and Tana French’s *In the Woods*. McGilloway suggests that the gap between self and other is best bridged through empathy, while French questions the necessity of empathetic engagement, positing instead an ethics of dissonance and a responsibility to reevaluate one’s own narratives.

*Remembering with Others in Contemporary Irish Detective Fiction*

Set on the border between Northern Ireland and the Republic, McGilloway’s Inspector Devlin series explores the relationship between two divided communities, as well as the complex legacy of the Troubles in modern Ireland. *The Nameless Dead* begins with the search for the body of one of the Disappeared, “victims of paramilitary violence who were murdered and buried in secret arising from the conflict in Northern Ireland” (*Independent*

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7 For example, Elizabeth Loftus has demonstrated that individuals can be made to “remember” details, and even entire events, which did not occur (Loftus & Hoffmann, “Misinformation and Memory: The Creation of Memory”). However, Sue Campbell argues, “As scientific tests for suggestibility are tests for false information, they easily lead to the conclusion that, insofar as we are influenced in our beliefs, we come to believe what is false” (*Relational Remembering* 146).

8 He gives the example of a father and daughter working together to remember where the daughter left her shoes: neither could remember this information individually, but they succeed as a group (*Voices of the Mind* 11).
Commission). The Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains is conducting an excavation for Declan Cleary, rumoured to have been executed in the late 1970s for informing on the IRA. During this excavation, the Commission discovers an unexpected set of bones: though they belong to an infant, they are not part of the nearby cillin (a burial ground for unbaptised infants), and the fractures on its skull indicate that the baby was killed by force. Inspector Devlin’s role in these excavations is unusual for a detective novel: he is there as a “liaison” for the Commission, not as a detective, since “[a]ny evidence uncovered in a dig for the Disappeared can’t be used to prosecute a case, nor can it be investigated or forensically tested” (19). This unfortunately also includes the murdered baby, since the Commission found the remains, and the close proximity to Cleary’s body means that a connection between the two deaths is possible.

Following a news story on the Commission’s dig, however, two more people are killed - Sean Cleary, Declan’s son; and Seamus O’Hara, the informant to the Commission about Declan’s body - and Devlin is responsible for investigating these murders. These latter murders are obviously connected to Declan’s death; thus, Devlin’s investigation is an ethical and legal grey area, finding out who killed Sean and Seamus without looking into Declan.

The struggle at the heart of this novel is the need to find the truth about the past - Devlin feels compelled to “give that child a story, or a name... so they don’t just disappear” (34), and Sean “need[s] the closure” (37) afforded by learning why his father was killed - set against the knowledge that repeated rehearsal of a painful past can keep old wounds fresh. As one character remarks about a local commemorative rally, “They’re using it to try to stir up something. As if another 3,000 dead would change things” (241).

While Margot Shea writes that the “people of Northern Ireland... [have for] decades [been] chastised for remembering too much, too often, and too passionately” (292), there is an equal danger in remembering too little, in suggesting that the past is best forgotten.

McGilloway suggests that an empathetic engagement with the perspective of the “other” can function as a middle ground between calls to

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9 McGilloway’s Commission is based on an actual organisation of the same name, established in 1999 “to obtain information, in Confidentiality” (Independent Commission) about the Disappeared.
forget the past and the partisan rhetoric that reinforces division and violent conflict. As Richard Kearney writes, “[A]cts of trauma and suffering call out for justice, and the best way of achieving this is often to invite empathy with strangers and adversaries by allowing for a plurality of narrative perspectives” (“Renarrating Irish Politics” 43). Alison Landsberg defines empathy as “imagin[ing] the other’s situation and what it might feel like, while simultaneously recognizing one’s difference” (“Memory, Empathy” 223). Although commonly understood as an emotional connection, Landsberg clarifies that empathy additionally “entails an intellectual engagement with the plight of the other” (223). When practiced thoughtfully, empathy “can force us to confront, and enter into a relationship of responsibility and commitment toward, ‘others’” (225). Devlin’s investigative success, both in uncovering the truth that others want to keep hidden and in preventing further violence, depends upon his imaginative engagement with others’ perspectives. Additionally, McGilloway develops several poignant images of connection - a hand extended in friendship, help, and understanding; a bridge constructed between two estranged communities - to illustrate the value of respectful sensitivity and meaningful exchange.

The murder investigation central to Tana French’s In the Woods also begins at an excavation: the body of a young child is found placed on a ceremonial altar stone recently uncovered at a significant archaeological site in Knocknaree. When he arrives on the scene, Detective Rob Ryan refuses an empathetic connection to the victim - “Violated, that innocence was too vast and final to allow any tongue-in-cheek claim of kinship” (30) - and consistently emphasises her alterity: she remains, even at the end of the novel, “a cluster of translucent, conflicting images refracted through other people’s words” (424). While the detectives quickly identify the child as Katy Devlin, and eventually discover the details of her murder, French questions the necessity of empathy to the practice of successful, ethical remembering.

Rob’s investigation, also like Devlin’s, shares a problematic connection to an old, unsolved case. On the altar stone where Katy is discovered, the detectives find a small bloodstain, belonging not to Katy but to one of two children who disappeared from Knocknaree in the 1980s and were never found. Rob, who went by the name “Adam” as a child, was with the other two
children, Peter and Jamie, when they went missing; he was found blood-stained and catatonic, with no memory of what had happened. His memories, like Peter and Jamie, never returned. This personal connection “would have got [Rob] booted off the case” (32), so he keeps it a secret from everyone but his partner, Cassie. Although Rob tries to recover his memories, and although the missing children become an item of inquiry in Katy’s murder investigation, their disappearance is never explained, either to Rob or to the reader. The closest Rob comes to answers are a few fragments of memory that barely make sense, and a range of “Knocknaree folklore” (217), some stories more plausible than others, but none of them satisfactory. French resists narrative consensus or resolution in order to question the psychological drive toward “closure” and “consistency,” the perceived need to establish one story that fully and definitively explains a sequence of events. It is not always possible to “bridge the gap” between conflicting narratives, and in order to remember ethically, one must sometimes acknowledge and accept dissensus.

French does not suggest, however, either that the past cannot be known, or that conflicts of memory cannot be amicably addressed. She remains optimistic about the possibility of remembering with others in such a way that remains “faithful to the past” (Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting 21), provided that the individual performs the important work of acknowledging, questioning, and, where necessary, revising the narrative frameworks used to structure one’s memories. French’s metafictional references to her own, as well as her characters’, use of generic frameworks to shape and to limit the contours of a story draws attention to the possibility of “[r]ecounting differently”: “[I]t is possible to revise a recounted story which takes account of other events, or even which organises the recounted events differently. Up to a point, it is possible to tell several stories based on the same events” (Ricoeur, “Reflections” 6-7).
Brian McGilloway’s *The Nameless Dead*

**Naming the Dead: Memorialising through Language**

As the title suggests, Brian McGilloway’s *The Nameless Dead* is especially preoccupied with the memorial function of names. While Devlin is legally prohibited from investigating the murdered infant found near Declan Cleary, he seems equally concerned about the possibility of the killer escaping justice and the disturbing fact that the child was “deprived not only of sacred burial but even its name” (24, emphasis mine). In fact, he likens the practice of “nameless burial” (6) to the loss of life itself; the families of such victims suffer a “double anguish” (6). As he expresses later, Devlin “want[s] to give that child a story, or a name. Something that can be written above them when you bury them properly, so they don’t just disappear” (34). When considered alongside the novel’s other thematic concerns – the stillborn babies in the unmarked *cillín* who require a public commemoration, the missing bodies of the Disappeared which must be found and properly buried – McGilloway suggests that an ethical memory requires the past to be named, to speak what has been kept secret.

This ethical imperative to name the dead is established within the novel through its insistence that names somehow signify or endow existence; in other words, memory does not exist independently of the way one tells it. For example, one of the women formerly in charge of the mother-and-baby home responsible for the infants’ deaths says of the children, “They were never named, though. They never existed” (327, emphasis mine). While this woman is attempting to downplay the severity of her crimes in covering up these infants’ deaths, the idea that names are requisite for identity is widespread; as sociologist Albert McCormick writes, “Until [the naming ceremony or baptism], as with any rite of passage’s transitional phase, an infant is in social limbo, occupying a social position of anonymity and an absence of status” (2). When Devlin argues this point with her, he does so not by claiming that the babies existed despite not having names, but by claiming that “Someone somewhere had a name for her” (328), even if it was not a name officially given during the rite of baptism. The babies very obviously existed in a physical sense, and Devlin could have countered her argument
with the kind of physical proof upon which detectives typically rely. This is an interesting position for the protagonist of a detective novel, where the investigator’s job is typically expressed as “finding the truth,” and the detective’s own acts of narrative construction are often categorized as “objective.” By not making such recourse to “objective” physical evidence, insisting instead that the babies *did* have names, Devlin attests the epistemological legitimacy of the families’ *memories*. The babies existed because “someone somewhere” remembered them, named them, told the stories of their brief lives, if only to themselves.

While it is ethically admirable that Inspector Devlin privileges such individual memory narratives over an authoritative, objective narrative, this position becomes difficult to maintain when people name and narrate differently. When the Commission receives the tip about the location of Declan’s body, the informant tells them that he was buried on Tra na Cnamha. The Commission investigator, mispronouncing the name, asks around but no one had heard of the place, suggesting that the name is no longer in common use. He looks up an old map of the area and sees that the place now called Islandmore is labelled Innis na Cnamha, or Isle of Bones, which not only leads them to look for Declan’s body there, but also suggests that there had been a *cillin* on the island (17-8). Devlin later learns that the name Tra na Cnamha, meaning Beach of Bones, was only ever used by smugglers and fishermen (31), leading him one step closer to the identity of the informant whom he believes can help him solve the infant’s murder.

This confusion about the name of the island, and the identity politics involved in its naming, illuminates the multiplicity of history: while the contours of the map suggest a singular and bounded location, its divergent names indicate the variety of ways this small island has been understood over time. Devlin’s identification of the informant based on his use of the name Tra na Cnamha recalls the conflict over the name Derry / Londonderry, McGilloway’s hometown, where the use of Derry or Londonderry is in many contexts a political identifier. The name does more than categorise the person who uses it, though. If, as McGilloway implies earlier, a name signifies existence, then a place which has alternate names in fact *exists* in alternate forms within memory. The smugglers who used the island to bring cattle
across the river knew a very different island from the one known by parents who buried children in the *cillín*, just as one remembers a different city depending on whether one calls it Derry or Londonderry. Clearly, what is at issue is much more than reconciling a name. At issue is the existence of two vastly different memories, narratives which are in many respects dissimilar and cannot be reconciled without great compromise.

The political implications of narrating the past differently come to the fore in the novel’s focus on the legacy of the Troubles. Declan Cleary is rumoured to have been executed by the IRA in the late 1970s for informing the RUC about the purported gun-smuggling of Dominic Callan; Dominic had been shot by the RUC while crossing the River Foyle in a smuggler’s boat, although no weapons were found at the time of his death, and local witnesses claim that Dominic had raised his hands in surrender before he was shot and killed. The location and exhumation of Declan Cleary’s remains takes place without political or judicial intervention. The Commission’s narrow aim to “provide those left behind with an opportunity to bury their dead” (13) signals their intention to “settle” the past through nonpartisan narratives, although the violence sparked by this effort calls into question the viability of such a project. The day after the excavation begins, the digging machinery is destroyed by a petrol bomb (49), and Sean Cleary and Seamus O’Hara are found murdered.10

While the Commission’s work attempts to circumvent the political and criminal narratives of Declan’s and Dominic’s deaths, it actually reignites them. Sean, as a child, expressed his desire “to stay loyal… to his father” (69) by keeping his surname when his mother gets married, affirming and preserving a positive version of Declan’s identity. Even though Declan was killed before Sean was born, Sean refuses to believe the rumours and issues an inflammatory challenge for the “other side” to change its narrative: “I don’t believe that my father was a tout. So, I want whoever reported his burial-spot… to tell me why my father had to die” (37). As he begins his own investigation into Declan’s murder, he discovers that Declan and Dominic had

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10 While the real-life work of the Commission has sparked some political controversy - primarily related to disputed allegations that Sinn Féin President Gerry Adams was implicated in the murder of one of the Disappeared (Moriarty, “Assembly Supports”) - it has not resulted in any retaliatory killings or other violence, and has successfully located the remains of fourteen of the seventeen Disappeared (Moriarty, “Remains Discovered”).
worked at the local mother-and-baby home and helped dispose of the infants who died as a result of drug testing; they were both killed in order to cover up the infant deaths. While Sean wants to make this story public to repair his father’s reputation, Dominic’s father Jimmy wants to suppress it for much the same reason: “My Dominic’s a hero. And they wanted to take that from me. [...] The week of my son’s death and he wants to tell the papers that Dominic killed babies. [...] Taking my son’s name away from him” (366-7, emphasis mine).

Sean and Jimmy each want to control the way these events are narrativised in order to protect the reputation of a loved one. While they narrate their own behaviour as acts of love or “loyalty,” McGilloway exposes the problematic corollary of this type of narrative: if the victim is a “hero,” then the killer must be the “villain,” and if the hero is unjustly killed, then the story will not be resolved until the villain is appropriately punished. Both Sean and Jimmy, although they might not have intended it nor understood it this way themselves, become the protagonist of a revenge plot. Sean, upset that the police will not look for Declan’s murderer, complains, “It’s not good enough... [t]hat whoever did it feels a bit guilty” (18), implying that they deserve much worse. Jimmy not only murders Sean and Seamus to protect Dominic’s reputation, but shoots Niall Martin “in the stomach, just as Dominic had been” (369) when he learns of Niall’s involvement in Dominic’s death. Even when one’s memory narratives spring from noble ideals, such one-sided stories become dangerous in circulation. Apart from being too idealised to account for the moral complexity of lived human lives, the blind devotion they inspire leaves little room for dialogue; to tell differently is heresy.

As the above examples illustrate, the ethical imperative of naming the dead is in fact only the beginning of a long and difficult conversation about the rhetoric of memory. McGilloway certainly participates in the burgeoning but problematic “discourse of ‘healing is revealing’” (Dawson 88); Devlin, as the protagonist of a detective novel, unsurprisingly challenges repeated suggestions that “it would do no good” to bring up the “bad stuff and suffering and pain” (70) of the past. He is, after all, committed to uncovering the truth. However, McGilloway is also clearly cognisant that “revealing” is not always, and never simply, healing; certain narratives are little more than
incitement to violence. Instead, McGilloway negotiates ways of telling - and of *listening* - to stories about the past that fulfil the ethical duty not to forget *while also* ensuring that the problems of the past are not repeated, or continued, in the present.

**Digging up the Past: Exhumations and Embodied Memory**

“*Memory is shown to inhere in and through the body*” (10), Susan Cahill writes, and in particular, “the body is often the means by which contemporary Irish novelists structure engagements with the past” (1). Crime fiction is quintessentially concerned with *memory* and the body, as the corpse functions as a catalyst for - and the primary text of - a rigorous inquiry into the past. In *The Nameless Dead*, bodies represent the persistence of the past; although the terminology of “the Disappeared” suggests otherwise, the past - particularly an unresolved past - cannot be erased or forgotten. McGilloway imagines excavation as a necessary memory project in such circumstances: the past must be uncovered, analysed, and only then can it be reinterred. Each mystery within the text, for example, begins with an exhumation of a body buried in secret, and is concluded with a public memorial service and burial. While these exhumations, literally bringing the past back to public attention in the present, initially suggest an unwillingness or inability to escape the influence of history, McGilloway demonstrates that such exhumations are a critical component of progress and healing.

In addition to the exhumations of the *cillín* and of Declan Cleary’s remains, Devlin also “exhumes” the body of Niall Martin - twice, and both while Martin is still alive. Niall Martin is the son of Alan Martin, the owner of a pharmaceutical company that tested its drugs on the pregnant young women of St. Canice’s mother-and-baby home in the 1970s. Martin is being pursued by the police for his involvement in a housing scam and an illegal adoption operation, and by Jimmy Callan for starting the rumour for which his son Dominic was killed. When Martin attempts to flee from the police, he runs into quicksand-like mud from which Devlin eventually rescues him (335-7). Soon after, Jimmy Callan finds Martin, shoots him in the stomach, and buries him while he is still alive; Devlin, once again, arrives on the scene just in time to dig him out (365-9).
Jimmy Callan shooting Martin clearly illustrates the desire for revenge. Callan “shot [Martin] in the stomach, just as [his son] Dominic had been” (369), and buries him near the place Dominic died. The desire for revenge can easily be confused with the desire for justice, but McGilloway illustrates the major difference between the two in Martin’s shooting: wanting revenge makes healing impossible because it orients the sufferer towards the past rather than the future. Callan is clearly still haunted by his son, and in his attack on Martin, he repeats the trauma of his son’s death, perpetuating the pain he originally experienced in a botched attempt to escape it. In her book *Trauma and Recovery*, Judith Herman writes that many trauma victims resist the mourning process, a necessary stage of “working through” the trauma, by engaging in the revenge fantasy: “The revenge fantasy is often a mirror image of the traumatic memory, in which the roles of perpetrator and victim are reversed... [It] is one form of the wish for catharsis” (189). Devlin “wondered why [Callan] should risk finishing Martin’s grave rather than making a run for it now, if he knew the PSNI were on their way” (365), but Callan desperately wants to put the past to rest (metaphorically, burying Martin) even while his revenge fantasy indicates that he is not yet psychologically capable of doing so. Callan’s fixation on revenge is further distinguished from justice insofar as he also kills Seamus O’Hara and Sean Cleary - not as punishment for wrongdoing, but to protect his dead son’s reputation - and then points his gun at Inspector Devlin for interfering with his attempted murder of Martin (367-8). While both Callan and Devlin want Martin to be punished for his crimes, Callan’s motivation is pathological and his actions recreate the environment of fear surrounding the original killings decades earlier. Callan’s attempt to bury Martin and “settle the debts” of the past in fact disallows anyone to move forward, while Devlin’s exhumation of Martin (digging him out of the grave himself, and calling for an ambulance) allows the Director of Public Prosecutions to review Martin’s case and ensure that justice, not revenge, is delivered (376).

On the surface, the other form of problematic memory which McGilloway foregrounds in the text, social forgetting, is the opposite of the desire for revenge: instead of rehearsing the injustices of the past and calling for punishment, social forgetting is characterised by a general attitude that
the past is best forgotten. Actually, however, the relationship between the two types of memory is more complex. As Guy Beiner writes, “[S]ocial forgetting is inextricably tied in with social remembering... [I]t pivots on tensions between public calls for silence and demands for recognition of private recollections... It is the outcome of compulsive engagement with a relentlessly disturbing past and its inherent ambiguity assists in sustaining, rather than eliminating, social memory” (35-6). The resulting “socially constructed silence” (35) covers over an unresolved obsession with the past. In the course of Devlin’s investigations, he often encounters this attitude - most noticeably, and problematically, from his boss, Superintendent Patterson. For example, on top of the legal restrictions preventing Devlin from looking into the murdered infants, Patterson tries to convince him that everyone is better off without an investigation. Patterson says about the murdered, disfigured child, “What do you want to find, Ben? Some wee girl who couldn’t cope? Saw that face and panicked and did something unimaginable? Will it mean anything to haul that up now?” (43). Even as Devlin looks into an underground adoption operation - an investigation that has nothing to do with the Commission and is thus perfectly legal - Patterson asks, “What’s the best that’s going to happen? You find the child, take it from some poor saps who have paid through the nose for an adoption, and place it in foster care” (342). Patterson’s reluctance to examine elements of a painful past sets these atrocities apart as events that “ought to be forgotten,” even while his motivation - a level-headed concern for the still-living victims of these situations - is not only unimpeachable, but generally in line with the novel’s ethics as embodied in Inspector Devlin. The difference is one of methodology: Devlin believes that a better way to care for the victims is by addressing the issues of the past in conjunction with their lingering effects on the present.

While social forgetting seems harmless, even merciful, in comparison with the often violent desire for revenge, McGilloway highlights the similar outcomes of both problematic forms of remembering in order to emphasize the necessity of ethical remembering. If Martin’s burial at the hands of Jimmy Callan represents the desire for revenge, then his sinking into the bog represents the process of social forgetting. Martin runs into the bog after
Devlin confronts him about his involvement in the disastrous medical trials at the mother-and-baby home, and the subsequent cover-up that led to Declan Cleary’s murder (334). Ireland’s mother-and-baby homes, as part of what James Smith has termed an “architecture of containment,”11 are a quintessential, and now well-known, example of social forgetting. The passive process of the land consuming Martin metaphorically illustrates the culture of silence that allows such traumatic histories to be forgotten - no one person is to blame, so the forgetting which results seems inevitable. McGilloway challenges this notion of inevitability in highlighting Martin’s decision to enter the bog. Not only did Martin “launch himself out towards the mud” (335), but he did so in an attempt to escape the consequences of his earlier crimes. Even as Martin is about to go under, and Devlin is attempting to rescue him, Martin begins “thrashing out with his foot... to force me to release him” (336). While the desire for revenge is an obsession with seeing the “guilty” receive the consequences they “deserve,” social forgetting, McGilloway suggests, is about the evasion of consequences - though not always by the guilty, as illustrated by Patterson’s well-meaning desire not to “haul up” the past. While Patterson considers present suffering as a reason not to investigate various crimes, Devlin himself realises that the reverse is true: it is from a failure to remember successfully that people continue to hurt in the present.

As a metaphor for bringing the past to light, exhumation’s emphasis on the damaged body underscores the central tenet of McGilloway’s memory ethics: a successful memory project needs to begin with the wounds of the past. Behind all of the conflicting memory narratives fuelling the quarrels, protests, and violence within the novel, there are damaged bodies - the dead and the injured, the physical and the psychological wounds - that require a caring touch. Before their narratives can be “resolved” in any meaningful way, McGilloway suggests a return to the body.

11 In addition to mother-and-baby homes, Ireland’s “architecture of containment” also includes “industrial and reformatory schools, mental asylums, adoption agencies, and Magdalen laundries” (xiii) aimed at concealing deviations from “conservative Catholic moral values” (xiv). Smith writes that, although Magdalen asylums were in operation in Ireland since the eighteenth-century (25), and that the system had become punitive rather than rehabilitative by the early twentieth-century (42), it was not until the 1990s that “Ireland began to ‘speak out’” (87), countering the “nation’s chosen forgetfulness... the secrecy and silence that shrouded the collusion among church, state, and society in effecting, and then effacing, Ireland’s containment culture” (82).
While the police want to bring in Niall Martin for his involvement in a number of illegal activities, Devlin’s pursuit of the man is primarily motivated by his desire to find the child that Martin has smuggled into the country as part of his adoption operation. As he chases Martin in the above mentioned scenarios, Devlin repeatedly asks “Where’s the child?” (335), but these questions are met with silence. However, when Devlin’s physical exertions knock the breath out of him, he stops asking questions and instead reaches out with his hands. In the first scenario, he grasps onto Martin and joins hands with another, “allow[ing] Dunne to pull [him], with Martin in tow, onto the rocks” (337). In the second, he digs Martin out of where Jimmy has buried him - “[M]y hand connected with cloth and flesh in the ground. I could feel Martin react to my touch” (368) - before attending to Jimmy’s injured body, “pressing my hand on the wound to his neck” (368). After these tactile interventions, Martin finally tells Devlin where he has hidden the child.

In these examples, McGilloway proposes that a caring touch is the necessary precursor to “settling” a painful past. Devlin’s extended hand, staunching Jimmy’s wound and rescuing Martin from immediate danger, represents a caring, humanitarian approach to conflict resolution that precedes the resolution of judicial or political narratives. However, as I have mentioned, McGilloway remains suspicious about the viability of achieving peace without engaging with such narratives: the Commission’s extra-judicial, non-partisan work in fact catalyses all of the novel’s conflict. The “extended hand” is not only merely a first step in this process, but a metaphor for the narrative project to follow. Richard Kearney, whose work in carnal hermeneutics advances a “philosophical approach to the body as interpretation” (“Introduction” 1), emphasises the reciprocity of touch as a form of knowing: “But if touch is something we do to the world, it is also something the world does to us. It works both ways. [...] [F]lesh is the membrane that both connects and separates” (“The Wager” 21-2). Against the prevailing Western philosophical metaphor of sight as knowledge, interpretation, and rationality,¹² Kearney proposes a tactile sensibility: “For

¹² Kearney writes, “The Platonic doctrine of the Academy held that sight was the highest sense, because it is the most distant and mediated; hence most theoretical, holding things at bay, mastering meaning from above. Touch, by contrast, was deemed the lowest sense because it is ostensibly immediate and thus subject to intrusions and pressures from the material world. [...]The Platonists prevailed and the Western universe became a system
while sight offers me dominion over external persons and things, it is my flesh which inserts me - body and soul - into the flesh of the world. It reveals my radical interdependency... as an embodied consciousness projecting meaning onto others at the same time as receiving meaning from them” (“The Wager” 27-8). Similarly, McGilloway suggests that an ethical memory begins with the reciprocity of touch. Rather than narratives which project meaning onto the other while allowing one to remain “untouched” in return, an ethical memory narrative is one which begins with an openness to the pain of others. Empathy is McGilloway’s key to the ethical mediation of difference.

**Bridging the Gap: Remembering with Empathy**

McGilloway uses Inspector Devlin to illustrate the ethical, as well as the practical, necessity of empathy in order to understand the past. In his “reading” of Seamus O’Hara, Devlin acts as a foil to Superintendent Patterson. The two investigators go to O’Hara’s home to find out why Sean Cleary had visited the man hours before his death, but when they arrive, they discover that O’Hara has been murdered, as well. As they spend an entire day searching the house for evidence, Devlin observes that he feels like an intruder: “Through the necessary steps of investigation we learned things about victims that their own families would not know; every secret, every embarrassment laid bare. [...] For my part, I found this was the most unpleasant part of our job” (152). Given the brutality that Devlin regularly faces, this is an incredible remark, through which McGilloway asserts the imperative of respect. This attitude is borne out in the way Devlin approaches the scene. The living room is in disarray: O’Hara’s body is surrounded by the contents of several large bookcases spilled across the floor, an old television knocked on its side, and a tumbler still full of whiskey. Landsberg writes that “empathy requires an act of imagination - one must leave oneself and attempt to imagine what it was like for that other person given what he or she went through” (“Memory, Empathy” 223), and Devlin uses these visual clues to “silently consider... O’Hara’s last night” (149). Noting the single glass

governed by ‘the soul’s eye.’ Sight came to dominate the hierarchy of the senses, and was quickly deemed the appropriate ally of theoretical ideas. Western philosophy thus sprang from a dualism between the intellectual senses, crowned by sight, and the lower “animal” senses, stigmatized by touch” (“Losing Our Touch”).

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and the lack of photographs, Devlin imagines O’Hara’s loneliness and is “saddened” (149). Patterson, in jarring contrast, pronounces the scene “[f]ucking pathetic” (150): “All these books. What did the man have, like? [...] VHS? Jesus... was he afraid to spend money or something, eh?” (151). When they find a gay pornographic magazine hidden at the bottom of a drawer, Devlin imagines the shame O’Hara must have felt to hide these materials even though he lived alone. Patterson laughs, “Oh ho... O’Hara was one of them” (152, emphasis mine), his phrasing indicating, and rhetorically enforcing, a gap between himself and the “other.”

Apart from the shocking insensitivity of Patterson’s comments, McGilloway suggests that his lack of empathy prevents him from discerning what happened on the night O’Hara died. Patterson suggests that the scene looks like a “robbery” (151); he thinks the killer could have been looking for money, even though “[n]othing obvious is missing, unless there’s something we’re just not seeing” (153). Devlin, however, sees what Patterson has failed to notice. Reading the titles of the books strewn across the floor, Devlin notices that they are mostly “fishing records and charts” (154) of the Donegal area. Recalling that the informant about the location of Declan Cleary’s remains had likely been a fisherman, Devlin searches through the Ordnance Survey and discovers that the map of Islandmore has been torn out, identifying O’Hara as the informant and establishing the purpose of Sean Cleary’s visit. Both Patterson and Devlin offer explanations for the night of O’Hara’s murder, but while Patterson simply projects his own values onto the scene - his preoccupation with money informs both his appraisal of O’Hara’s belongings and his theory about his murder - Devlin “project[s] meaning onto others at the same time as receiving meaning from them” (Kearney, “The Wager” 27-8). O’Hara is obviously unable to speak for himself, but Devlin is receptive to the story that O’Hara’s books tell him. McGilloway thus suggests that the detective’s ideal mode of reasoning - unprejudiced observation and deduction - is accomplished not through “objectivity,” setting aside one’s personal preconceptions, but through empathy, balancing one’s thoughts with an imaginative engagement with the other’s.

As Suzanne Keen notes, empathy has become something of a fad in contemporary culture: “Being empathetic receives hearty endorsements from
diverse voices in popular culture... [whereas] lack of empathy spells social problems, danger to others, criminality, and inhumanity” (Empathy and the Novel 10). Many cultural critics, however, are rightly sceptical about the ethics of identification with the other. Bakhtin, as early as the 1920s, proposes the concept of vzhivanie, translated as “live-entering,” in order “to counter an uncritical notion of empathy by insisting upon the integrity of relational borders” (Newton 148). He writes on the fallacy of identification: “What would I have to gain if another were to fuse with me? He would see and know only what I already see and know, he would only repeat in himself the inescapable closed circle of my own life; let him rather remain outside me” (Bakhtin, qtd. in Newton 91). Vzhivanie also involves imaginatively entering into the perspective of the other, but necessitates first that one approaches this enterprise by keeping one’s alterity constantly in view, and second that this imaginative projection must serve as the beginning of a dialogue with the other (Newton 86). In other words, an ethical empathy should bridge rather than fuse the gap between self and other.

McGilloway is sensitive to these ethical problems of empathy, and I argue that he develops a framework for empathetic remembering which can be read through the thematic conceit of limbo. While the term “limbo” is initially used within the novel in reference to the old Catholic doctrine about the afterlife of unbaptised infants, McGilloway also uses the term to describe a number of other situations, including repeated references to Islandmore as a “geographical limbo” (5). In addition to being the burial place for all the novel’s “unresolved” deaths - the community’s stillborn children, the infants killed in the mother-and-baby home’s drug trials, and Declan Cleary - Islandmore is also liminal in its location: it “sits in the middle of the river Foyle, its two lateral shores no more than 200 yards from either Northern Ireland or the Republic. But the island belongs to both and neither; the Irish border, which runs along the riverbed from Derry to Strabane, dissects the island down the middle” (5). In a novel shaped by the conflict between North and South, this island “limbo” is also a clear visual representation of the gap between two communities mutually perceived as “the other.”

However, McGilloway also labels several other difficult circumstances as types of “limbo.” Sean Cleary, without knowledge of who killed his father
or why, is “living in a state of... [l]imbo” (37), and the reporter conducting the interview suggests that he needs “closure” (37). In a local ghost estate, whose name Island View evokes the nearby Islandmore, one man observes that “[a] lot of people live in and out of those unfinished houses” (137), reflecting the transience of squatters who occasionally occupy the sites, the welfare scammers who register the empty addresses to claim benefits, as well as the uncertainty of inhabitants whose homes are becoming increasingly unsafe. Finally, the parents of the “limbo” babies are depicted as living in a liminal state themselves, unable to complete their mourning. Devlin’s own wife had a miscarriage that they almost never discuss even as they sit “with our phantom child somewhere between us” (24); another bereaved mother continues to refer to her deceased child in the present tense, and hears the “ghost of a cry” (115) in the baby monitor that she cannot bring herself to turn off.

In using the same terms to explain all of these situations, McGilloway relates these problems back to the opening image of the island in “limbo.” In so doing, he suggests that a wide variety of unresolved issues, especially problems of memory, might stem from an inability to cross the gap between self and other: a lack of empathy. When Sean makes his televised request for information about his father’s death, for example, he appeals to the informant to understand his unhappiness and uncertainty (36-7), even as he dismisses assurances that the informant must have been motivated by prolonged guilt: “And that’s the best we can expect? That whoever did it feels a bit guilty? My heart bleeds” (18).

Additionally, though, in figuring this metaphorical gap as a literal space, an island in the middle of a river, McGilloway’s model of empathy proposes not that the distance between self and other be erased or ignored, but crossed. McGilloway notes that “[t]he island had once served as a crossing point” (5), but as tensions grew between North and South during the Troubles, the bridges “fell into disrepair” (6), suggesting that such conflicts are fuelled in part by an unwillingness to practice empathy; by the time Declan “disappeared in ’76... both bridges onto the island had gone” (159). The concept of empathy as a bridge is significant in two key respects: one, it preserves the alterity of the “other side”; and two, as an act of “crossing,” empathy is imagined as dialogue, a two-way traffic. This framework mirrors
Paul Ricoeur’s model of empathy as “memory-exchange... of taking responsibility, in imagination and in sympathy, for the story of the other” (“Reflections” 6-7). Adam Zachary Newton, developing a similar concept, writes that “the very fact of alterity obliges a constant interplay across the borders of self and other, each held mutually hostage by a constant exchange of surpluses of meaning accessible only from outside” (48). As this definition suggests, the perspective of the “other” is valuable because of its “otherness”; this “surplus of meaning” indicates the wealth of information available only from a different perspective, which can only be accessed through a dialogue predicated on the imaginative border-crossing of empathy.

Public Commemorations and Competing Models of Empathetic Engagement

McGilloway explores the usefulness of this framework to the resolution of memory conflicts through two contrasting public commemorations: a memorial service for the babies buried in the cillin, and a “rally” (33) held to commemorate Dominic Callan’s shooting. These two commemorations are clearly set up as parallels. They are both held on the same day – 2 November, the “Feast of All Souls” (206) or the Commemoration of All Faithful Departed – and, most significantly, they both take place in the middle of the River Foyle, the cillin memorial on Islandmore and Dominic’s “rally” on Lifford Bridge. The cillin memorial is depicted as a successful commemoration. Devlin tells Father Brennan, who organised the ceremony, “It’s a good thing you’re doing today” (251), and over one hundred people, from both sides of the border, gather on the island; many are moved to tears.

The new bridges erected for the memorial indicate a project of empathy. In addition to creating a space for joint commemoration between two divided communities, this memorial also enables an empathetic connection between the Church and its parishioners. In Devlin’s conversations with the parents of these “limbo” babies, McGilloway depicts the old Church doctrine as a failure of empathy; one woman says through her tears that “They said he couldn’t be buried in a church. They told me there was a cillin [but] I never knew where it was exactly” (218), while another man “called the priest but he wouldn’t do anything for us,” though he angrily adds that “Padraig was on God’s right hand the day he was buried, baptized or not, and
no bastard will ever tell me otherwise” (79). As Carol Baraniuk writes, McGilloway “implies that the parents of the stillborn infants have been cruelly marginalized by church practices so that they find themselves beyond the borders of Christian comfort” (86). In the memorial, however, these parents experience “relief that their pain was finally acknowledged” (252). While this ceremony is a profound and important moment of recognition, McGilloway also emphasises that, in order to be transformative, the affect of this gesture requires continued work: “What would happen afterwards was not so clear, whether the island would become isolated once more or, having been received into the community’s collective conscience, remain connected again to the mainland, no longer in limbo” (252).

As a first step, however, the empathetic exchange at the cillín memorial is considerably more promising than the commemoration for Dominic Callan. As Devlin watches this rally, he notes “the simmering aggression of the group” (259) as someone shouts into a loudspeaker, “Dominic sacrificed his life for the cause. [...] Our politicians have failed us, have failed the cause. They call us traitors, yet they are the ones who have become agents of British justice. Dominic’s death has been belittled by their actions” (258-9). While the cillín memorial enables “a mixture of mourning and relief” (252), the rally reignites the anger sparked by Dominic’s execution. In one respect, the problematic nature of Dominic’s memorial might be attributed to a lack of empathy: symbolically, “Lifford Bridge... was temporarily closed while the Memorial Service for Callan was conducted” (257), and the language used at the rally - “They call us traitors” - certainly emphasises division and blame rather than reconciliation and sympathy.

However, McGilloway actually suggests that a different kind of empathetic understanding is at work here: the man with the loudspeaker asks the crowd to consider, “How would [Dominic] feel now?” (258, emphasis mine). Taken together with the suggestion that this rally recreates the problems of the Troubles - even Dominic’s father condemns the gathering, saying that “[t]hey’re using it to try to stir up something. As if another 3,000 dead would change things” (241) - the protestors’ empathy can be understood as a form of “postmemory.” As Marianne Hirsch writes,
“Postmemory” describes the relationship that the “generation after” bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before—experiences they “remember” only by means of the stories, images, and behaviors among which they grew up. But these experiences were transmitted to them so deeply and affectively as to seem to constitute memories in their own right. (The Generation 5)

Thus, McGilloway deliberately emphasizes the youth of the protestors—the rally is “a day for... young lads fancying they could be something big” (240), and Devlin notes that “some of them were barely out of their teens; certainly not old enough to have been alive when Dominic was shot” (258)—not so much, or not only, to indicate their naivety, but to mark them as the “second generation.” In taking on the memories of the previous generation, these protestors illustrate why an uncritical empathy—complete identification with the other—is problematic. Recalling Bakhtin’s suggestion—“if another were to fuse with me... [h]e would see and know only what I already see and know, he would only repeat in himself the inescapable closed circle of my own life” (qtd. in Newton 91)—these young men, experiencing others’ memories as their own, remain limited by that perspective and end up repeating the past rather than learning from it.

Moreover, in experiencing this past only as “stories,” the “second generation” lack the embodied memory which “both connects and separates” (Kearney, “The Wager” 22), the sensibility to engage with others’ stories in an equal and reciprocal exchange. For example, Sean Cleary is also identified as one of this “second generation.” Like the protestors, he is characterized by his youth: “Despite being in his mid-thirties,” Devlin observes, “his voice and manner were a teenager’s” (18), an arrested development that speaks to his inability to “move forward.” Recalling McGilloway’s use of touch as a metaphor for reciprocal connection, Sean’s mother Mary “extend[s] her hand” (19) to the Commission investigator who tells her that Declan’s body has not yet been located, while Sean’s “hands twisted around each other” (14), a clear symbol for the “closed circle” of an empathy that fuses rather than connects. Sean identifies with his father, having, as I mentioned, chosen to keep Declan’s surname when his mother married, though he knows him only
through the stories told about him by his mother and by others in the community. Mary remarks, “He’d always known [his father] was dead, but when the dig started, it made it more... real for him. I think it was the first time he thought of it as having actually happened” (69-70). Sean’s lack of access to an embodied memory means that, as he conducts his own investigation into his father’s death, he projects rather than exchanges narratives; his meeting with Jimmy was short and full of “raised voices” (63), Sean “looking to pin his da’s death on [Jimmy]” (239) and refusing to hear Jimmy’s denial. And, just as Dominic’s memorial erupted into violence – some of the “younger men” (259) launch an attack on Devlin’s police car – so do Sean’s memory practices lead to his murder.

This behaviour of the “second generation” is often presented in direct contrast with that of the “first”: Devlin “marvelled at [Mary’s] composure” (16) as she insists that “enough stuff has happened, enough bad stuff and suffering and pain, that it would do no good” (70) to prosecute Declan’s killer, even if the Commission could; and even Jimmy, as I have mentioned, expresses his scepticism about the politics of his son’s memorial. However, McGilloway establishes this contrast not to suggest that the only ethical way to know the past is to have been there oneself, but to emphasise the importance of mediation, of remembering across a distance. In Mary’s case, this distance is temporal: although she eagerly waits for the Commission to “bring Declan home” (18), she also explains her acceptance that Declan is “gone, life changed, moved on without him” (70), acknowledging her past emotional attachments from the perspective of a changed present. Across this gap, she is able to find a kind of peace, while Sean’s arrested development – his feeling of perpetual “limbo” – suggests that for him, the past is still very much present. Mary has had the intervening years to work through her grief, while Sean is still experiencing it; though his “postmemories” are mediated through narrative, they are experienced as immediate.

Through Devlin’s example, McGilloway demonstrates how one can ethically engage with others’ memories through the mediation of the flesh. Kearney argues, against the notion that “Touch... [is] the lowest sense because it is ostensibly immediate and thus subject to intrusions and pressures from the material world” (“Losing our Touch”), that “touch is a
discriminating sense”: “In touch, we are both touching and touched at the same time, but we do not dissolve into sensuous sameness. Proximity is not immediacy. Difference is preserved. [...] [F]lesh always harbors a certain distance or interval through which touch navigates. Touch is not fusion but mediation through flesh” (“The Wager” 19). Against the “fusion” that Sean experiences through his postmemories, Devlin accesses others’ pasts through something like Landsberg’s concept of “prosthetic memory.” Prosthetic memories are memories “of events through which one did not live... derived [instead] from engagement with a mediated representation... [but] that, despite their mediated quality, have the capacity to transform one’s subjectivity, politics, and ethical engagement” (“Memory, Empathy” 221-2). While these memories “are not organically based, they are nevertheless experienced with a person’s body” (Prosthetic Memory 26). They involve a fuller engagement with the past - intellectually reflective and acutely felt - because “particular types of knowledge are simply not available on a purely cognitive register” (Prosthetic Memory 33).

While Landsberg is specifically writing about the transformative capacity of cinematic experiences of others’ histories, her model of bodily engagement illuminates a practice of empathy that both mediates and touches. Devlin’s investigation into Sean’s murder - and, bending the rules a bit, into Declan’s as well - involves listening to others’ memory narratives, but it also entails a “reconstruction of Cleary’s final moments” (71), “walking in his shoes” as an embodied experience of this history. Devlin also puts himself in Jimmy’s position, standing in his back garden and imagining the scene from his perspective: “If he was involved in Cleary’s disappearance, it would be difficult to stand and watch from his back window while the body’s being exhumed” (65). Through these engagements, Devlin “could begin to understand [Sean’s] ire” (37) without being blinded by it. He uncovers the same information about Dominic and Declan’s involvement in the drug trials, but in a way that prevents the escalation of violence. Devlin, for example, convinces Jimmy to submit to his arrest over a cup of tea and a conversation, while the official strategy to wait for backup is presented as unnecessarily violent: “[T]hree armed-response gardaí swept into the shop... one of them shout[ing], moving towards us, his weapon angled towards the floor and
shifting back and forth between us” (241). Devlin thus fulfils the ethical imperative to “name the dead” - uncovering truths about the past that many would prefer to remain hidden - through his sensitive engagement with a multiplicity of emotionally- and politically-charged memories.

Tana French’s *In the Woods*

*Embodied Memory and the Limitations of Empathy*

If Brian McGilloway’s ethics of memory are largely developed through the positive example of Inspector Devlin - as Baraniuk suggests, Devlin is presented as a paragon of moral virtue, “a man driven by sincerely held convictions, who is nevertheless compassionate and genuinely tolerant” (80) - the detectives in Tana French’s *In the Woods* can hardly be understood in the same way. Detective Rob Ryan describes police work as “crude, crass and nasty” (3), their interrogation tactics “cruel”: “[T]his watching through cool intent eyes and delicately adjusting one factor or another till a man’s fundamental instinct for self-preservation cracks, is savagery in its most pure, most polished and most highly evolved form” (8). These descriptions, however, do not mean that French’s detectives are either immoral or amoral, but rather that morality in practice is profoundly complicated; as Rob puts it, “This is my job... I crave truth. And I lie” (4). I suggest that French presents a nuanced ethical framework. While both French and McGilloway emphasise narrative multiplicity, the challenges as well as the ethical imperative of remembering with diverse others, French questions the necessity, the efficacy, and even the possibility of bridging the gap between self and other through empathy.

The novel’s central investigation begins when the body of a child, later identified as Katy Devlin, is found displayed on a ceremonial altar stone at the archaeological site abutting the housing estate in which she lived. As Ronald Thomas observes, “At the center of virtually every detective story is a body upon which the literary detective focuses his gaze and employs his unique interpretive powers” (2). Katy’s body bears witness to the struggle of her final moments - “[b]lood was caked on her nose and mouth and... [a] couple of nails
were broken off” (29) - but the detectives and forensic scientists must create the explanatory narrative of Katy’s death and disposal: “[S]he wasn’t bleeding any more by the time she was brought here... Looks like she fought” (29).

Although the production of this type of narrative is the standard work of the literary detective, the idea of reading Katy’s body to gain access to the past is problematized in Rob and Cassie’s initial reluctance at the scene. After inspecting Katy’s body, Rob reflects, “For a moment I was dizzied by the impulse to leave her there: shove the techs’ hands away, shout at the hovering morgue men to get the hell out. We had taken enough toll on her... Leave her to sleep” (29-30). Cassie, upon noticing that she owns the same t-shirt that Katy is wearing, observes that she “wouldn’t wear it again. Violated, that innocence was too vast and final to allow any tongue-in-cheek claim of kinship” (30).

This reluctance to invade Katy’s privacy or to identify with her suggests that there is something problematic about telling another’s story or inhabiting her perspective, an issue that does not often arise in the detective novel. McGilloway’s Devlin, for example, frames his pursuit of justice as “giv[ing] that child a story” (34). Rob and Cassie obviously want to find justice for their victim, as well, but they remain sensitive to the fact that they approach Katy’s case as outsiders, and that something about Katy - something related to her embodied experience - remains innately unknowable from their perspective. As Rob reflects, “The victim is the one person you never know; she had been only a cluster of translucent, conflicting images refracted through other people’s words” (424). While Devlin’s success as an investigator depends upon imagining himself in others’ perspectives, and connecting with the other through his empathetic touch, French suggests that the embodied experience of the other signifies an ultimate alterity which cannot be known by anyone else.

Of course, the detectives do eventually piece together a story that explains how and why Katy died, but there is a lingering sense that this story is incomplete, both within the detective’s framework - they could not find enough evidence to arrest their prime suspect, Katy’s sister Rosalind, for murder - and within the personal one, as Rob reflects that, for all his work, he still did not know Katy at all. Katy’s story is not truly resolved until, at the
end of the novel and a year after her death, Rob finds Katy’s diary hidden at her dance studio. The diary, with its focus on her pursuit of dance - “I still have to think about it coming from the whole body” (422) - and Rosalind’s acts of physical abuse - “I cant get sick anymore so tonight I said to Rosalind I dont want to drink it” (423) - emphasises that, for the first time, detective and reader gain access to Katy’s embodied experience. Though the diary is not specific enough to tie Rosalind to any crimes - “it doesn’t prove anything” (424, emphasis mine) - this development, as the final mention of Katy in the novel, functions as an emotional resolution. Katy’s story cannot be finished until Katy herself is allowed to speak; she, rather than the detective, is the one who finally makes her body “readable.”

While French thus questions the viability of empathetically inhabiting and understanding the other’s perspective, she does suggest that remembering with others is an essential component of remembering well. When Rob confronts Katy’s body, and notes the uncomfortable realization that her embodied perspective is completely foreign to him, he also experiences flashbacks of his own harrowing ordeal in those same woods, when, as a child, his two best friends went missing while he was left behind. These flashbacks are depicted as vivid yet fragmented sensory memories that are uniquely his: “runner heels dug into the earth of the bank, leaf-shadows dappling a red T-shirt, fishing rods of branches and string, slapping at midges” (21, emphasis in original), and a few moments later, the enigmatic “blond wing lifting” (28, emphasis in original). When Rob was found in the woods after Peter and Jamie’s disappearance, his body, like Katy’s, bore signs of violence - “[h]is fingernails... had broken off... and [there was] a deep abrasion on each kneecap” (5) - but he has never been able to narrate his experience: “I was near-catatonic: I made no voluntary movement for almost thirty-six hours and did not speak for a further two weeks. When I did, I had no memory of anything between leaving home that afternoon and being examined in the hospital” (6).

Rob’s memories from Knocknaree return to him as sensory fragments, but they only begin to make sense through his engagement with others’ stories. When Jamie’s mother Alicia describes the children’s resistance to Jamie being sent to a boarding school, Rob recovers more memories from that
summer: “LET JAMIE STAY, red block letters across squared paper. My mother trying helplessly to reason with me… my stomach squirming with excitement and terror at my own daring” (183-4). Reading old witness statements prompts memories of a “group of rough looking teenagers” (75) on the estate - “[b]lack leather jackets, unzipped at the wrists and trimmed with studs” (76) - and a girl who sometimes joined them: “It was nearer to a sensation than a memory: powdery lemon bonbons, dimples, flowery perfume. [...] Something inside me flinched... - acrid taste like fear or shame at the back of my tongue - but I couldn’t find why” (78). This “acrid taste” of fear only becomes intelligible when Rob interviews Jonathan Devlin, Katy’s father and one of the aforementioned teenagers, who explains that he and his friends raped Sandra to strengthen their friendship, “like the blood-brothers thing” (232). While embodied memory represents the individual’s unique perspective on the past, that perspective only develops significance through dialogue.

Moreover, French suggests that the success of such dialogue actually has little to do with the practice of empathy. Jonathan explains what happened to Sandra in nearly hysterical terms: “It didn’t feel real, you know? It was like a nightmare, or a bad trip. [...] I couldn’t feel my hands, they didn’t look like mine” (233). Rob instantly dismisses this version of events as “an absurd story... melodramatic and self-serving and utterly predictable” (233), displaying little of the emotional fellow-feeling that characterises nearly all of Inspector Devlin’s conversations. While a bit of further reflection leads Rob to concede that “some tiny part of me believed it... It would not have been difficult for [Jonathan] to see this as an act of love” (233), he decides that this moment of empathy is inconsequential: “Not that this made any difference: I wondered what else he would have done for his cause” (233). What does make a difference is the way Rob challenges Jonathan’s exculpatory reading of the frenzy from his position as an outside observer: “[Y]ou were under the influence both of alcohol and of illegal drugs at the time... Don’t you think these factors might have had something to do with the experience?” (233). So challenged, Jonathan “shrugged, a defeated little twitch. ‘Yeah, sure,’ he said quietly” (233); he later asks Rob to “tell [Sandra] I’m sorry. We did a terrible thing. I know it’s a bit late to be saying that, I should’ve thought of it twenty years ago” (236). Through this exchange, Rob’s
sensory memories begin to *make sense*, and Jonathan’s delusional attempts to eschew responsibility are transformed into an acknowledgement of wrongdoing. As Campbell explains, “[W]e share a past that we remember in highly individual ways while having *together* to determine its significance. Integrity as a personal/social virtue mirrors the nature of recollection as a complex personal/social activity” (“Our Faithfulness” 374, emphasis mine).

*The Ethics of Narrative Dissensus*

This kind of resolution, however, the other’s body being made knowable, is one rarely achieved outside the realm of the detective’s investigation. Jonathan only tells his story out of desperation to find his daughter’s killer - Rob tells him that “we’re considering the possibility... that the [rape] victim might have had something to do with Katy’s death” (229) - and with Rob’s reassurance that “I’m certainly not going to arrest you” (229). Reading Katy’s diary, even after her death, would be an invasion of privacy were it not for the detective’s authority and privileged access to her life, a breach that Rob acknowledges when he reads the warning scrawled on its cover - “VERY PRIVATE KEEP OUT THIS MEANS YOU!!!” (422) - and remarks, “I opened it anyway” (422). How, then, are we to make sense of others whose embodied experience is unavailable; who are, in a fundamental sense, unknowable?

Because acknowledging the unknowability of the other does not necessitate abandoning the attempt to understand and explain that other; as Ricoeur suggests, this would be impossible: “Even at the individual level, it is through stories revolving around others and around ourselves that we articulate and shape our own temporality. [...] Thus, the story of my life is a segment of the story of your life; of the story of my parents, of my friends, of my enemies, and of countless strangers. We are literally ‘entangled in stories’” (“Reflections” 6).

In the novel, Peter and Jamie represent this “unknowable” other. In addition to the fact that their bodies are never found, they pointedly withheld communication in the weeks before their disappearance. Upset about Jamie’s imminent move to boarding school, they “shut out the entire adult world for weeks - wouldn’t speak to us parents, wouldn’t even look at us, wouldn’t speak in class” (183). In fact, the only form of communication in
which Jamie engaged at all was to write “Don’t send me away” (183) on all of her school assignments, a retrospectively eerie plea in light of her disappearance, but ultimately meaningless in terms of providing answers. While Peter and Jamie’s disappearance is hardly a “normal” situation - Rob observes that “In all Ireland’s brief disorganized history as a nation, fewer than half a dozen children have gone missing and stayed that way” (156) - French uses the example of their missing bodies to explore the more common conundrum of attempting to story those whose embodied experience we cannot know.

In an odd move for a detective novel, French refuses to supply the “truth” about what happened to Peter and Jamie, although she does explore numerous conflicting narrative explanations. Despite their “unknowability,” Peter and Jamie linger in memory, returning again and again in the narratives of the Knocknaree residents. Of the two detectives who originally worked the case, “McCabe thought it was a tourist killer” (158) because no local suspects were ever found, while Kiernan thinks it was a local with a convincing fake alibi. An older woman in the neighbourhood explains that her mother believed the children were taken by the pooka, “an ancient child-scarer out of legend” (217), but insists that she knows the children are dead because her neighbour had recently seen their ghosts in the woods. Jamie’s mother Alicia says that at the time of their disappearance, she assumed that Jamie had run away because she had not wanted to go to boarding school, but when Cassie asks her what she thinks now, Alicia replies, “I don’t know. Oh, Detective, one day I think one thing, and the next…” (184).

If narrative construction is an essential component of making sense of lived experience - “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told” (Bruner, “Life as Narrative” 708) - it is often argued that “[t]his ‘drive to story’ seems particularly strong when one is confronted with death, loss, and grief” (Gilbert 236). Although the narrative “working through” of grief moves one toward resolution of the “insensibility and chaos of their recollections and... emotions” (Gilbert 224), and although this process is often popularly referred to as a search for “closure” (as, for example, in McGilloway), French suggests that such resolution, as an affective orientation, is not dependent on narrative resolution. Ann Jurecic, in thinking through an ethical attempt to
understand and explain the other, remarks that “making the effort to understand is a necessary commitment, even in impossibly complex circumstances”; it is important, she suggests, “to experience the interplay of connection, distance, and difference, knowing that [one’s] understanding will always be incomplete and imperfect” (19, emphasis mine).

It is significant, then, that this case about the missing children is allowed to remain a mystery, upsetting strict generic conventions by denying the reader a tidy explanation. Because this case is never solved, because no one “truth” is found or provided, the “Knocknaree folklore” (217) is never disproved - none of these folklore explanations are ever offered for the case which is finally solved - so that the folklore and the supernatural narratives are allowed to exist alongside more prosaic explanations in the reader’s imagination. Moreover, it is also significant that these explanations are almost always presented in the text as doubles. These pairings highlight the memories within a community that remain irreconcilable with one another, and create a kind of cognitive dissonance. Against the psychological inclination to “strive toward consistency” (Festinger 1) in one’s mental schemata, French prolongs this dissonance and leaves it, in each instance, unresolved.

While Peter and Jamie’s stories cannot be “resolved,” French suggests that the act of telling conflicting, open-ended stories does not preclude the possibility of emotional resolution. Rob, for example, though he spends most of the novel searching his memory for an explanation of what happened to his friends - “com[ing] back to this story again and again, in any number of different ways” (4) - eventually achieves acceptance despite not finding any answers. Near the end of the novel, he recollects one brief and happy memory from their final summer together, proclaiming, “This memory... still remains - sharp-edged and warm and mine, a single bright coin left in my

\[13\] To some extent, *In the Woods* might be considered a “metaphysical detective story,” defined by Patricia Merivale and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney as “a text that parodies or subverts traditional detective-story conventions - such as narrative closure and the detective’s role as surrogate reader - with the intention, or at least the effect, of asking questions about mysteries of being and knowing which transcend the mere machinations of the mystery plot” (2).

\[14\] Leon Festinger, who developed the concept of “cognitive dissonance,” writes, “Study after study reports such consistency among one person’s political attitudes, social attitudes, and many others. [...] The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance” (1-3).
hand... [I]f the wood was going to leave me only one moment, that was a kind one to choose” (421). Although he never “settles” their story, he finds comfort in the fragments available to him.

Moreover, French encourages her readers to accept this kind of narrative dissensus - to entertain multiple narratives without collapsing them into one “true” narrative - because she imagines empathy as “a form of false identification and flawed knowledge that disregards distance and difference” (Jurecic 17). If empathy is understood as an impulse towards sameness, French promotes the admission of difference: not just accepting the other as other, but using that “distance” to productive, critical ends. This position might be understood in terms of Ricoeur’s model of responsible interpretation: a “double motivation” combining “a willingness to listen” with “a willingness to suspect” (Freud and Philosophy 27), the same strategy which Rob employed in his aforementioned conversation with Jonathan.

The necessity of such an approach becomes clear, however, when Rob interrogates Damien, one of the archaeologists working near the estate. Damien empathises with the story Rosalind tells him about her abuse: “I was thinking about it every night, what she was going through... She’s so fragile, she’s been hurt so badly... Can you imagine?” (373-5). In his willingness to feel Rosalind’s pain, Damien accepts her story without question - much as Rob himself had done, as I elaborate below, although when Rob witnesses this kind of empathy from an outside perspective, he recognises the fault. “I was furious... with Damien,” Rob observes, “for being such a fucking cretin, such a perfect sucker... Didn’t it even occur to you to ask to see the scar before you slaughtered a child for it?” (373, emphasis in original). Damien’s kind-hearted impulse to listen is not balanced with a critical suspicion; his unwillingness to challenge her story, or to consider alternative explanations, leads him, against his better judgment, to murder.

15 If this understanding of empathy sounds entirely alien to the virtue developed in McGilloway’s novel, this difference reflects a current debate about what “empathy” actually means: Ann Jurecic summarises, “This division exists not just because of the tension between their theoretical views, but also, quite simply, because they use the term empathy so differently. One group characterizes empathy as the basis of compassionate behavior in institutions and societies, the other as a cultural tool for reinforcing existing structures of power” (11, emphasis in original).
One prominent criticism of empathy within the academy is that “the fellow feeling associated with social emotions” can actually function as “expressions of power, appropriations of others’ experience, and falsely oversimplified understandings of social and cultural relationships” (Jurecic 11). Lauren Berlant suggests that feeling empathy can prevent one from acting to alleviate the other’s pain: “[T]he ethical imperative toward social transformation is replaced by a civic-minded but passive ideal of empathy. The political as a place of acts oriented toward publicness becomes replaced by a world of private thoughts, leanings, and gesture” (641). Sara Ahmed argues that even acts of charity motivated by empathy can obscure the larger social injustices which create the conditions for inequality in the first place. In Tana French, the tables are turned in that Rosalind deliberately elicits empathy as a means of control: by persuading Damien to feel compassion for her, she convinces him to do what she wants; she “get[s her] kicks by having power over other people - manipulating them” (384). In both cases, however, empathy, insofar as it encourages “fellow feeling” and collapses difference, is dangerous in that it conceals a power imbalance.

Foucault suggests that power operates through the production and circulation of narratives: “Discourse transmits and produces power” (The History of Sexuality 101), or, as I have previously mentioned, “the types of discourse which [are] accept[ed]” as truth are “ma[de to] function as true” (“Truth and Power” 131), thereby creating the reality they purportedly to describe. Rosalind uses particular types of narrative - “sob stories, flattery, guilt trips” (381) - in order to exert her influence over others. However, discourse not only “reinforces [power], but also undermines and exposes it” (Foucault, The History 101) as it encompasses competing narratives,

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16 Ahmed writes that “feeling bad about the other’s suffering allows the subject to feel good” through acts of charity intended to alleviate that suffering. “What are erased in such a conversion are the very social relations that give some the capacity to feel good. In this case, the West is the one that gives to others only insofar as it is forgotten what the West has already taken in its very capacity to give in the first place” (“The Politics” 75).

17 While Rosalind’s psychopathy might suggest that her manipulative use of narrative power is atypical, French suggests elsewhere that people routinely use stories in order to influence others and shape the world around them. Her 2016 novel The Trespasser is particularly concerned with this type of narrative power: “Dozens and dozens of people, they just keep coming, and every single one of their heads is crammed with stories they believe and stories they want to believe and stories someone else has made them believe, and every story is battering against the thin walls of the person’s skull, drilling and gnawing for its chance to escape and attack someone else, bore its way in and feed off that mind too” (387).
counter narratives, or revised narratives. Narrative dissensus makes possible an ethical balance of power; uncritical empathy, though generally well-meaning, impedes this practice.

French even extends this concept of narrative dissensus to her detectives’ explanation of Katy’s murder. The novel identifies Rosalind as the primary culprit in Katy’s death, but when the case goes to court, Rosalind was “offered... a three-year suspended sentence for reckless endangerment and resisting arrest” (412), while “Damien was found guilty of murder and sentenced to life” (415). In the context of the courtroom, the detectives’ narrative – typically privileged in the detective novel – becomes one voice in a conversation, where conflicting narratives are allowed to be heard. However, even the courtroom cannot provide a “final” authoritative narrative for the crime; following the trial, “newspapers and publishers were having a bidding war over [Rosalind’s] story” (412).

While the reader still feels confident that the detectives’ explanation of the crime represents the “true” story, French ends the novel with these reminders that such confidence should not be taken for granted. This narrative dissensus is so important because, ironically, the presence of multiple memory narratives for one event does not obscure the truth as much as a single, “official” narrative would. When only one narrative exists, it inevitably serves the interests of some at the expense of others; alternatively, the presence – and acknowledgement – of multiple, even conflicting, memory narratives allows for a dialogue to take place. No one telling of the past is fully complete, objective and impartial. However, when disparate memories are brought together, like the competing narratives of the detective novel, one eventually achieves a much fuller picture of the past “as it really happened,” both in terms of the details recounted and their significance to the present. Contesting narratives ensure closer scrutiny and public discussion about how best to remember the past, overcoming the limitations and “unreliability” of individual perspective.

**Narrative Frameworks and the Necessity of Revision**

French also, like McGilloway, explores the connection between individual identity and the particular way one “names” or narrativises the past. Rob
frequently describes feeling alienated from his own past - “I had come to think of Knocknaree as though it had happened to another and unknown person” (31) - remembering nothing that happened to him before a few months after his friends’ disappearance. Crucially, this rupture happens when, after his initial difficulties in accepting the loss of his friends and fitting in at his new boarding school, Rob “decided that [he] would never be homesick again” (119), an inward change in perspective that is signified outwardly in a change of name: “Adam” becomes “Rob.” In McGilloway, the relationship between identity and memory narrative is broached in order to address the strength of one’s attachment to a particular way of telling the past; Sean keeps his father’s name, and refuses to believe the stories that label him a traitor, because of a “loyalty” that is rooted in family, politics, and religion. However, French suggests an inverse reading of this attachment: if one’s relationship to the past is so dependent on the way one labels it, then the flexibility of language enables one’s relationship to the past to change.

While Rob’s memory loss is also the result of psychological trauma and thus to a certain extent outside his conscious control, French deliberately emphasises both Rob’s “decision” to leave his past behind, as well as Rob’s agency and narrative flexibility in his subsequent attempts to recover that past: “I will come back to this story again and again, in any number of different ways” (4). Language creates the possibility of multiple pasts, not only between disparate communities but also within one’s own memory.

Not only is it possible to tell one’s past differently, but the narrative strategies and schemata one chooses to tell that story are decisions of significant ethical consequence. Drawing on work by Judith Butler about the power of “frames” to organise and to limit our perspective, Fionnuala Dillane argues that Tana French’s novel The Secret Place “exceed[s] genre parameters to make us think about frames and what exceeds both the frame and its contained, comprehensible narrative” (145), forcing her readers to reconsider “whose pain is acknowledged, whose ignored or ‘forgotten’” (144) in the narrative schemata we deploy. As I have mentioned previously, French’s work often complicates the generic conventions of the detective novel, and, as multiple critics - and indeed French herself - have noted, she is interested in “blur[ring] the genre borderlines” (“Interview with Tana
French”), her mystery novels often blurring into the gothic. Additionally, throughout her novel *In the Woods*, Rob’s narration consciously and consistently invokes a generic framing of everyday experience: Peter and Jamie “had become children out of a haunting storybook, bright myths from a lost civilization” (115). A woman he interviews is “like a sly old woman from a fairy tale... you couldn’t help half-believing she would give you the answer to your riddle” (216-7). And Rob observes that he had always discounted Sam’s investigations into “[i]nternational holding companies, rogue property developers and hush-hush land deals” on the grounds that it sounded like “some cheesy blockbuster starring Tom Cruise, not something that could ever affect anyone in any real way” (309). Although Rob distinguishes between what would happen “[i]n the movies” and the prosaic reality of “real life” (117), French’s metafictional use of genre references indicates the powerful shaping effects of narrative forms on individual perception.

In the opening scene of the novel, French uses a devastating genre shift to illustrate not only the extent to which narrative frame shapes the content it depicts, but also the plasticity of these frames: subsequent events or insights can prompt a retrospective reevaluation of the past through different, more fitting, schemata. The narrator describes the idyllic bliss of three children on school summer holiday, asking the reader to “[p]icture a summer stolen whole from some coming-of-age film set in small-town 1950s” (1). As the children run into the wood behind their homes, “they scramble through its trees and hide-and-seek in its hollows all the endless day long” (2). This perfect summer descends into horror when the narrator remarks, “These children will not be coming of age, this or any other summer” (2), a sharp denial of the *bildungsroman* framework established in the preceding paragraphs. A few pages later, Rob retells this story - “This is what I read in the file, the day after I made detective” (4) - where the “hot, clear day” (4) is only the opening scene which offsets the tragedy that follows. When Peter and Jamie go missing, one type of story retrospectively becomes something quite different. When the children are fifteen minutes late for their tea, their parents initially assume that they “had become absorbed in a game and forgotten to check the time” (4), but the passage of two hours provokes a different reading - “the children might have become lost” (5) - and when Rob
is found in a pair of “heavily bloodstained” (5) shoes, the story becomes darker still.

The emotional disturbance that the genre shift in the opening scene provokes, though mitigated by the reader’s advance knowledge that she is reading a detective novel, illustrates the general reluctance to revise a story one thought one already knew. This is especially significant in terms of memory, where one’s narrative constructions about the past are intimately connected to one’s personal identity; one can get so attached to a particular telling of events that one is blinded to alternate possibilities. Rob demonstrates this reluctance throughout the novel in his infatuation with Rosalind. He is taken with her from their first meeting - “She had a kind of vital, electric presence that filled the room” (46) - and this attraction inhibits his critical evaluation. When Cassie suggests that “there’s something off” (65) about the Devlin family, and that all the girls exhibit signs of abuse, Rob muses, “I realized that, somewhere in the back of my mind, I had been wondering about the same thing, but I disliked the thought so much that I had been avoiding it” (65). After he imagines Rosalind as a victim, however, he again remains unable to think of her in any other way, even after her suspicious behaviour should have caused him to reevaluate his interpretation. In one instance, Katy’s other sister Jessica, with much prompting from Rosalind, tells Rob about a man in a tracksuit she saw on the night of Katy’s murder. Cassie disbelieves this story as they had found no evidence of anyone matching that description on the estate, but she has to convince Rob that it is a lie. He responds to the suggestion with “[a] flare of disproportionate, almost uncontrollable fury” (177) before he concedes that “if she went to this much hassle, she must know something pretty bloody definitive” (177).

Rob’s attraction to Rosalind is, like Damien’s, mixed with a powerful sense of empathy. When he catches her in another “transparent” (165) lie about writing a sonata for the National Youth Orchestra, he observes that “it went straight to my heart as no sonata ever could have; because I recognized it” (165, emphasis mine). He remembers the comforting lies he told after his friends disappeared - “I coped, in the grand tradition of children everywhere, by retreating into my imagination” (116) - and identifies with Rosalind’s pain, or at least, what he imagines her pain to be. As it turns out, Rob has
completely misunderstood Rosalind; her lies are not a coping mechanism but a symptom of her psychopathy. Cassie explains later, “She fits the clinical definition. No conscience, no empathy, pathological liar, manipulative, charming…” (382-3). While Rob could be excused for failing to identify Rosalind’s mental disorder, he is still accountable for his irresponsible strategies of relating to her.

French expresses her scepticism about the value of empathy here, as well: when Rob looks lovingly at Rosalind, he “could see [him]self reflected… in her eyes” (297), suggesting that empathy is blinding insofar as it often becomes, in practice, a way of seeing oneself instead of the other. However, even when empathy does not collapse into narcissism, French illustrates the ethical consequences of the narrative strategies used to make sense of others. Rob imagines Rosalind, as he does so much else in the novel, in generically codified terms: “Rosalind fluttering white and slender as something from a poem” (392); “She looked as if she had just stepped in from some Edwardian garden party” (161). French emphasises Rob’s use of generic frames in order to highlight that any attempt to understand the other, including acts of empathy, are, at least in part, projections: Rob’s empathetic identification does not give him an “insight” into Rosalind’s unique perspective, but is an act of interpretation, constructing a narrative explanation for her experience.

This narrative work is not, in itself, a problem - as I have suggested, one cannot avoid being “entangled in stories” (Ricoeur, “Reflections” 6) both by and about others - but one does have a responsibility to be aware of the narrative frameworks one uses in these situations. As constructs, these frameworks are not intrinsic to the object of one’s speculation. They inevitably leave things out, and the possibility of other ways of telling necessitates an openness to revision; memory’s malleability can actually serve positive ethical ends, when it is thoughtfully and critically acknowledged. Rob’s intentions are well-meaning - “I thought of Rosalind… and felt a sudden, unaccustomed surge of protectiveness” (66) - but his unquestioned assumption that Rosalind is a victim in need of (his) protection eclipses “what exceeds both the frame and its contained, comprehensible narrative” (Dillane 145). He cannot see Rosalind as a suspect until it is too late to make much of a difference. Moreover, Rob’s empathetic understanding of Rosalind prevents
him from executing the more nuanced ethical decisions he outlines in the opening chapter as an intrinsic part of his job. When Cassie suggests that they bring in Damien and Rosalind to “play them off each other till we find out what’s going on” (349), echoing Rob’s earlier description of interrogation work as “ruthless… delicately adjusting one factor or another till a man’s fundamental instinct for self-preservation cracks” (8), he refuses, lecturing Cassie on her lack of empathy: “That girl is fragile, Maddox. She is sensitive and she is highly strung and she just lost a sister… We have a responsibility to look after that girl” (349-50, emphasis in original). Cassie calmly responds, “No we don’t, Rob… That’s Victim Support’s job. We have a responsibility… to try and find out the truth about what the hell happened here, and that’s it” (350, emphasis in original).

If Rob’s problematic attempts at empathy are represented in the text as irresponsible narrative constructions, French imagines “finding the truth” as an ethical narrative project. As I have mentioned, talking about “truth” in connection with memory is often a means of privileging one narrative over others, and occluding the power dynamics involved by positioning this narrative as “objective.” However, French suggests that finding “truth” is not only a matter of determining what happened, but why and how; it is the pursuit of an accurate narrative explanation of the causes and effects of the events described. For example, Rob and Cassie determine conclusively, through forensic evidence and a detailed confession, that Damien lured Katy onto the archaeological site, struck her in the back of the head with a rock, raped her with a trowel, and hid her body in the finds shed for twenty-four hours before moving her onto the ceremonial altar the next night. He is placed under arrest nearly 100 pages before the end of the novel; the only piece missing from Damien’s story is his motive. Damien’s motive is not actually necessary in order to secure a conviction; the detectives can prove beyond all doubt what Damien did. However, Rob reflects that “juries, trained by TV, want a motive” (346), and French’s readers, similarly trained by genre convention, need to know why Damien killed Katy before the novel can reach a satisfying conclusion.

This need to know why, though, is not only a matter of wanting the expected tidy ending, where all questions have been thoroughly answered.
Establishing a motive is a critical component in understanding the causal sequence of events; it not only answers the question of “how... this ended up happening” (342), but it also identifies which agents, acting under what circumstances, caused those events to happen. In *Narrative Causalities*, Emma Kafalenos explains “on the one hand, how open events are to plural interpretations of their causes and consequences... and, on the other hand, the degree to which context determines interpretations of causality” (x). In applying a different narrative structure to a set of events, the “function” of a character, or her “position in a causal sequence” (ix), changes. When the detectives finally learn Damien’s motive, the story transforms – Rosalind had spent months convincing Damien that Katy enables their father to abuse Rosalind and Jessica, and that the only way to protect them from further harm would be for him to kill her - and the attribution of criminal responsibility subtly, but critically, shifts. Damien still committed the murder, but Rosalind is ultimately to blame for orchestrating the plot.

Like McGilloway’s Inspector Devlin, French’s detectives are forced to confront the fact that the past can be narrated in a number of different, often conflicting, ways. While this multiplicity means each individual rememberer might produce a unique narrative for a given set of events, it also indicates that it is possible to change the way we tell our own stories. One can find “the truth” - a version of the past that mediates these diverse perspectives while remaining “faithful to the past” (Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* 21) - by taking responsibility for our narratives, by talking about the past with others and being willing to revise our individual version of events where appropriate. Memory’s openness to social influence does not make it inherently unreliable, but necessitates a thoughtful, ethical engagement with the narrative project of memory. The “significance” of the past - its meaning, its relevance, and the attribution of responsibility -

18 Campbell helpfully glosses Ricoeur’s point about memory’s relationship with truth: “[W]e must enlarge our conception of good remembering, our concern, in Ricoeur’s apt words, that memory be faithful to the past, to reflect two further facts. First, good remembering often involves getting something right about the significance of the past as judged from the standpoint of the present. [...] There is thus more to good remembering than that our memory declarations are true. Second... [w]hile sometimes experienced as a feature of our interiority, human remembering also takes place through action, narrative, and other modes of representation in public space and in the company of others. [...] [J]udgements that I have the significance of the past roughly right are rarely mine alone” (“Our Faithfulness” 362).
emerges in a social context, though the individual has to complete the work of applying this new understanding to her own story. No amount of dialogue or empathetic understanding can possibly be effective otherwise.
CHAPTER 2

“Midwife to my Own Old Story”: Constructing Life Narratives in Contemporary Irish Fiction

As I sit here at this table marked and scored by a dozen generations maybe of inmates, patients, angels, whatever we are, I must report to you this sensation of some gold essence striking into me, blood deep. Not contentment, but a prayer as wild and dangerous as a lion’s roar. I tell you this, you. Dear reader.

Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture*

Does the body remember? When the mind has forgotten?

Joseph O’Connor, *Ghost Light*

Introduction

Autobiography enjoys a particular prominence in the Irish literary canon, and it is perhaps because of this prominence that Irish authors have so often, and so productively, reimagined the generic boundaries between autobiography, biography, and fiction. These generic boundaries are notoriously fluid. Gunnthórunn Gudmundsdóttir, for instance, “consider[s]… fictionality to be a necessary part of the autobiographical process and not something external to it, or incompatible with it” (4), while Paul John Eakin writes that “it is as reasonable to assume that all autobiography has some fiction in it as it is to recognize that all fiction is in some sense necessarily autobiographical” (10). Although such cross-genre experimentation is hardly unique to the Irish, the centrality of these experiments within the Irish canon is notable. Claire Lynch, for instance, observes that “James Joyce’s *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) has long been acknowledged as a classic of the Künstlerroman genre and it is in part due to the enormous influence of Joyce that autobiographical elements have held an unassailable position in

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19 Liam Harte, for instance, notes the “preponderance of life writing in contemporary Irish culture” within a “large and richly varied literary corpus” (*Modern Irish Autobiography* 1-3). Claire Lynch writes that “Autobiography is a genre which has held a silent revolution in Irish writing... In its formal guise it has enriched an already expansive literary tradition... [while in] contemporary incarnations it continues to challenge expectations of what Irishness is and how that can be captured in writing” (*Irish Autobiography* 5).
Irish novels” (Irish Autobiography 16). This practice of blending the fictional and the autobiographical has interesting precedent in Irish literary history before Joyce, including the contemporaneously controversial but relatively quickly forgotten Autobiography of a Child by Hannah Lynch.20

The twentieth century witnessed a progressively more sustained engagement with the questions of fact and fiction in the narration of a life story, culminating in the “memoir boom” of the 1990s. Some of Ireland’s most well-known and critically acknowledged novels of this era are also, in part, autobiographical: most notably, John McGahern’s Amongst Women (1990) and Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark (1996). The texts published on the other side of the dividing line, however - autobiographies and memoirs proper - are also often brought into this generic debate by critics concerned with how much of the author’s remembered past is “actually true.”21 The twenty-first century sees a continued interest in the complex relationship between fiction and autobiography, memory and truth; as contemporary Irish novelist Belinda McKeon says in a recent interview, “The boundary between what really happens in a life and what you imagine is much more fluid than I used to think - and I’ve become... interested in writing which explores that” (Wallace, “Belinda McKeon”).

One type of such cross-genre experimentation is the “biographical novel” or “biofiction,” which Michael Lackey defines as “literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure” (“Locating and Defining” 3). He writes that “the biographical novel has become one of the most dominant literary forms in recent years” (“The Rise of the Biographical” 34), and suggests that its growing popularity might be attributed to concurrent shifts in both psychology and historiography, namely the “narrative turn” which, as I have discussed, emphasises the role of subjective interpretation:

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20 Binckes and Laine describe Lynch’s Autobiography as “a book that contains such a plethora of generic signatures and intertextual references that is self-consciously engaged with the difficulties of writing a memoir of childhood and is, equally self-consciously and explicitly, not straightforwardly autobiographical” (“Irish Autobiographical Fiction” 198).
21 For instance, thirteen years after the publication of Frank McCourt’s famous memoir Angela’s Ashes (1996), the BBC’s coverage of McCourt’s death leads with the line, “Residents of [Limerick] have been divided over whether the Pulitzer-winning account of childhood survival amid soul-crushing poverty was more fact than fiction” (“City Still Tastes Memoir’s Ashes”).
With regard to representing history, the biographical novel, which takes into account the surreal dimension of the biographical subject, shifts the focus from the seemingly objective reality of the external world to the subjective reality of the internal world. ("The Rise of the Biographical" 46)

Thus, this shift of focus, from “the facts” of the historical record to the subjective nature of their construction, is not a “mere matter of aesthetic preference” (Lackey, “The Rise of the Biographical” 54). Rather, through examining the personal and social influences on narratives constructed about the past, the lens of the biographical subject enables both “a more accurate representation of history and a more profound critique of the political” (Lackey, “The Rise of the Biographical” 54, emphasis mine).

Eve Patten writes that “Irish fiction [has] strategically and artfully appropriated the structures of biography and autobiography as pertinent narrative machinery” (67). In this chapter, I argue that Sebastian Barry’s The Secret Scripture (2008) and Joseph O’Connor’s Ghost Light (2010) utilise the “narrative machinery” of life writing in order to address the ethics and politics which govern the narrative and social construction of the self through memory. These novels signify their position on the generic border between fiction and life writing in that the authors, as well as their characters, work through many of the same questions that autobiography typically addresses: “the status of the subject, the relations and representations of... gender, and perhaps most importantly... the individual’s relationship with the past” (Gudmundsdóttir 1). At the same time, these novels indicate their distinction from autobiography in that they are based on fictional - or, as in O’Connor, highly fictionalised - characters whose life stories are imagined by their authors. They are further mediated by strategies of twinning and shifting voice to allow the reader insight into the autobiographical writing process, as well as the social conditions in which that construction takes place. Barry and O’Connor utilise these cross-genre strategies in order to address the narrative complexity of the autobiographical memory project. The aim of this chapter, then, is to analyse the ways that these novels traverse generic boundaries in thinking through the reclamation of agency through narrative; the individual and interpersonal ethics of constructing and communicating life narratives;
and the performative dimensions of memory and identity which augment written narratives about the past.

Sebastian Barry, in his 2008 novel *The Secret Scripture*, constructs the life story of Roseanne, in her final days at the mental hospital where she has spent the majority of her life; and writes a separate narrative from the perspective of Dr Grene, the resident psychiatrist who must assess whether any of his patients are fit to re-enter the community. The novel is structured in alternating sections of first person narration, Roseanne writing what she terms a “Testimony of Herself,” and Dr Grene keeping a “Commonplace Book” which he had intended to be a “professional, semi-at any rate, account of... the last days” (47) at the hospital, but which becomes a much more personal set of reflections on his own history. In short, the novel is written in the form of two autobiographies.

Although the characters are fictional, Barry does draw on fact. Barry has often mined his family history for the raw materials of his fiction; as Nicholas Grene writes, “The figures around whom he builds his plays are members of his own family but not, for the most part, members of the family about whom there are public records” (168). The same holds true for his novels, as well, as Barry has explained in an interview that Roseanne is loosely based on one of his great aunts: “My mother didn’t know her name... She had married my mother’s uncle, and then been considered ‘no good’ in some fashion, and was eventually committed to Sligo Mental Hospital” (qtd. in Harney-Mahajan 58). More significantly, however, Barry draws not only from his family history, but from Ireland’s, as Roseanne’s circumstances of incarceration situate her within what James Smith terms Ireland’s “architecture of containment,” comprised in part by the Magdalen laundries, mental institutions, and orphanages in which those perceived as taboo to Ireland’s social order were kept out of the public eye.

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22 Raphael traces some of these connections, noting that “Barry has always been open about many of his characters being based on his relatives. His great-grandfather James Dunne, a police superintendent in the Dublin Metropolitan Police, inspired the central character in his 1995 play *The Steward of Christendom*. The title character in *Annie Dunne* is based on a beloved great-aunt. Willie Dunne, the young lad in *A Long Long Way*, is brother to both Annie and Lilly Bere” (“Why Sebastian Barry Writes as a Woman”). Joseph O’Connor, in a review of *The Secret Scripture*, notes this trend, as well: “Barry, in effect, is making one operatically extended fiction comprising discrete but interrelated novels and plays, often inspired by his real-life ancestors” (O’Connor, “Not All Knives and Axes”).
The Secret Scripture further complicates the generic boundaries of autobiography, biography, and fiction in its thematic preoccupation with the struggles of remembering, writing, and communicating one’s past. In the novel, Roseanne encounters difficulties in all three areas: she misremembers details of her past (which come to the reader’s attention via documentation that Dr Grene consults); she struggles to admit certain discrepancies to herself and notes her distaste at including them in the narrative; and finally, she undergoes a significant change in her opinion on whether or not, and with whom, her autobiography should be shared. Dr Grene’s narrative, meanwhile, revolves around his changing approach to Roseanne and her story: he learns to become a responsible and supportive witness.

Joseph O’Connor’s 2010 novel Ghost Light explores the famous relationship between the Irish playwright John Millington Synge and his fiancé, the actress Molly Allgood, although as O’Connor admits in the book’s afterword, “Ghost Light is a work of fiction, frequently taking immense liberties with fact” (244). The novel imagines Molly’s thoughts for a day as she walks through the city and remembers her life with Synge. Molly does not write out her narrative as Roseanne does, and this decision is fundamental to the novel’s concern with the construction and communication of personal memory narratives. This preoccupation with the autobiographical project is signalled early in the text, as Molly receives a request from an academic for a life story interview. Molly does not participate in this interview, but its request for her “recollections” (18) provokes a “haunting” of her memory as Synge “come[s] to [her] again... like a wanderer reluctant to be exiled” (4). It also prompts her to consider whether “there [were] some way of ordering [those memories] as one would tidy a messy room, or would the clutter that has amassed merely be shifted about in conversation so as to create an illusion of neatness” (29), and finally whether there would even be “any point” (31) in communicating them.

The social and ethical questions raised by both novels, then, are precisely those which complicate the distinctions between autobiography, biography, and fiction: how much of memory can be considered “true”? How does narration affect the content of the remembered past? And how is the
self - and the story of the self - shaped by others, both those who appear in the narrative, and those to whom the narrative is communicated?

These two novels explore the ethics concerning the construction of autobiographical narratives, particularly as they relate to interpersonal negotiations of power; both O’Connor’s Molly and Barry’s Roseanne have been “written out” of history. Molly’s many letters to Synge have been “destroyed by the executors” (189) of Synge’s estate after his death in order to protect and control Synge’s reputation, but as Molly describes it, “[T]hey came to take away all the proof of [my] existence” (21). Likewise, when Roseanne is ostracized from her family and community after she meets with a man who is not her husband, Fr Gaunt orchestrates the annulment of Roseanne’s marriage and her removal to the mental asylum. He explains that her marriage “never happened. It does not exist” (223). Part of the project of these novels, then, is to restore to social memory those who have been marginalised, silenced, and forgotten. Fintan O’Toole has observed that Barry’s writing tends to focus on “history’s leftovers, men and women defeated and discarded by their times” (“Introduction,” vii). As Barry himself writes through the voice of Dr Grene,

The fact is, we are missing so many threads in our story that the tapestry of Irish life cannot but fall apart. There is nothing to hold it together. The first breath of wind, the next huge war that touches on us, will blow us to the Azores. Roseanne is just a bit of paper blowing on the edge of the wasteland. (183)

This sentiment echoes James Smith’s argument about Ireland’s “duty to remember... [the] Irish women and their children who were... forgotten by an oppressive and exclusionary narrative of national identity (91, emphasis mine). Insofar as these novels focus on such “missing threads,” as well as the profound injustices of their erasure from social memory, they might be imagined as responses to this duty.

In structuring these texts through the perspectives of their heroines as they complete, or contemplate, the construction of their autobiographies, both Barry and O’Connor explore the politics and practices of social forgetting, of the narrative processes by which such women were marginalised in the first place. Though Molly and Roseanne have been erased from and
misrepresented in others’ historical narratives, these narratives also exert a
crippling influence on their own processes of self-narration. Roseanne, for
instance, silences herself for decades after being labelled an informer, and
Molly frequently reflects that the details of her life most important to her
would be deemed “irrelevant” (78) by anyone else, and so keeps them to
herself. These oppressive histories have thus complicated their own narrative
abilities. Barry and O’Connor’s novels, then, are concerned not so much with
“rescuing” those who have been forgotten, but with the deceptively difficult
process of reclaiming agency by recuperating authorial control of the past.

Reclaiming agency, however, is paradoxically presented in both novels
as a form of sharing the autobiographical project with another. In Barry’s
novel, Roseanne is only able to recover from one of the disabling traumas of
her past following the empathetic intervention of Dr Grene. Meanwhile, Dr
Grene’s narrative illustrates the extraordinary complexity of becoming a
“responsible witness to the miracle of the ordinary soul” (281, emphasis
mine), even when one begins with the best of intentions. In O’Connor, Molly
can only “settle” her ghosts insofar as she is able to construct her identity,
and share her legacy, through embodied acts of performance, imagined in the
novel as the revision of narratives – such as social schemata or written
histories – within the “interactional and material constraints” (Langellier and
Peterson 152) of the rhetorical situation.

Both novels suggest, then, that the autobiographical project is not only
inherently connected to the stories of others and to fiction, but that it is only
by utilizing these connections – entangling one’s life story with others’, and
mutually revising those narratives – that the self can be successfully
constructed. If narrative is an essential tool for privately organising,
collecting, and cohering one’s life, it is also precisely what makes it circulable
among others. Rather than considering this connection as coincidence, Angel
Medina contends that “[t]he meaning of my whole life is communicative; it
emerges, as such, for the benefit of another consciousness when I attempt to
present myself totally to it. Reciprocally, the meaning of another life
becomes a totality only when received fully within my life” (30, emphasis
mine). Insofar as life is understood in narrative terms, it also entails a
communicative project. The sharing of narratives with others becomes an
essential component of making sense of oneself. As Ricoeur writes, “If each of us receives a certain narrative identity from the stories which are told to him or her, or from those that we tell about ourselves, this identity is mingled with that of others in such a way as to engender second order stories which are themselves intersections between numerous stories” (“Reflections” 6). Narrative identity is thus not only communicative, but collaborative.

The collaborative construction of narrative identities not only “contribute[s] to the reconfiguration of our own past and that of the past of others (Ricoeur, “Reflections” 7, emphasis mine), but it enables the kind of “mutual revision” of the past that Ricoeur understands as the project of forgiveness. He writes, “Forgiveness is... a specific form of the revision of the past and, through it, of the specific narrative identities... lifting the burden of guilt which paralyses the relations between individuals who are acting out and suffering their own history” (“Reflections” 9-10). In this formulation, forgiveness is not a matter of forgetting the past, but revising its meaning for the present. Barry and O’Connor create protagonists whose personal feelings of guilt and shame contribute to their experience as passive victims of history. Through engaging in projects of forgiveness, Roseanne and Molly challenge the oppressive weight of their histories, freeing them to construct a positive self-identity and to participate in productive interpersonal exchanges.

Before addressing the novels, however, I wish to make one final observation about the ethics of authorship in the fictional projects of Barry and O’Connor. As both novels are concerned with the trauma of being misrepresented, marginalised, and silenced by others’ narratives, Barry and O’Connor also problematize their own positions as novelists who arguably co-opt the stories of the real women on whom their protagonists’ experiences are based. Though the novels can be read as critical interventions, responding to Smith’s “duty to remember” (91), at the same time, that basis in historical fact introduces additional levels of ethical concern. As Barry appropriates the life story of a family member about whom very little is known, Harney-Mahajan posits that it seems a bit “transgressive for Barry to have put words in the mouth of one who, in the real world, would never be allowed to speak” (62). O’Connor, meanwhile, appropriates the life story of a relatively well-
known historical figure, prompting questions about the accuracy of his representation:

How far may liberties with the facts extend? Molly is touchingly rendered here, yet O’Connor’s portrayal of the Dublin actress as a worn-out drunk, disorientated and living in penury in London would be hurtful if it were not for his final, if faintly dismissive, caveat that her circumstances simply “were not as depicted here.” (Smith, “Haunted by Ghosts”)

I argue, however, that both of these novels can be read as examples of Ricoeur’s “model of memory-exchange” (“Reflections” 6). Ricoeur argues for taking responsibility, in imagination and sympathy, for the story of the other, through the life narratives which concern that other. This is what we learn to do in our dealings with fictional characters with whom we provisionally identify through reading. These mobile identifications contribute to the reconfiguration of our own past and that of the past of others, by an incessant restructuring of stories that we tell, some of them about others. (6-7)

As both of these novels explore multiple narratives about their heroines, they are participating in, and encouraging their readers to join, an ongoing conversation about how the past, and the self, is narrated. Furthermore, in adopting the perspective of their protagonists, Barry and O’Connor engage in a form of “prosthetic memory” (Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory 2); by imaginatively inhabiting the memories of another, these novels have “the ability to shape [the reader’s] subjectivity and politics” (Landsberg, Prosthetic Memory 2) in a way that a consciously mediated, third-person narrative could not. Finally, as both novels are highly self-reflexive, their focus is as much about the process of constructing an autobiography - revealing hidden power dynamics and implicating Irish society as failed witnesses to real, silenced women - as it is about presenting a version of their stories.
Sebastian Barry’s *The Secret Scripture*

**Silence, Narrative, and the Reclamation of Agency**

As Roseanne begins her “honest-minded history of myself” (5), she explains her decision to compose her story: “[W]hen I was young I thought others were the authors of my fortune or misfortune; I did not know that a person could… be the author therefore of themselves” (3-4). In choosing to write her own life story, Roseanne’s narrative project aims to correct the ways she has been misrepresented by others, although the silencing she experienced in her younger years continues to influence her approach to her autobiography. She is both afraid to divulge secrets about her past, and reluctant to cede any of her narrative power through dialogue.

Roseanne’s dealings with Fr Gaunt, who orchestrates the annulment of her marriage and her separation from the community, illustrate the connection between authorial control and social power. Shortly following Roseanne’s marriage to Tom McNulty, Fr Gaunt observes her meeting another man, John Lavelle, at Knocknarea (192-3). Consequently, her family shuns and abandons her, while Fr Gaunt begins the “monumentally complex undertaking” (223) of her annulment: “Deep deep thought at Rome... Weighing everything, sifting through everything, my own deposition, Tom’s own words, the elder Mrs McNulty... No stone unturned” (223), except for the fact that Roseanne herself is not allowed to contribute. She is not even made aware of this “undertaking” until it has been completed, and as a result, she is effectively erased from their narrative: her marriage with Tom “never happened. It does not exist” (223).

As Roseanne struggles to comprehend Fr Gaunt’s explanations, her reaction demonstrates her linguistic disenfranchisement: “I made a few little grunts then of consonants and vowels, my brain not really sure what words to use” (214). When she finally achieves coherent speech - asserting, “I love my husband” (214) - Fr Gaunt dismisses her words, responding simply, “That is all history now” (214). Though he is referencing the fact that her marriage is already over, his phrasing also suggests that her story, having been subsumed by the complex and authoritative history written by himself, the family, and the Church, is no longer open to revision or addendum. As historian Hayden
White notes, “The historical narrative… reveals to us a world that is putatively ‘finished’” (The Content 21). In relegating Roseanne’s story to “history” - in suggesting that it is finished - Fr Gaunt effectively uses language to create silence, establishing a barrier that isolates Roseanne both from her own past, and from other people. Furthermore, the way he narrates this history - using words like “nymphomania” (224) which Roseanne does not understand, and which he refuses to explain - ensures that Roseanne does not even have the opportunity to respond to the story he has written.

It is entirely understandable, then, that Roseanne wants to similarly guard her story from external influence. She imagines, learning from Fr Gaunt’s example, that agency is established through having complete control, even tyranny, over the narrative. This explains, to a certain extent, why Roseanne is so opposed to sharing her story with Dr Grene. When he asks whether she remembers the circumstances of her admission to the asylum, for instance, she responds, “‘No,’ …a foul and utter lie being the best answer” (26). As she admits later, she is not as opposed to Dr Grene knowing her story as much as she objects to the conversational exchange: “I don’t mind him reading [the diary] as long as I don’t have to be questioned closely” (126). She resolves to write out her story in solitude rather than develop her memories in conversation with Dr Grene in order to maintain control.

Roseanne’s impulse to secrecy and silence, however, is also related to her fear of being labelled an informer. This fear becomes the dominant concern in Roseanne’s life, and the lens through which she interprets all other dilemmas, following one formative event in her childhood. As Roseanne tells the story, a group of Republican soldiers asks her father to help bury their fallen comrade, for which task Roseanne is sent to fetch Fr Gaunt (37-45). Before the burial takes place, however, the Free State soldiers arrive and arrest the Republicans (49-54), for which Roseanne is blamed as she was the only one who left the scene (54). In Fr Gaunt’s account, however, written as a deposition for Roseanne’s file upon her incarceration at the mental hospital, Roseanne witnessed the group of Republican soldiers burying a coffin in the graveyard. Unbeknownst to her, the coffin contained a stash of weapons and strategic information; as a confused child, she thought the men were grave robbers, and alerted her father. As a police sergeant in the Royal Irish
Constabulary, her father uses this information to make a number of important arrests (152).

Roseanne knows that such alternate versions of the story exist, but these discrepancies disturb her less than the “one grand constant, that I had stopped in my path... and told my tale” (54). It would be difficult to overstate the significance of Roseanne being accused of informing. Dudai, in writing on the cultural significance of informers in the context of Ireland’s periods of political violence, notes that informers function as folk devils, or “individuals who become the subject of intense moral concern by the community, the embodiment of a serious threat to collective social values and interests” (36). This function marks the accused as unforgiveable, strengthening community bonds through exclusion; as he writes, “Heresy is very useful in defending orthodoxy” (36). Roseanne’s narrative is punctuated with concerns about her morality: “I may dwell with the devil shortly” (55), she writes, and she frequently begs her reader, “Forgive me, forgive me” (220). Moreover, Roseanne tells this story about the strange burial immediately after talking to Dr Grene about the possibility of her being released; she does not want “freedom” (27), as he puts it, because she does not believe that she has a community to which she might return: “[W]hat does Dr Grene mean... that I might go out into the world? Where is that world?” (27). Being labelled an informer has come to dominate Roseanne’s self-perception, and this puts her in a predicament: although part of the reason she writes her narrative is to dispute these accusations, her desire not to be thought an informer has been internalised as an injunction to silence. She fears that “to speak at all is a betrayal of something, perhaps a something not even identified” (76, emphasis mine).

While Roseanne’s anxieties are the result of her childhood experience, Barry also suggests that there exists a general cultural anxiety about informing, creating a culture of secrecy and silence. For instance, Dr Grene observes “how terrified everyone always is at these staff meetings... [o]f anything having to be mentioned to the visiting professionals... The staff seems to gather together and roll itself into a ball, needles outward” (163-4). Similarly, when he inquires about the nuns at Nazareth House orphanage, a friend observes, “They used to be very closed of course, about these
matters... Their instinct I am sure is still to secrecy” (271). These social parallels to Roseanne’s personal secrecy suggest that even though Roseanne’s fear is rooted in a personal trauma, it is not a problem unique to her, nor one that can be effectively resolved on her own. She must find a way to manage her own anxieties, but her community must also acknowledge its responsibility for maintaining this culture of silence. I will return to Barry’s exploration of how the community might exercise this responsibility, and how Roseanne learns to communicate with an open and supportive community, but first I want to address how Roseanne realises that such openness, in the form of narrative exchange and negotiation, is necessary in the first place.

After Roseanne explains her reasons for wanting to write her story - primarily to set the record straight, but also, in so doing, to “go to [her] own rest… with joy enough” (5) - she begins with a description of her father, Joe Clear, and the “curious happiness” (11) he experienced in telling stories about his life: “It was as if such an event were a reward to him for being alive, a little gift of narrative… My father’s happiness not only redeemed him, but drove him to stories” (11). In direct contrast, Roseanne describes her mother Cissy as primarily characterised by fear and silence: “[M]y mother’s anxiety was a perpetual spanner thrown in her works. For my mother never made miniature legends of her life, and was singularly without stories, though I am sure there were things there to tell as good as my father’s” (11). In order to find happiness, or “joy enough” (5) to face her death, Roseanne understands that she must, like her father, tell her own stories.

However, Barry suggests that Joe experiences this happiness in the way he uses these stories to create a space for himself in an otherwise hostile community. While Joe “might be thought to have no place in the Irish story” (36), both because of his Presbyterianism and his former career in the Royal Irish Constabulary, she insists that “he loved whatever in his mind he thought Ireland to be” (61). Implicit in Roseanne’s description is the idea of the nation as a construct, and national identity as a form of story. For instance, Roseanne observes that her father “understood rebellion” (36). His prized possession is a “memorial booklet for the Rising of 1916” (36), and he is particularly grieved by the deaths of young soldiers, both in the Rising and in the ongoing Civil War: “it might be said that those dozens of men were buried
in my father, in the secret graveyard of his thoughts” (36). This metaphor suggests the profound intimacy of such connections; Joe does not simply think about these men, but they are, to a certain extent, components of his own self. Thus, when Joe would “share memories and anecdotes” (36) at burials, he becomes, in Ricoeur’s phrase, “entangled in stories” (“Reflections” 6), for “the story of my life is a segment of the story of your life” (“Reflections” 6). In telling the story of his life where it intersects with these others’, Joe implicates himself in the way his community is remembered - and the way they remember him - essentially writing his place into history, revising the parameters of Irishness in the process of revising the boundaries of the self.

Joe experiences his happiness not simply through constructing these stories about his life, nor even through communicating them, but for sharing them when it “seemed pleasant and generous to do so” (36). As Roseanne learns, through recounting Joe’s experiences as well as her own, it is sometimes essential to share one’s personal narrative with others, but that one must find the “right moment” (206) to communicate. As Sue Campbell suggests, part of the purpose of sharing memories with others is to affirm a certain conception of self; the way that others respond to the significance of the narratives one constructs and communicates either affirms or challenges one’s sense of identity (Our Faithfulness 79-81). Joe’s stories, which negotiate his place in the community, are only affirmed for a season; as tensions rise during the Civil War, Joe is increasingly ostracised and eventually murdered by the IRA (110-1). At two critical junctures in Roseanne’s life, she recognises the necessity of telling her story to another, but fails to find the “right moment”: though she does precisely what she needs to do in her circumstances, she is, in Ricoeur’s terms, a “[witness] who never encounter[s] an audience capable of listening to them or hearing what they have to say” (Memory, History, Forgetting 166).

In the first example, after her husband Tom is informed of her “infidelity” with John Lavelle, she acknowledges that she needs to tell him in her own words what had happened: “There is a moment to speak to a topic... This was a rare moment in life and I knew that if I could just see Tom, or rather, just let him see me... everything would be all right” (209). The reciprocity in Roseanne’s phrasing suggests that a successful “moment”
requires an equal exchange; Roseanne and Tom must be allowed to “see” one another. As it happens, however, Roseanne is barred entry, though Tom’s brother Jack tells her that “[t]he mother has spoken on this matter” (209). The elder Mrs McNulty has heard and accepted Fr Gaunt’s story about Roseanne’s infidelity, and so prevents her from telling her own version of events.

Later, following a brief affair with Tom’s brother Eneas, Roseanne becomes pregnant, and she once again acknowledges the need to tell her story: “While it had just been myself, I had learned a little strategy of secrecy and survival, but now I was drifting well beyond that” (251). She pleads with Tom’s mother for help, “begging another woman to understand my plight” (256). This time, although Roseanne is given the opportunity to speak, she censors herself: “I was trying to say pregnant, but it didn’t seem a word that could be said. I knew in her ears... it would have the same meaning as whore, prostitute” (257). She knows that Mrs McNulty’s prejudices would warp the significance of her story, so she refuses to tell it. Changing tactics, Roseanne pleads for understanding on the grounds of Mrs McNulty’s own “vicissitudes” (258); as Barry reveals later in the novel, Mrs McNulty herself had borne a child out of wedlock (285). However, Mrs McNulty refuses to share her own story just as she had earlier refused to hear Roseanne’s; she dismisses anything Roseanne might have heard about her past as “[f]ilthy gossip” (258). Although Roseanne tries to participate in a meaningful exchange of stories, Mrs McNulty’s rhetorical positioning does not allow for any such connection. Even when Roseanne thoughtfully considers when and to whom she will tell her story, it accomplishes nothing - not for herself, nor for others - without a receptive audience.

*Angels and the Miraculous Possibilities of Memory*

While Roseanne’s story is full of such discouraging moments, she attributes her exceptional resilience to the help of “angels”: as she summarises near the end of her narrative, “I once lived among humankind, and found them in their generality to be cruel and cold, and yet could mention the names of three or four that were like angels. I suppose we measure the importance of our days by those few angels we spy among us” (268). She describes as angelic those
who have played a positive role in her life – her father (11), Dr Grene (99), and the other women who have been incarcerated in the asylum (91), for example – and the “miracle” they accomplish is a positive change in the way Roseanne remembers and relates her life story. While Roseanne begins the novel by fiercely guarding her secrets from others, and while Dr Grene initially reads the distortions in Roseanne’s memory as evidence of her madness, Barry suggests that memory’s susceptibility to alteration through external influence is not necessarily a weakness – neither a loss of power, nor a mental deficiency – but rather a miraculous possibility.

In Dr Grene’s assessment of Roseanne – as he puts it, his task is “simply to ascertain if she was mad” (153) – he has to weigh Roseanne’s story about her past, including its many distortions, against Fr Gaunt’s meticulous testimony. Although Dr Grene at first finds Fr Gaunt’s “conscientiously detail[ed]” (151) account to be persuasive, his opinions are transformed after he reads Roseanne’s completed narrative, which “differs from Fr Gaunt’s history in many ways” (277). Dr Grene still does not doubt the veracity of Fr Gaunt’s text overall – the “evidence is against [Roseanne]” (278) on a number of issues, including the nature of her father’s work and death – but he notes that Fr Gaunt was “obviously sane to such a degree that it makes sanity almost undesirable” (278). Roseanne, in contrast, remembers things that could not have happened, ordinarily a marker of the kind of ‘madness’ Dr Grene has been tasked to assess, but he finds in her account something complex and valuable, though he struggles to articulate any final judgement on it. He writes that his “first inclination to identify her memory as a traumatic one, with details transposed and corrupted... [was] actually too simple” (280), and that her narrative contains “useful truths above and beyond the actual veracity of the ‘facts’” (280).

While Dr Grene labours to express these values within a rational framework, Roseanne insists from the beginning of her narrative that an irrational memory can be understood as miraculous. She tells one of her father’s treasured stories about “The Indian Angel” (10). During a motorcycle race, the rider in front of Joe crashed into a stone wall, and Joe “saw a sight he could not and never could explain, which was the rider rising as if on wings, and crossing the huge wall in a swift and gentle movement” (10).
Roseanne is anxious to establish that, even though the story defies rational explanation, her father was not lying. She pleads with her reader, “Please do not think my father was dissembling... Such stories are only effective if the teller feigns absolute belief... But my father was no magician of lies” (10). Roseanne’s anxiety that her father not be considered a liar could be read as a pre-emptive plea for the reader to believe her story, as well as Barry’s metafictional reference to the work of the novel in addressing “truth” through fiction.

In characterising this story as part of “an evangelical gospel of my father’s life” (11), Roseanne suggests that this grey area between truth and falsehood might be productively utilised. As with the anecdotes Joe shares at funerals, he is “redeemed” (11) by this story, gaining a sort of immortality by becoming part of local legend; telling it again “keeps him even now alive” (11). This story also benefits its listeners. As the story continues to circulate, “things merely hinted at by him would become in the new telling by a second hand solid, unprovable, but raised up even higher into the realms of miracle. So that all and sundry might take comfort from it” (11). Insofar as others shape the story, it strays further from “truth” but gains the power to delight and encourage.

Other references to angels in the text illuminate how this miraculous power operates in individual acts of remembering. For example, Roseanne imagines the process of self-construction as “that long conversation we make in our heads, as if an angel were writing there unbeknownst” (57). In Oneself as Another, Ricoeur develops a model of narrative identity in which “the work of otherness” resides “at the heart of selfhood” (318): the “history of each person” is “entangled... in the histories of numerous others” (161), so that “[e]ven at the individual level, it is through stories revolving around others and around ourselves that we articulate and shape our own temporality” (“Reflections” 6). In Roseanne’s account, these others who contribute to her acts of narrative self-construction are angels. Though she composes her life story in solitude, she sits at a desk which has been “marked and scored by a dozen generations maybe of inmates, patients, angels” (91), and as she reflects on their experiences, she is galvanised to tell her own. She feels “[n]ot contentment, but a prayer as wild and dangerous as a lion’s roar” (91),
finding in their influence a strength that is quite at odds with the fear and uncertainty she frequently expresses about her task. Her “brittle... history” (5) transforms in this passage into “a ferocious truth” (90).

The central problem which Roseanne experiences in narrating her story, however, relates to her unresolved grief about her father’s death. When she was still a child, her father was hanged, and Roseanne describes her mourning as “[t]he grief that does not age, that does not go away with time, like most griefs and human matters. That is the grief that is always there” (86). Research psychologists have posited that in the case of “complicated grief,” one’s sense of self is predominantly constructed from memories related to a significant loss (MacCallum and Bryant, “Self-Defining Memories”), a focus which distorts the way one remembers the past, experiences the present, and envisions the future. Roseanne’s grief, as “a secret and ruinous burden at the very heart” (18), is a defining component of her identity. If the “angel that sits inside us” is “a connoisseur of happiness” (227), then Roseanne’s “angels” are in conflict with the competing force of her grief; her father is “removed from [her] at the will of... devils” (18).

Not only does Roseanne’s grief negatively inform her self-perception, but it also becomes a limiting framework for her memories, experiences, and future-oriented thinking. As MacCallum and Bryant suggest, complicated grief becomes a cycle of suffering that has a tendency to make itself worse; one is “‘stuck’ in their grief, with their past and future constructed within the context of the loss” (“Imagining the Future” 663). Roseanne’s need to make sense of her father’s suicide prompts obsessive speculation about his happiness; she has “puzzled it over these eighty years and more” (86). She begins her narrative, as I have mentioned, by insisting on “[her] father’s curious happiness” (11), although as she broaches the subject of his death, she rehearses several other stories which gesture toward his profound sorrow. After the aforementioned incident in the graveyard, Joe is forced to resign and, as Roseanne recalls, “to lose the job was to lose in some extraordinary

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23 While Roseanne believes that her father hanged himself, Dr Grene reads in Roseanne’s file that Joe was “tragically killed by the IRA” (111).

24 Complicated grief is defined as “a syndrome that is characterised by a persistent sense of yearning for the deceased, difficulty accepting or believing the loss, bitterness, lack of trust, and a loss of perceived meaning in life that is ongoing for at least 6 months after the death” (MacCallum and Bryant, “Impaired Autobiographical Memory” 328).
fashion himself” (63). Joe later witnesses a burning orphanage, where the young girls jump to their deaths to escape the flames, and realises that he had inadvertently caused the fire himself (70-5). Finally, when his wife Cissy makes an extravagant purchase which leaves the family without enough money for food, Joe is deeply hurt by her deception as well as her scorn for his attempts to care and provide for her (80-5); it was “yet another atrocity... worse than burning girls” (83). In telling each of these stories, she attempts to ascertain whether they were “dark enough to darken my father forever” (86), but repeated rehearsal has not yielded any new insights. She remains “stuck,” not only in her grief, but in a framework where “happiness” becomes the dominating concern.

Of course, Roseanne’s search for happiness is not problematic in itself, but rather in the limited way she has understood happiness. MacCallum and Bryant note that overcoming “complicated grief” necessitates the practice of “benefit finding” 25: “[T]here is a growing evidence that people who perceive benefits in adversity, including bereavement, tend to show better recovery” (“Self-Defining Memories” 1312). This practice is not as simple as “looking for the positive,” however. Harney-Mahajan suggests that Roseanne’s selective insistence on her father’s happiness, as well as her own, is not entirely convincing: “Happiness, in this superficial sense, functions as a defense against the reality - and the forgotten facts - of the underlying situations that plague these characters” (69). Roseanne, in looking for fulfillment in this transitory kind of happiness, either fails to account for the more troubling episodes of her life, or, when she does recount them later, is unable to resolve those narratives in an emotionally satisfying way.

It is only through the “angelic” intervention of Dr Grene that Roseanne is able to “work through” her grief, telling the story of her father and herself within a different, more enabling framework. Although she initially refuses to remember with Dr Grene, her interactions with him slowly begin to change the way she approaches her autobiography. The first turning point in their relationship occurs following the death of Dr Grene’s wife. He is visiting Roseanne on his rounds when, after a long moment of silence, he begins to

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25 “Benefit finding” is one way in which trauma survivors find healing through “identify[ing] positive ways in which their lives have changed as a result of the traumatic event” (Helgeson et al. 797).
cry. Roseanne writes, “I rose and moved towards him. You would have done the same yourself... Something propels you towards sudden grief” (101). The experience of grief forges an empathetic connection between the two, which Dr Grene notes, as well: “I felt I should see you today, despite my own challenges... because I am just at the moment susceptible to, to grief” (110). He had just read about her father’s death, and wants to speak with her about it, recognising in her pain something like his own. Although Roseanne was not yet ready to talk about her own grief - “I buttoned my lip as quick as I could. I did not want to rehearse all that now” (112) - her encounter with the grieving Dr Grene begins a change in perspective that alters both the way she remembers her past, and the way she tells it.

As Roseanne comforts Dr Grene by placing her hand on his back, she has a brief flashback: “I had this unbidden memory of my father sitting on his bed, holding my mother, and patting her back almost childishly” (102). Although this memory of her father is much shorter and less developed than the many others which fill her narrative, it is singularly important because this memory alone is not imagined through the limiting framework of her father’s happiness. In the memories previously recounted, Cissy is a source of grief for Joe; Roseanne remembers him “incredulous” (84), “desperate” (85), “pallid” and “exhausted” (83) as he deals with his wife. In this “new” memory, however, Roseanne does not see any of these signs of distress, though he could hardly have been described as “happy,” either. He performs a gesture of love, care, and connection. Simply recollecting a different moment makes it possible for Roseanne to break out of the cycle she has been rehearsing for eighty years. Moreover, in remembering her father in the selfless role of caregiver, unconcerned for the moment about his own wellbeing but fully absorbed in Cissy’s, Roseanne is prompted to look beyond happiness as an indicator of contentedness or fulfilment, utilising instead a narrative schema based on meaningful human connection.

Immediately after Roseanne’s moment of shared grief with Dr Grene, for example, she recollects her own experience of one such moment of connection that is fulfilling while not happy in the “superficial sense.” As she visits her father’s grave, she encounters John Lavelle. At first, they implicate one another in their losses: John’s brother was killed as a result of Roseanne’s
“informing,” while her father’s role in that episode earned him a “death sentence” (107). However, as they had both come to the graveyard to mourn, they set these accusations aside; they each express their condolences, and she helps him to find his brother’s grave “so that he might say goodbye” (108). Harney-Mahajan suggests that Roseanne develops an understanding of happiness as “the emotion holding the power to provoke the ability to forgive” (70). As I have mentioned, Ricoeur writes, “Forgiveness is a specific form of the revision of the past and, through it, of the specific narrative identities... lifting the burden of guilt which paralyses the relations between individuals who are acting out and suffering their own history” (“Reflections” 9-10). As a revision of the past, this kind of forgiveness is not about forgetting the wrongs that one has suffered, or “erasing” them from one’s narratives; rather, it is a strategy for narrating them as part of a forward-looking narrative, “liberating the promises of the past which have not been kept” (9). As Roseanne and John share their grief, she sees “kindness” (108) in his eyes, and wonders “[h]ow much of such kindness the war had covered over with corpses and curses” (108); she renarrates her pain through the optimism borne of meaningful connection. Through such “angelic” interventions, Roseanne learns how remembering with others can enable a “mutual revision” (Ricoeur, “Reflections” 9) of the past which leads to a sense of fulfilment.

**Becoming a “Responsible Witness”**

As Dr Grene composes his own self-narrative, he observes that while “we are each the hero of a peculiar, half-ruined film called our life... [i]t is very difficult to be a hero without an audience” (227). While Roseanne has struggled to find an audience receptive to her story, Barry explores through Dr Grene’s narrative, presented alongside Roseanne’s, the concomitant struggle to perform the narrative work that witnessing requires. Insofar as Dr Grene learns how to “be a responsible witness to the miracle of the ordinary soul” (281), he must be supportive and critical in ethical balance, affirming Roseanne’s sense of self while helping her to revise the way she narrates her identity. Before the controversial plot twist wherein Roseanne is revealed to
be Dr Grene’s mother, Barry incorporates a series of subtle changes to the way Dr Grene approaches his meetings with Roseanne, charting his ethical development.

Dr Grene begins his “assessment” by assuming the role of interrogator: he questions his patients about the circumstances of their confinement, weighing their responses against what archival records he can find, all while remaining “disinterested... detached... resist[ing] compassion” (45) as he believes to be appropriate for a medical professional. While he acknowledges the injustice of many of his patients’ incarceration, he also expresses doubts about the efficacy of “releasing” these elderly, institutionalised patients: “creatures so long kennelled and confined find freedom and release very problematic attaintments” (16). Therefore, he approaches his task with ambivalence, especially as it relates to Roseanne. He writes, “So now I will have to go in and tackle her about this and that” (17), gesturing both towards the figurative violence of the process (“tackle”) and the relative insignificance of the facts it will establish (“this and that”). Although he believes himself to be pursuing Roseanne’s best interests – “I don’t wish to upset you,” he tells her, “And I don’t intend... to throw you out in the cold” (27) - she still experiences “a feeling of sweeping dread” (27) when he begins to question her about her past. Dr Grene, recognising her agitation, agrees to postpone the questioning until later. However, this strategy only leaves Roseanne to linger in fearful anticipation - “Panic in me now blacker than old tea” (34) - much as Fr Gaunt had done when he kept her in isolation and ignorance before her annulment.

In their next meeting, Dr Grene asks Roseanne what she remembers about her life before the asylum, to which she replies, “I do remember terrible dark things, and loss, and noise, but it is like one of those terrible dark pictures that hang in churches, God knows why, because you cannot see

26 Though Barry’s novel won Costa’s Book of the Year Award, Matthew Parris, chair of the panel, said of the judges’ deliberations: “They agreed that it was flawed, and almost no one liked the ending, which was almost fatal to its success” (Jeffries, “Interview: Sebastian Barry”). Barry has consistently defended his ending, explaining, “I probably should have been content to stop thinking about the ending on the first day and not the millionth day. But I'm a fatal worrier. And... my mother was dying in hospital as I was writing The Secret Scripture. At a certain point it hit me that she was actually my mother and I was her son. This was the person I’d had terrible rows with. And yet we were mother and son. I was sitting with my mother in hospital one day when I realised that Dr Grene was Roseanne’s son. I needed someone to look after her, to reward her for telling her story” (Raphael, “Why Barry Writes”).
a thing in them” (101). He reads this response as “a beautiful description of traumatic memory” (101), one which echoes Caruth’s understanding of the term as a memory which “registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned” (“Introduction” 151). Following this exchange, Dr Grene reflects that Roseanne “was perhaps even in dread of speaking, in case it led her back to things she would rather forget” (121). As he begins to imagine Roseanne’s pain, he relents in his interrogation, choosing instead to rely more heavily on the various documents he has uncovered: “I think I may decide this... if she was mad, and whether or not her committal was justified, and whether or not I may recommend her to be returned out into the world... without her corroboration... I must make a judgement about the verities that are before me” (153, emphasis mine). Although he acts out of sensitivity to Roseanne’s suffering, Barry problematizes Dr Grene’s overreliance on the archive, as his phrasing echoes Fr Gaunt’s monopolisation of Roseanne’s history.

It is only after Dr Grene begins his own process of self-interrogation that he begins to position himself as a responsible witness to Roseanne’s story, gesturing toward the inherently social and reciprocal nature of self-construction. Following the death of his wife, Dr Grene composes two short narratives documenting the most difficult moments of his life: first, when he cheated on his wife and irrevocably damaged their relationship (176-9); and second, when his younger brother’s death prompted his mother to commit suicide (181-3). He begins the first narrative with a lament about the inadequacy of language to capture the complexity of lived experience - “I don’t have words for what I mean” (177). However, and perhaps more importantly, this utterance registers his aversion to narrativising the experience; after he completes both accounts, he is both “disgusted with [himself]” and “astounded” that he has created “an anecdote out of the tragic death of [his] brother” (182). It is not that the “right words” do not exist, but rather that they do, and they enable a pointed and emotionally challenging personal evaluation: “[A]s is clear to me from the cooled syntax,” he observes, “I obviously blame myself” (182). In recognising the emotional difficulty of narrativising one’s past, he is able to comprehend the enormity of what he is asking Roseanne to do, resulting in a more mature respect for her as a human being: “Although she is buried here to some degree... she is
not to be pulled from it and her teeth examined... her body deloused, disgraced, dispatched” (184).

Moreover, through the process of narrativising his own experience, Dr Grene comes to recognise the complexities governing one’s attempts to understand and explain the other. He writes about his mother, following the death of his brother, “Great sorrow. Beyond imagining. Her deepest heart destroyed. And yet there is something in it that eludes me. A true understanding” (182). Even as he discovers the usefulness of his own emotions to make sense of his mother’s experience - until this moment, he had “given it no valency at all in the last fifty years” (182) - he also acknowledges the limitations of this understanding. These realisations prime him for a better relationship with Roseanne as, first of all, he becomes aware of their interactions as a relationship; he cannot be the “disinterested” and “detached” (45) observer, but must “interrogate [his] own motives now in everything” (184). Furthermore, he realises that no amount of “verities” (153) will ensure his complete understanding of Roseanne’s story. While he expresses this realisation as a doubt about his effectiveness - “Assess her. It suddenly seemed so absurd I laughed out loud” (169) - Barry makes clear that the moment Dr Grene stops trying to “assess” Roseanne is precisely the moment that he truly begins to understand her. Dr Grene transitions from interrogator to witness when he realises that understanding the other necessarily means understanding the other in relation to the self.

Barry illustrates this new understanding in the moment Dr Grene finally calls her by the right name. He has referred to her throughout the text as Mrs McNulty, although this name has been causing Roseanne some distress (28); she informs him early enough in their exchanges that she “should really be called by [her] maiden name” (111), although it takes a while for Dr Grene to make this transition. Following his own autobiographical constructions, however, he is more conscientious in his efforts to call her by the name she wishes: “This morning I went up to Mrs McNulty’s - no, no, Roseanne’s - room” (197). Metaphorically, Dr Grene’s acquiescence corresponds to his willingness to let her tell her own story. Significantly, it is also at this point that Dr Grene begins to register his suspicions about Fr Gaunt’s deposition, wondering “if what Fr Gaunt wrote was true” (198). He finally recognises the violence
involved in projecting Roseanne’s story onto her: “Her skin is so thin... Something stretched for the purposes of writing on it. No monk however would have risked the nib of a pen on such thin parchment” (198).

Thus, Dr Grene returns to his task of questioning Roseanne, but with a changed perspective. His respect for her enables a more productive conversation than they have yet shared: “Whether she caught my mood or what, I don’t know, she was very responsive, even revealing” (198). However, the most significant component of this conversation is Dr Grene’s decision to “opt... for her silence” (199); though he recognises that he might have been able to press her for the information she had been reluctant to share, he decides “that there is something greater than judgement. I think it is called mercy” (199). The notion of silence here is complicated, as a running theme throughout Roseanne’s history has been the oppressive silencing she has endured at the hands of men in positions of authority. However, Barry makes the subtle distinction that oppressive silence is created through speech; much as Fr Gaunt had done previously, Dr Grene’s “talk had locked [Roseanne] into silence” (29) in their first exchange. When Dr Grene “opts” for Roseanne’s silence, by contrast, he does so by choosing to be silent himself. After he realises that Roseanne is upset by thinking about her past, he stops asking questions, offers her a handkerchief, and simply “gazes” (201) at her; he sees Roseanne, creating precisely the kind of “right moment” that Roseanne had been denied from her husband so many years before.

The structure of this scene corresponds to a similar, though critically different, moment earlier in the novel, when Dr Grene shares his grief with Roseanne, and a flashback about her father enables her own mourning to become more productive. In this scene, however, both Dr Grene and Roseanne imaginatively engage with the other’s perspective. Dr Grene gazes at Roseanne with a “miserable” expression on his face as he reflects on how “tragic” (200) her life has been, while Roseanne “trie[s] to imagine him sitting somewhere in his house... his wife gone from him” (201). Although the first moment was certainly positive for each of them individually - I do not want to lose sight of how transformative that experience was for Roseanne - the second allows for a more meaningful connection. Their simultaneous experiences of empathy lay the groundwork for a truly open dialogue, and the
silence of both parties makes room for speech. After demonstrating their commitment to understanding one another, Roseanne finally begins to imagine, however tentatively, Dr Grene as the audience of her autobiographical project. While she has referred on numerous occasions to the “reader” of her text in an abstract sense (“Dear reader!” (23 and 187)), and in moments of difficulty she modifies this address into a form of prayer (“[D]ear reader, I am calling you God for a moment” (220)), she imagines Dr Grene as a potential audience immediately after this exchange: “I must admit there are ‘memories’ in my head that are curious even to me. I would not like to have to say this to Dr Grene” (201). Until this moment, Roseanne had not acknowledged her fear that her memories are unreliable, but Dr Grene’s support has given her the strength to face it. Soon after she admits to her memory’s “curiosity,” she adds Dr Grene’s name to the address: “Dear reader, God, Dr Grene” (248).

While this moment of empathy thus enables Dr Grene to function as a witness to Roseanne’s testimony, the ethical fulfilment of this role requires further action; as I discussed in my first chapter, feeling empathy is never, in itself, a sufficient ethical accomplishment. Most significantly, Dr Grene continues the work he had begun in their first moment of shared grief; that is, he helps her to revise the narrative framework of her life story. When Roseanne tells Dr Grene about the pains of her past, he suggests that her story has been “tragic” (200). He describes Fr Gaunt as the perpetrator of cruel violence: he “burn[s] away all traces of [Roseanne]… turning everything to ashes and cinders. A tiny, obscure, forgotten Hiroshima” (230).

This narration is crucial because, throughout Roseanne’s narrative, she has struggled with her feelings of shame; she believes, or fears, that she has caused all her own suffering and earned her own punishments. When Roseanne is abandoned during her pregnancy, she recollects a moment of overwhelming fear: “I thought God was coming to cancel me out just as surely as Fr Gaunt had done… I felt that guilty” (234). She also phrases her anxieties about her memory’s unreliability in terms of betrayal. “I am trying to be faithful to what is in my head” (201), she writes, and later, “God knows the true story before I write it, so can easily catch me out in falsehood” (219); if she cannot distinguish “[w]hat was true” from “what was untrue,” she fears
that her soul will be “cancelled at some office in the halls of heaven” (219). Roseanne’s self-identification as an “informer” has contributed to her tendency to blame herself for everything - as Dudai suggests, accusations of informing attribute responsibility to a single individual while “ignoring [a] wide range of structural and contingent developments” (45) - and is also related to her desire to take complete control of her life story.

Therefore, Dr Grene’s act of “responsible witnessing” is not a passive, emotional support, but an active, narrative project: he shares her burden, both in the narrative act of telling her story back to her, but also in redistributing some of the responsibility she had carried all on her own. In emphasising the wrongs that have been done to her, Dr Grene narrates her as a survivor rather than a betrayer; he challenges her interpretive framework and encourages her to not to blame herself. In fact, in their final conversation in the novel, Dr Grene “apologise[s] on behalf of [his] profession... [and] on behalf of [him]self” (291) for the injustice of her incarceration. Thus, Dr Grene enables Roseanne to participate in the kind of forgiveness which is “the revision of the past and, through it, of the specific narrative identities... lifting the burden of guilt” (Ricoeur, “Reflections” 9-10).

Joseph O’Connor’s *Ghost Light*

*The Archive and Embodied Performance*

In Joseph O’Connor’s *Ghost Light*, Molly Allgood’s autobiographical project begins with a request for an interview. An American scholar named Mercia asks Molly to tell her about

...your recollections and impressions, your friendships and associations in the Ireland of those years, your time in America, especially on Broadway, your memories of your sister, her notable career in motion pictures, and of course on the question of Synge. (18)

Although this interview never takes place, it does prompt Molly to reflect on the important events of her life. She thinks that it might be “redemptive, after all this time - not pleasant, but healing, a settling of the ghosts - to
allow yourself to speak of those years” (19), even as she fears that the story of her life would make a “poor play... with no hero or heroine, and... the scenes are no longer in the right order” (20). O’Connor’s novel, then, follows Molly for the day as she walks through the city and talks with her friends, colleagues, and acquaintances, all the while privately rehearsing her memories, constructing a secret autobiographical narrative.

Mercia’s request for an interview, however, is accompanied by another proposal. Her university would like to acquire for their archive any “manuscripts having to do with JMS and his circle [which] remain in [Molly’s] possession” (19). In contrasting Molly’s embodied acts of memory with the official and authoritative records of the archive, O’Connor explores the power dynamics which shape and limit the way that the past is understood in the present. Diana Taylor writes about the peculiar value that Western culture attaches to the archive: “Part of the colonizing project through the Americas consisted in discrediting autochthonous ways of preserving and communicating historical understanding [i.e., ritual performance and the oral transmission of knowledge]. As a result... the very ‘lives [the natives] lived’ faded into ‘absence’ when writing alone functions as archival evidence, as proof of existence” (The Archive and the Repertoire 34). In cases of such power imbalance, Taylor argues that it becomes an ethical imperative to consider, “What is at risk politically in thinking about embodied knowledge and performance as ephemeral as that which disappears? Whose memories ‘disappear’ if only archival knowledge is valorized and granted permanence?” (36).

O’Connor posits Molly as one such example. For instance, when Mercia suggests that “there is little we are missing” (19) in her university’s archive about Ireland’s “great men of letters” (19, emphasis mine), the fiction that the archive is complete allows marginalised figures like Molly - or, indeed, many of Ireland’s noteworthy women27 - to disappear from cultural memory.

27 The famous controversy over the first three volumes of The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, which were “sharply criticized for their under-representation of women’s writing” (Meaney, “Engendering the Postmodern Canon?” 15), is one such example of women “disappearing” from the archive and from cultural memory. Meaney writes, “Irish women have written more novels, poetry and plays than the most dedicated literary archaeologist can trace, let alone read. However, this work is only available to specialists, in academic libraries, and to those with the time and skills to seek it out. [...] The effect of this has been an unproblematic assumption that women have been the objects not the authors of Irish
Sometimes, this disappearance is intentional. For example, after Synge’s death, his uncle informs Molly that the hundreds of letters she wrote to Synge had been “destroyed by the executors. So as to protect the confidentiality of the friendship and its particular circumstances” (189), while also strongly entreating her to return the letters Synge wrote to her on the grounds that “A literary man’s papers comprise part of his estate” (189). Through manipulating Synge’s archive, his family has effectively written Molly out of history in order to protect and control Synge’s legacy.

Other times, however, the archive is less intentional about its exclusions. Mercia’s university is, after all, genuinely interested in Molly’s story, but the selection process – Mercia would have to “see and appraise personally any material, of course” (19) – necessarily means that some things get left out, not so much deliberately or maliciously erased as deemed less important according to cultural values, and thus forgotten. O’Connor’s description of Molly’s room in this same passage functions as a parody of the archive, illustrating instead the kinds of things which are typically excluded or forgotten: “A reek of mildewed newspapers and mothballs and old wood. Paper bags of ancient birthday cards… cancelled ration-books, expired passports, redundant lengths of tinfoil” (20); the decayed, the finished, the ‘unimportant.’ This list of “junk” foreshadows a moment later in the novel, when Molly contrasts the lofty ideals of “Great Men” (198) like Yeats - “Our purpose... is the creation of beauty” (198) - with the circumstances of her own life; she thinks to herself,

You are the daughter of a junkshop, a child of rag and bone, raised amid the tat no one wanted anymore, the bric-a-brac and clutter, the ugly and expendable, but give the junk a little rub and you’ll see your reflection. (198)

Echoing Mercia’s reference to the “great men” whose work is considered important enough to be included in her university’s archive, O’Connor suggests that the set of values which makes them “great” simultaneously makes Molly’s life appear to be “expendable,” if in fact she is registered at all; Molly posits that such Great Men “[n]ever saw the everyday... the writing, which has impoverished critical debate and specifically feminist critique of Irish literature and culture” (“Territory and Transgression” 78).
forgettable conversations and meaningless glimpses” (198). However, O’Connor also suggests that there are other ways of evaluating, that there is music in both “Mahler” and “the cry of a newsboy” (198). O’Connor illustrates through Molly that a more socially conscious, ethical memory does not simply expand the archive, but sees beyond it, imagining other ways that identity is performed, negotiated, and made real in the world. As Molly reflects, “A woman walking hungry through snowblown streets. Is this not a drama worth playing?” (198).

As Molly begins her walk through London, she has a conversation with a policeman which illustrates how memory and identity are negotiated in everyday embodied performance. The policeman asks Molly if she has had any troubles, as there have been reports of antisocial behaviour in the area. Molly challenges his characterisation of the neighbourhood, countering that it is “most respectable” (27), constructing an alternate narrative to illustrate her point:

Heirs to the monarchy have dined on this street. Great love affairs have been conducted. Continents redrawn. The steam engine was invented at number 76. We often feel that we are living in a sort of museum. Rather stirs the imagination, does it not? (27)

The policeman’s imagination, however, remains unstirred by her narrative; he persists in escorting her safely through a neighbourhood he believes to be dangerous. While Molly illustrates here that narrative memories contain progressive potential in their multiplicity - the story of any past can be retold and revised - the policeman’s reaction demonstrates a reluctance to such imaginative revision that is all too common. As a figure of law enforcement, he is presumably predisposed to the worldview enabled by the narrative genre of police reports, and remains unaffected by narratives which complicated this understanding.

In their next point of conflicting perceptions, Molly chooses to complicate his story through embodied performance rather than alternate narrative. The policeman mentions that part of the problem is the Irish population of the neighbourhood: “Apparently there’s some female there, too, old tramp sort of thing... Spins a yarn she used to be an actress, needs a
bob for the gas. You look out for her, ma’am, and don’t be taken in by her nonsense” (28-9). Though it is unfortunately clear that the policeman is talking about herself, Molly has been keenly aware of his watchful gaze and has modulated her performance in such a way that he is not able to label her as this “old tramp.” She puts on a “genteel accent” (27); she converses in prim, courteous speech that is presented in jarring contrast with the acerbity of her inner thoughts; she introduces herself as “Mrs de Winter. Rebecca” (27). She is quite consciously playing a role. Though her narrative agency is compromised - when she talks honestly about her past, she is dismissed as “spin[ning] a yarn” (29) - she finds a different kind of agency in embodied communication. While Molly is not able to change the policeman’s narrative, she is able to defuse some of its power; she does not allow it to delimit herself, demonstrating instead that identity is fluid, adaptable, and multifaceted. Personal identity is always a matter of enacting certain social roles, and Molly is able to manage the way she is perceived by others through performance.

*Body and Text in Conflict*

In this instance, thinking of memory and identity in terms of embodied performance enables Molly to negotiate the imbalanced power relationship she faces, but O’Connor proposes that the conflict between the written and the embodied is often detrimentally weighed in favour of the former. This thematic preoccupation situates O’Connor’s novel within an ongoing debate about the relationship of, and differences between, memory and history. As Taylor explains, “The rise of memory and history, as differentiated categories, seems to stem from the embodied/documentated divide” (“Save As”). If the “archival culture” of history “favors rational, linear, and so called...

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28 For instance, when the policeman asks if he can walk her to the Bayswater Tube, she thinks, “Tell him Bayswater is Sodom,” while responding demurely, “Oh. No thank you, Constable, you are chivalry personified, but I can manage quite nicely” (27, emphasis in original).

29 As Judith Butler has famously argued, gender is one such example of identity as performative: “Gender ought not to be construed as a stable identity... rather, gender is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts. [...] Significantly, if gender is instituted through acts... then the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and perform in the mode of belief” (*Gender Trouble* 141, emphasis in original).
objective and universal thought and individualism,” then embodied practices of transmitting knowledge about the past “provoke different ways of knowing and being in the world... [such as] collective thinking, and knowing in place” (Taylor, “Save As”). The apparent antithesis of memory and history has been well established. Pierre Nora writes of

the brutal realization of the difference between real memory - social and unviolated... - and history, which is how our hopelessly forgetful modern societies, propelled by change, organize the past... With the appearance of the trace, of mediation, of distance, we are not in the realm of memory but of history. (8)

Maurice Halbwachs also notes the distinction between memory and history, which Patrick Hutton summarises, “[M]emory and history are antithetical... Memory evokes the presence of the past; history keeps its distance from it. Most important, memory distorts the past whereas the historian’s obligation is to correct memory’s inaccuracies” (538; see also Halbwachs’ On Collective Memory). In calling attention to the mediation of history’s written narratives, Nora suggests that memory, being somehow more “real,” provides an unmediated access to the past. Halbwach’s interpretation of history’s “distance,” on the other hand, aligns history with truthfulness in contrast to memory’s distortions.

This conflict between memory and history also informs the conflict in the novel between performance and text, as O’Connor’s depiction of Synge’s tempestuous relationship with his mother illustrates. As a deeply religious and conservative woman, Mrs Synge’s most-often repeated criticism of her son is her theological objection to his life’s work: “The theatre is the liar’s house. It is itself a lie” (59, emphasis in original). The equation of performance with lies is not limited to the religious, however. Taylor observes a widespread cultural inclination wherein “the constructedness of performance signals its artificiality - it is ‘put on,’ antithetical to the ‘real’ and ‘true’” (The Archive and the Repertoire 4). And yet, O’Connor repeatedly emphasises the extent to which Synge’s mother uses her particular social roles to define herself and structure her interactions with others. In her attempts to bend her son to her will, Mrs. Synge reminds him that she is “The woman who bore you. The widow of your father” (59, emphasis in original), arguing that such positions
demand from him a certain respect and deference. Additionally, a considerable portion of her dialogue is the recitation of Scripture - “My response shall be the same: Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image” (59, emphasis in original) - a practice which Synge later likens to the actor delivering lines (171). Although Mrs. Synge responds to this comparison with a defensive tirade about the “truths” (171) of the Bible, O’Connor describes her actions as theatrical performance in order to suggest a “more complex reading [in which] the constructed is recognized as coterminous with the real” (Taylor 4), dismantling the oversimplified notion that performance is antithetical to truth.

Similarly, it is through acts of performance that Molly is able to communicate the truth of her identity. Identity, though it is innately connected to the recollection of personal memories, is a matter of interpretation, or the way that meaning is created around those memories (Bruner, Life as Narrative). Thus, the construction of identity is closely related to the idea of faithfulness, which Sue Campbell describes as the ambition of “getting something right about the significance of the past as judged from the standpoint of the present” (“Our Faithfulness” 362). She further explains,

When we aspire to accurate recollection, we are concerned to recall the facts, but must also be concerned to get their significance right. This further concern requires us to develop a much richer appreciation of how various social engagements affect our characterizations of a past for whose ongoing and changing significance we are collectively responsible. (Our Faithfulness to the Past xvii, emphasis mine)

O’Connor’s emphasis on identity as performance enables Molly to construct a faithful identity precisely because of the way it makes visible these various social engagements. Writing on the relationship between autobiography and performance, Langellier and Peterson argue, “Performing personal narrative is radically contextualized: embodied..., situated in the interactional and material constraints of the performance event, and embedded within discursive forces that shape experience, narrative, and selves” (152). Thus, Molly’s background in performance gives her the tools to disrupt the
policeman’s narrative: she argues that she has “seen no person fitting that description” (28, emphasis mine), disputing the faithfulness of the policeman’s narrative, the appropriateness of its interpretation, rather than the truth of its facts, which reasonably denote her past actions.

Moreover, in recognizing that the “truth” of identity is not simply expressed but negotiated in context, Molly is able to shape her performance to be received in the way she intends. As she reflects near the beginning of their exchange, “When dealing with [policemen], she has learned, one has only two options: adamantine firmness or tear-smitten frailty” (27). Performance is not only about the actor’s interpretation of the “character,” but also crucially involves an awareness of the audience’s schemata - the narrative structures and social roles framing their perspective - which influence the way that performance is received. She knows that her truth will not be believed if presented “wrongly” - the policeman disbelieves her story about being an actress when accompanied by requests for money (29), because her actions, in his perspective, characterise her as a beggar, and hence, untrustworthy - so she adopts a firm and decorous persona to communicate the dignity she feels. Molly’s performance works both with and against the policeman’s narrative to negotiate her personal identity.

O’Connor thus uses Molly’s career as an actress to explore the complex relationship between performance and text, to illustrate how memory and identity are embodied as well as narrativised. He elaborates on this process in a rehearsal at the Abbey Theatre, where Molly and Synge argue about the character she is playing. Synge contends that Molly is not speaking the lines as they were clearly meant to be delivered, while Molly counters that “perhaps… [he] should have written it different” (79). Molly and Synge’s argument about understanding and communicating a character’s identity illustrates the productive tension between the written word and its embodiment.

Constructing identity is a creative process that involves the continuous reinterpretation of narratives and performances in light of one another. As cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner argues, autobiography, as a “continuing interpretation and reinterpretation of our experience,” involves a “two-way… mimesis between life so-called and narrative… that is to say, just as art imitates life in Aristotle’s sense, so, in Oscar Wilde’s, life imitates art” (“Life
as Narrative” 692). In other words, one’s identity is constantly negotiated both by translating lived experience into narrative forms (whether written or “constructed in people’s heads” (Bruner 691)), and also, crucially, by using those existing narrative constructions to structure and interpret the experiences which follow. Identity is never “settled” either in narrative or in lived experience, but is made up in the relationship between the two.

While Molly and Synge work together in the construction of a fictional character, both have differing opinions on who is in “control” of this process. Synge asserts the primacy of the narrative through his repeated commands that Molly “speak the actual text as it appears on the page” (80), while Molly maintains the supremacy of her performance of the text: “If it doesn’t exist in my head, Mr Synge, then it doesn’t exist at all” (80). In this particular spat, both Molly and Synge overlook the degree to which each of their activities is a kind of interpretation of the other, although they elsewhere recognise the symbiosis of their creative partnership: “[Synge] starts to advise his changeling [Molly] to become a playwright herself. She is already a sort of playwright; it is only that she doesn’t know it, hasn’t realised he is making notes of her phrasings and coinages” (90). The characters that Synge writes for Molly, therefore, are his textual interpretations of certain aspects of herself, which she then reinterprets in her on-stage performances. Their creative relationship mirrors the way that Molly herself negotiates her own identity elsewhere in the text, through the production, and creative recycling, of narratives which are reimagined in embodied performances.

While Molly and Synge’s argument at the Abbey represents the productive tension between the written text and the embodied performance, Yeats’s intervention in their quarrel30 illustrates Taylor’s identification of the Western cultural supremacy of narrative and the archive. Yeats addresses the actors as follows:

30 On the representation of Yeats in this particular scene, O’Connor says in an interview, “I thought I would have a little bit of fun with Yeats... He’s just so respected and everybody loves him so much. I love him too, but I think that sometimes we have him up on a pedestal. I mean, his face used to be on the bank notes, and I think with any author, when your face is on a bank note, respect has gone too far. So yeah, I thought I would allow him to be a bit pompous and a bit ridiculous... I tried to reflect myriad facets of Yeats, to take him down just a peg or two” (Langan, “The Power of the Past”).
And when you... are deservedly long forgotten and part of the dust, the work of this Homer shall be glorified. [...] And when you are old and full of weariness, the best any of you will have to recollect of your miserable, futile huckstering existences is that once you were in the presence of a Titan. You will fetch down the very script you now besmirch... from the shelf upon which it will have rested for years - perhaps decades - and [be ashamed] that you did not kneel when you had the opportunity of genuflection. (82-3, emphasis in original)

Yeats does not simply valorise Synge’s genius, but explicitly contrasts the image of the enduring text - the decades old script - with the ephemerality of the embodied - the actors’ bodies turned to dust. Though his predictions are painfully prescient - Molly’s present is miserably imagined in the novel, and Synge does dominate her memories - they are hardly “right,” or not for the reasons he might imagine. Yeats’s language mystifies a cultural process in which he actually plays a key role: speaking of the actors as being one day “deservedly” forgotten occludes the way that they are being characterised as forgettable now. The “ephemerality” of the embodied, in other words, is not a necessity but the result of social class structures which are shaped and enforced by public figures like Yeats.

While the textual and the embodied thus represent conflicting modes of transmitting knowledge and constructing identity, O’Connor proposes not only that these two strategies actually inform one another in practice, but that favouring one over the other, as Yeats does above, is problematic. Insofar as Molly’s memory project is presented in the novel’s opening pages as “a settling of the ghosts” (19), O’Connor represents ghosts throughout the novel as either silent figures or disembodied voices. The textual or the embodied, when divorced from one another, create a fragmentary and troubling representation of the past.

Throughout the novel, Molly is haunted by her memories of Synge; she “had thought [him] forgotten or purposefully banished. But today will prove him a wanderer reluctant to be exiled” (4). One of these hauntings takes place in the cinema, with the “pictures” (163) in Molly’s head vying with the pictures on the screen. O’Connor emphasises that Molly is alone - “there is
nobody except yourself in the row” (140) - so that the theatre becomes a symbolic representation of Molly’s private acts of remembrance. As she watches the film, Molly keeps remembering the words of a letter that Synge wrote to her. She tries to suppress this memory, and her internal struggle is depicted as a haunting:

The words of that silly old letter he wrote after Killiney are bubbling up now, wanting remembrance. They know that you know them. They are buried in you, Changeling, and they want to come back from the dead. You make yourself resurface. (143)

Molly is not only haunted by the letter, however. She also sees a man in the theatre, though, as she learns afterwards, she had been the only person present: “[T]here is only one man in all the rows behind you, a codger in a raincoat, with an umbrella in the seat beside him fully and inappropriately extended” (141). Although the sighting is not explained, O’Connor mentions earlier in the text that “many years after [Synge’s] death you [Molly] would imagine you saw him” (67), so Molly is haunted in this scene both by Synge’s words and Synge’s body. While both had been beloved by Molly in life, they have now become malign and threatening presences.

What makes these hauntings particularly troubling is Molly’s sense of powerlessness before them. As she observes after the film is over, “[T]he queerest sensation of the many besetting you now is that someone else is composing the day and everything in it. A faraway sentiency has been shaping and shifting”; Molly is “a character in a life whose author is invisible” (147). This sense of external influence is compounded by the novel’s second person narration, which vaguely suggests that someone is narrating Molly’s life to her. It also mirrors the way that Molly’s work as an actress is described at certain points in the text. When Molly is haunted at the cinema, for example, she observes that “We must efface ourselves as we play... The words are everything” (141). Or, during Yeats’s intervention described above, Molly receives this theatrical advice: “You are a professional who is remunerated on the basis of compliance... perhaps you would condescend to speak the actual text” (80). O’Connor problematizes a subservience to the text, both in Molly’s marginalisation at the theatre and in her haunting memory of Synge’s letters.
In all of these passages, Molly feels powerless to *engage* with the text; she is a vessel for someone else’s words.

**Settling the Ghosts**

The way that performance is imagined in these examples, however, is problematic, and it is at odds with the way that Molly and Synge worked together in her youth: although acting might *appear* to be effacement in deference to the text, it is completely grounded in the actor’s skilful manipulation of the body. In fact, Molly’s skill as an actress is most often attributed to her voice: Lady Augusta observes it (74), as does Yeats (102), and Molly’s first conversation with Synge revolves around her “voice of some potential” (48). As he tells her, “Lovely, that little verse of Yeats you were speaking in the break. Quite brought it to life for me. Hadn’t truly got it before” (48). Molly clearly does not simply *speak* the words; she *brings them to life*. Through her performance, she creatively reinterprets the text - not the words themselves, perhaps, but in some indefinable way, their meaning. Though she is speaking someone else’s lines, her performance improves the text while remaining true to it.

If O’Connor problematizes an approach to the past in which the archive eclipses the role of embodied memory, he depicts an ethical memory as a productive union of the two, text and body informing one another. As I have mentioned, memory and history are often imagined as contesting methods of understanding the past, the former based on embodied knowledge and the latter on written texts. However, as Taylor suggests, memory and history “are not static binaries, or a sequential pre/post, but active processes - two... interrelated and coterminous systems that continually participate in the creation, storage, and transmission of knowledge” (“Save As”). In *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Ricoeur explores the possibility of “an educated memory, illuminated by historiography, [which] perfectly overlaps... a scholarly history capable of reanimating a fading memory and thereby... ‘reactualising’, ‘reliving’ the past” (145). If “bodily memories are always already inscribed, organized, and symbolized” (Spillman and Conway 81), it is equally true that
the archive relies on performance. In order for Molly to achieve this sort of ethical approach to the past, she must learn how to engage with her own memories of Synge in the same collaborative fashion that they once practiced together in the theatre, uniting embodied performance and written text. Similarly, O’Connor suggests that an ethical cultural memory will look beyond the archive to find the “traces” of what it excludes: rather than simply augmenting the archive to make it more inclusive, he suggests that it is necessary to acknowledge and engage in other strategies of accessing the past.

While Molly is haunted by Synge in the present, their loving though tempestuous relationship enacted precisely this ethical union of text and performance. In fact, in one of Synge’s letters to Molly, he writes, “You must permit the words to lead you to the heart words come from” (22, emphasis in original). Although this advice is meant to inform Molly’s performance on the stage, this phrase, repeated throughout the novel, becomes the lens through which O’Connor imagines the narrative project of memory. The recommended connection between words and heart suggests the association of the inscribed and the embodied, while the connection itself symbolises the interpersonal relationships that ought to guide the remembrance and narrativisation of the past. In discussing the significance of Synge’s letters to Molly, O’Connor mentions both the struggles Synge endured in writing them - “The eyes of ancestral portraits gazing down on him as he wrote. That is not ink. It is our blood” (22) - and their particular importance to Molly: “Should you admit to [Mercia] that you... sewed a pocket into your shift so as to carry [the letter] close to your breast?” (31). In both of these descriptions, the “heart” to which the words of letter enable connection is made literal in order to emphasise what remains external and irreducible to text. As Hirsch and Taylor write, “Live bodies and the embodied practices of the repertoire exceed the bounds of the archive and become available through the traces revealed in court papers, desk drawers, and archival boxes - all waiting to be found” (“The

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31 As Taylor argues, “Innumerable practices in most literate societies require both an archival and an embodied dimension: weddings need both the performative utterance of ‘I do’ and the signed contract; the legality of a court decision lies in the combination of the live trial and the recorded outcome; the performance of a claim contributes to its legality. […] Materials from the archive shape embodied practice in innumerable ways, yet never totally dictate embodiment” (The Archive and the Repertoire 21).
Archive in Transit”). In finding the “heart” words come from, O’Connor thus suggests taking responsibility to search for these “traces,” to contextualise, complicate, and humanise the written word through acknowledgement of embodied practices.

While Molly and Synge practiced this sort of collaboration in life, she is haunted by her memories of Synge in the present because, much like Barry’s Roseanne, Molly is “stuck” in her grief. Because Synge died before they could establish the future that they had imagined together, Molly mourns that “the long rehearsals are not to be realised” (129). She carries the burden, in other words, of what Ricoeur terms the “unfulfilled future of the past… the arrows of futurity which have not been fired or whose trajectory has been interrupted” (“Reflections” 8). Also like Roseanne, Molly is paralysed by guilt. Molly feels a responsibility to the past; she imagines that it is her duty “always to keep” (23) Synge’s one surviving letter to her, and thus feels enormous guilt as she contemplates selling it (23, 172). In preserving this letter, however, Molly has become a sort of archivist, a custodian to the past rather than an active participant in its narration and performance. O’Connor depicts this subservience to the past as a haunting, as well; when she visits an antique bookshop with the intention of selling the letter, she observes, “It almost seems to whisper: *Do not put me away*” (172). In order to absolve her own misplaced feelings of guilt, Molly must participate in the kind of forgiveness which Ricoeur describes, as I have mentioned, as a “mutual revision” or “critical reading” of the past, “changing the past, not as a record of all that has happened but in terms of its meaning” (“Reflections” 8-10). Rather than preserving the past, she has to engage with it.

Molly begins this process of transformation during her visit to the antique bookshop. Mirroring her own haunting guilt, Molly observes the rare volumes in the shop and imagines that “the phantoms of the sellers are present in the doorway, glancing regretfully over their shoulders, guilty money in their hands” (175). However, Molly receives a letter at the bookshop, left for her by the recently deceased owner, Mr Duglacz, which changes her perception. The news of Mr Duglacz’s death is a shock to Molly, and his letter to her is in many respects similar to the final letter she received from Synge: thanking her for their time together, bidding her goodbye, and
signing off as “Your Friend” (129-30, 178-9). In his letter, though, Mr Duglacz writes that “Books... bring people together. I think they are the best part of us” (179), suggesting that texts have the capacity to forge connections. Text are imagined here not as haunting or dominating, but as informing or enabling embodied practices of connection.

Although Mr Duglacz attributes these connections to the books themselves, it is actually in the way that such texts are used which determines their ability to bring people together. For example, Mr Duglacz’s bookshop specialises in second-hand copies and manuscripts; the texts Molly notices are “foxed and stippled novels with their ex libris labels and insignia, their scrawled dedications and assertions of lasting love” (174-5). In each of these cases, the text has been altered in some way, and it is this alteration that makes meaningful communication a possibility. It is the “traces” of “live bodies and... embodied practices” (Hirsch and Taylor) which make these texts meaningful, which enable connection. Molly’s own memories of Synge, symbolically represented by the words of his letters which haunt her, can only be “settled” if she, too, learns to engage with them in this “collaborative” fashion, reuniting text and body.

Molly accomplishes this “reunion” in her final act of performance; literally, as she prepares for a radio play at the BBC; figuratively, as she performs the role of mentor for a young actress named Elizabeth. Molly imparts a few standard words of advice to Elizabeth - “work hard... [a]nd who knows what may happen” (203) - but when Elizabeth pulls out her much-loved copy of Synge’s The Playboy of the Western World, Molly is inspired to speak more earnestly about her own life experiences, her work on the stage and her relationship with Synge. The “dog-eared paperback copy,” with its “notes in the margins [and a] bus ticket doing duty as a bookmark” (203), recalls the texts in Mr Duglacz’s shop and his loving pronouncement that such books bring people together. Molly acts on this advice, as well as Synge’s earlier exhortation to “Permit the words to lead you to the heart words come from” (205, emphasis in original), when she gifts Elizabeth her letter from Synge: “Look after it for me, won’t you? [...] It would honour him... [and] bring me a great blessing” (205).
Molly had initially considered the keeping of this letter as her duty to Synge’s memory, but her observation of the letter’s physical decay - she describes it earlier in the novel as “withered notepaper, its creases greyed by age, its inkblots like a mapped archipelago” (21-2) - reveals the futility of attempting to preserve the past. In passing on the letter to Elizabeth, however, she feels “no need... [t]o look at it a last time” (205). Instead, she recovers her “argumentative” relationship with Synge’s words: “He was a bossy old coot, as you’ll see from his tone,” she tells Elizabeth, “But he gave me the wisest guidance I ever received” (205). She is no longer haunted by, or subservient to, Synge’s legacy, but engages with it, settling her own ghosts as well as helping Elizabeth at the start of her own career. Thus, Molly’s “duty” to the past has shifted from attempting to preserve it to making it useful in the present. While her personal resolution is imagined in the novel, as with Barry’s Roseanne, as an acceptance of death - as soon as she relinquishes this letter, “Death comes for [her]” (205) - she achieves what Ricoeur refers to as “the liberation of [the] unfulfilled future of the past” (“Reflections” 8) in passing on the entwined legacy of herself and Synge to the next generation.
CHAPTER 3

“MORTGAGE LOVE”: REMEMBERING THE ECONOMIC COLLAPSE THROUGH FAMILY NARRATIVES

Father Cotter used to say to us in school that a Christian, when faced with a moral dilemma, should ask himself only one question: What would Jesus have done? I’ve always stuck by that, except when I was young I substituted my auld fella for Jesus and when I got older, Bobby Mahon got the spot.

Donal Ryan, The Spinning Heart

I am very interested in the iconized mother figure in Irish literature, because the men can’t actually write them. They are very often dead, or left out of the narrative. The mother gets half a sentence and there is an awful lot about fathers.

Anne Enright, in interview with Caitriona Moloney

Introduction

Ireland’s experience of economic prosperity in the Celtic Tiger, and of the economic crash of 2008, has had a profound and traumatising effect on Irish cultural identity. The extremes of this era are difficult to overstate. During the 1990s, the Irish economy “[caught] up with European neighbours that for decades had left it languishing” (“After the Race”), and by the middle of the next decade, “The Irish became... the second-richest people in the European Union” (“After the Race”). Maher and O’Brien write that the Celtic Tiger “led to a transformation in the self-perception of the Irish, who realized to their satisfaction that they were no longer the poor relation of Europe or the colonized property of the UK” (3-4). This positive self-image, however, was dramatically and abruptly shattered when the housing market collapsed and the country entered into a devastating recession. As Patrick Kinsella reports,

[F]rom the best of years to the worst of years, total national income was down more than 11 per cent; after tax, household income per person was down 16 per cent, retail sales were down 24 per cent, and the unemployment rate peaked at 15 per cent...
and the knock-on effects are seen in renewed emigration, homelessness, and shortcomings in health, education and other public services. ("How the Economy was Wrecked")

As of 2014, Maher and O’Brien contend that “[t]he effect of exceptional wealth, followed by massive indebtedness, on the collective unconscious of the Irish people has never really been addressed” (11), although the outpouring of fictional responses to the crash might reasonably suggest otherwise. This chapter aims to analyse the ways that two recent Irish novels - Donal Ryan’s The Spinning Heart (2012) and Anne Enright’s The Forgotten Waltz (2011) - represent the crash of the Celtic Tiger as a traumatic rupture in order to imagine alternative ways of thinking about memory, community, and identity in such a way that enables an optimistic vision of the future.

A significant trend in representations of Ireland’s economic crash is its depiction as a communal trauma. Kai Erikson defines a communal trauma as “a blow to the basic tissues of social life that damages the bonds attaching people together and impairs the prevailing sense of communality... [There is] a gradual realization that the community no longer exists as an effective source of support and that an important part of the self has disappeared” (187). News outlets and academics alike participate in this pathologisation, and the diagnosis is particularly apt for a number of reasons. Erikson contends that “traumatized communities [are] something distinct from assemblies of traumatized persons” (185), and these unique “social dimensions” illuminate the landscape of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland.

First of all, Erikson suggests that traumatised communities often share “an understanding that the laws by which the natural world has always been governed as well as the decencies by which the human world has always been governed are now suspended - or were never active to begin with” (194). This particular perspective relates to the way that trauma shatters and defies narrative understanding, but in its social dimension, also gestures to the destruction of social narratives. As I will elaborate below, Ireland’s economic

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32 Urban geographer Cian O’Callaghan, for example, writes that “Ireland is now entering a period in which the traces of recent economic prosperity, cultural cosmopolitanism, and particularly property investment are overlaid by the trauma of unemployment, negative equity, and the death of a dream” (“Memories of the Everyday Present”), while The Economist reports, “At this tumultuous time for Europe... Ireland’s collapse may be the worst trauma of all” ("After the Race").
crash is often figured as a *narrative crash*, where traditional, culturally dominant social narratives are revealed as inadequate to present circumstances.

Secondly, communal traumas “often seem to force open whatever fault lines once ran silently through the structure of the larger community” (189); the crash as communal trauma, in other words, reveals and exacerbates existing social problems. In this respect, however, the experience of communal trauma also facilitates a change in perspective which Erikson terms the “wisdom” of trauma which “ought to be heard in its own terms” (198). The revelation of these “fault lines,” in other words, potentially enables a clarity of hindsight by which these previously hidden problems might be redressed through the work of memory.

As a communal trauma, Ireland’s economic recession revealed the prevailing cultural narratives of economic progress and success to be profoundly inadequate, leaving the country to question its entire sense of identity. In the wake of such trauma, then, Irish writers have looked for new identities, expressed through alternate narrative frameworks, in order to facilitate a cultural recovery alongside the economic. One of the primary concerns in both of these novels is the impact of the crash on the family. This is hardly surprising, given the centrality of the family unit both within Irish society and the Irish literary canon: as Cusack and Janssen observe, “the Irish Constitution states that ‘[t]he State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society’” (8); and, as such, “the role of the family in Irish society [has been a] predominant theme in Irish literature” (O’Keeffe and Reese 1). There is even a strong precedent within the Irish literary canon of representing the effects of communal traumas, such as the Great Famine, through the lens of the family (Cusack and Janssen). Within this tradition, the family unit is often depicted “as a metonym for a larger social or cultural community” (10), providing a smaller scale analysis of the “recalibration of cultural identity” (10) attending the massive disruptions caused by such a communal trauma.

In the novels by Ryan and Enright which this chapter addresses, the particular focus is on the image of the family home - both the inherited home, and the new constructions of the Celtic Tiger - as a representation of
traditional narratives of family which are disrupted, devalued, and threatened by the collapse of the housing market. As part of the larger “narrative crash” I mentioned above, the narratives which govern and sustain the traditional family unit - patriarchy, Catholicism, capitalism - are revealed (though arguably not for the first time) as problematic and untenable for the future. As such, the protagonists of Ryan’s and Enright’s novels struggle with the inheritance of family structures, both literal and figurative, which they no longer particularly want. As a result, both novels negotiate, with varying degrees of success, the reimagining of the family unit in order to save it from the problems inherent within traditional narratives.

*The Spinning Heart* is comprised of twenty-one first-person narratives from the perspectives of twenty-one distinct characters from a small rural community. It is unified by its thematic preoccupations with unemployment, ghost estates, emigration - in short, the fallout of the economic crash - as well as by the character Bobby, who narrates the first section of the novel and reappears as the object of gossip and speculation in each of the subsequent narratives. These characters watch - some with horror, others with barely concealed glee - as Bobby, a construction foreman who is suddenly out of work, first appears to have an affair with Réaltín, a single mother whose child Dylan is later kidnapped, and then is suspected of murdering his father Frank. Bobby crystallises the anxieties of the community - both the disintegration of the family unit and the collapse of the housing market - to such an extent that his outcome, left unresolved at the novel’s end, comes to stand for the ability of the community itself to weather its traumatic experience. The novel, winning multiple literary awards and longlisted for the 2013 Man Booker Prize, was heralded in contemporary reviews as insightfully capturing the “[l]ives undone by the economic disaster” (Battersby), providing an “utterly resonant state-of-the-nation landscape” (Hughes).

Enright’s *The Forgotten Waltz* is narrated by Gina, an international communications specialist working in a tech firm, who has an affair with Seán, a man she works with; both of their marriages are subsequently destroyed. Gina narrates the novel with a fluctuating and provisional temporal sense, calling attention to the inadequacies of memory and narrative cause
and effect as she frequently backtracks, second guesses, and revises her own story, eventually deciding that its proper focus is her new step-daughter Evie. Gina’s temporal confusion, along with the break-up of her marriage and the death of her mother Joan, provides an individual correlation to the cultural trauma of the economic crash that plays out alongside it; Joan dies just as the recession begins, and Gina’s marriage dissolves just as the globalised communications company she works for goes bankrupt. While contemporary reviews of the novel generally read it as a modern sort of love story— one reviewer for The Irish Times even writes, “[Enright] might have set her sights on writing the great Irish novel of the bust... Instead, she has written a love story for our times” (Heaney) - it has perhaps more appropriately been recognised, if mostly in retrospect, as “arguably the best fictional evocation of Ireland’s recession” (Gleeson).

In representing the economic crash as a communal trauma, both novels make use of the sense of temporal dislocation that trauma is understood to induce. A traumatic memory is one that, having not been adequately narrativised, irrupts into the present. As Cathy Caruth writes,

[T]rauma is the confrontation with an event that, in its unexpectedness or horror, cannot be placed within the schemes of prior knowledge - that cannot, as George Bataille says, become a matter of ‘intelligence’ - and thus continually returns, in its exactness, at a later time. Not having been fully integrated as it occurred, the event cannot become, as Janet says, a ‘narrative memory’ that is integrated into a completed story of the past. (“Introduction” 153)

As the economic crash effectively exploded those “schemes of prior knowledge,” as I have already discussed, it might be expected that the traumatic past would return to haunt these novels. The Spinning Heart abounds in images of a traumatic past replaying itself in the present; as one character observes, “Madness must come around in ten-year cycles” (137). Most of the “repetitions” of the past, however, occur within problematic

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33 See also Prose’s review which concludes, “Cloaked in a novel about a love affair is a ferocious indictment of the self-involved material girls our era has produced,” or Hagestadt who writes, “An adulterous affair lies at the heart of Anne Enright’s novel” and makes no reference at all to the economic or cultural climate which pervades the novel. Thompson, in contrast, writes that Enright “captures the dying days of the Celtic Tiger.”
father-son relationships. Bobby’s father Frank, for example, remarks on his family’s legacy of child abuse: “I wonder how it is I was able to do to Bobby exactly what was done to me” (145). Ryan summarises the community’s patrilineal structure through Josie Burke: “Joseph Burke was my father’s name too... Second sons got a name and first sons got everything else” (24). Within such a system, replication of the past is all but inevitable, as the son’s identity and livelihood are handed down as a matter of inheritance. These father-son relationships are made traumatic, however, by this community’s masculine ideal: in its emphasis on power as asserting one’s will over others, masculinity promotes violent communication, both the use of violence instead of language (Frank’s father beats him for performing well in school (144)), and the use of language as violence (Frank torments his family with “brutal sharp words” (143)). These forms of violent father-son communication not only traumatisate sons, but, as they are taught to use violence themselves, deprive them of the narrative resources necessary to recover from that trauma, wherein they pass it along to the next generation, traumatically re-enacting the past.

*The Forgotten Waltz* is also characterised by traumatic temporal confusions. In addition to Gina’s narrative returns and revisions, she also experiences the death of her mother as trauma: “I think I was the last to realise that she was gone. It was like waking up - the realisation, I mean - it happened slowly at first and then, somehow, all in retrospect” (116). Enright, like Ryan, is critical of patriarchal narratives, but she focuses her critique on the way those narratives obscure women. In coming to terms with her mother’s death, for example, Gina realises how her mother was made mysterious and unknowable by the masculine narratives applied to her life, a process which enables her to see that she had been similarly obscured: “he made it sound like he was responsible for my being so generally clever and... I wanted free of it” (56). In reclaiming agency over her story, Gina is able to redress her sense that life is chaotic and outside her control, thereby correcting, to some extent, the temporal confusion throughout the novel. As Brison writes, “working through, or remastering, traumatic memory... involves a shift from being the object or medium of someone else’s... speech (or other expressive behavior) to being the subject of one’s own” (39).
Finally, both novels propose a process of creative memory work through narrative revision, on both the individual and social level, in order to recover from communal trauma and imagine an optimistic, changed future. While the masculine narratives of violence in Ryan’s novel create a patriarchal system which simultaneously destroys and perpetuates itself, Ryan suggests that these patriarchal narratives might be productively revised. Bobby’s imagined renovation of his father’s house, for example, mirrors the way his wife Triona revises her memories of Frank, suggesting that the narrative structures framing the past are plastic enough to allow the possibility of a future that is not characterised by traumatic repetition, although these examples remain underdeveloped within the novel and the final image is one of uncertainty.

Enright, meanwhile, not only critiques dominant cultural narratives, but offers an alternative narrative framework - the maternal genealogy - which supplements and corrects the limitations of a strictly patriarchal narrative. Enright’s maternal genealogy, informed by Melanie Klein’s theories of the maternal role in facilitating complex, creative thought, allows Gina to imagine a maternal inheritance wherein the past is not a burden, but the key to change for the future. Despite the gendered dimensions of these social frameworks, this analysis does not aim to suggest a simplistic division where the masculine comes to stand for all that is wrong with society. Rather, both novels imagine the revision, rather than the destruction, of damaged patriarchal narratives in order to reassert the enduring value of the family unit beyond the problematic ways it has been structured in the past. The family is worth saving, and provides the primary motivation for the difficult memory work they propose.

Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart*

*Trauma and Violence in Masculine Cultures*

*The Spinning Heart* is preoccupied with trauma, and Bobby Mahon, as the novel’s central figure, represents the intersection of Ryan’s two primary concerns: the personal trauma that occurs within the familial space, and the communal trauma accompanying Ireland’s economic crash. Bobby’s narrative
arc is driven by his attempt to come to terms with his father Frank’s abuse and the loss of his job, and this plot underwrites and connects the other fractured narratives within the novel, both in literal representations of Bobby as the object of speculation and concern, and in terms of thematic preoccupations with abuse and unemployment. In the intersection of personal and communal traumas, moreover, Ryan suggests that the cultural impact of the economic crash is particularly devastating in a masculine culture with limited resources for narrativising, and thus healing, the traumatic rupture.

The impact of the economic crash is described as the sudden loss of an entire narrative framework; as Seanie observes, “You can kind of lose yourself very quick, when all about you changes and things you thought you always would have turn out to be things you never really had, and things you were sure you’d have in the future turn out to be on the far side of a big, dark mountain that you have no hope of ever climbing over” (94). If trauma is understood as the experience of an event so shocking that it defies narrative processing, then the economic crash as trauma reveals the prevailing narratives of economic progress and success to be profoundly inadequate, leaving the community not only in vast uncertainty but without the narrative means of recovery. Ryan provides an eloquent image for this crushing loss when Bobby’s co-worker discovers that their boss has not been paying their pension contributions: “Mickey’s left hand was outstretched. It held the invisible weight of what he should have been given but wasn’t” (10).

This “invisible weight” also describes the legacy of Frank’s verbal abuse, which is primarily an attempt to undercut Bobby’s positive image of himself. Frank explains, “I had to prepare him for the hard world... He’d have gotten some hop if I’d left him off out thinking he was the boy that his mother told him he was” (142). Frank’s violent language, like the physical violence inflicted elsewhere in the novel, leaves its victim without the linguistic resources necessary to recover from the trauma of abuse. Bobby, who as a child “stopped talking, not to be drawing his father on” him (148), is unable to narrate a new identity to replace the one taken from him, first by his father, then by the economic crash. When Bobby says that he has “a pain in [his] heart for the man [he] thought [he] was” (15), he is speaking about the loss of identity with the loss of his job, but the reason this loss is felt so
acutely is that Frank has been similarly undermining his identity throughout his life.

Bobby’s relationship with Frank is emblematic of the damaged father and son relationships which populate the novel, a narrative thread which expresses anxiety about the future as symbolised in the son. The novel opens with the words “My father” (9) as Bobby thinks about his troubled relationship with Frank, and ends with Bobby watching his son play in the back garden. In between, there are narratives about father figures who feel that they have let down their sons (like Jim and Josie), and sons who worry about disappointing their fathers (Brian and Rory). There are fathers who are distraught to be denied access to their sons (Jason and Seanie), and sons who complain about growing up without fathers (Timmy, Trevor, and Lloyd). Even the female narrators are preoccupied with father-son relationships: Lily’s son is ashamed of her and his father beats them both; Bridie’s son drowns and his father blames her; Réaltín, Hillary, and Kate’s narratives all centre around Réaltín’s son Dylan and the day care centre from which he is kidnapped; and Mags and Triona struggle to come to terms with the difficult father figures in their lives. The novel is haunted by sons who have died (such as Timmy’s nephew, and Bridie’s son who reappears in Jim’s narrative), or sons who are metaphorically maimed or impotent by being out of work, mentally ill, or crippled by anxiety and depression. Bobby and Dylan form the novel’s two main narrative arcs in that they crystallise these anxieties for the community: Bobby is idealised by many as the saviour of his community - “Bobby will put paid to this auld downturn” (108-9), for example - until the town is scandalised to hear that he has allegedly murdered his father, while Dylan’s kidnap and rescue provides a tentative symbol of hope for the future. These damaged sons not only indicate an anxiety about the future, but implicate the patriarchal system that undermines the very future it is meant to propagate.

In opening the novel with a son who imagines killing his father, Ryan evokes the Freudian paradigm of the Oedipus complex. As Freud famously argues in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the son, driven by an ambivalent mixture of envy and resentment of the father’s position, dreams of killing the father in order to take his place (261-4). Freud develops the sociological implications of this idea in *Totem and Taboo*, where he argues that the
Oedipus complex drives the perpetuation of patriarchy. In an imagined primal history of mankind, Freud posits that the sons who have “satisfied their hatred” (143) by killing their father are afterwards overcome by “a sense of guilt” (143). This ambivalence, he claims, is the beginning of monotheistic religions: “The dead father became stronger than the living one had been” (143), and the sons internalise his authority as a form of “deferred obedience” (143). “[A]t bottom,” Freud concludes, “God is nothing other than an exalted father” (147). This Oedipus complex clearly animates the narrative structure of *The Spinning Heart*, in that the son’s complicated and unresolved emotions towards the father - Bobby both wants to kill Frank and, as I will elaborate below, develops his identity as a mirror image of him - create a patriarchal system whose cyclical structure is redolent of traumatic repetition.

Crucially, however, the Oedipal paradigm is not the only structural force at work in the novel. It is not only sons who dream about murdering their fathers; fathers also imagine, with varying degrees of latency, the destruction of their sons. In this, Ryan draws on the Irish myth of Cúchulainn, the warrior who unwittingly kills his own son in combat and, in his subsequent grief, “fight[s] against the waves of the sea” for three days (Gregory 241). Gerardine Meaney argues that this myth is a “central trope for the emerging Irish canon,” and that “Cuchulainn’s misguided battle with his son becomes a recurrent paradigm of the impossibility of a national, civil society, that is, one that can bequeath posterity to a new generation” (*Gender* 155). Ryan first references Cúchulainn in Réaltín’s narrative, a young mother whose father helped her to buy a house on what has now become a ghost estate. His attempt to provide for Réaltín’s future unwittingly traps her in a kind of death, and now he comes by her house nearly every day to maintain the estate which has been abandoned, unfinished, by its builders: “He slashes at weeds with his feet. He kicks at the devouring jungle. He’s like an old, grumpy, lovely Cúchulainn, trying to fight back the tide” (43). It is within this paradigm that Ryan imagines even the best intentions of the father as warped and destructive. Frank, too, though he is depicted throughout the novel as unequivocally evil, understands his own parenting as driven by an instructive impulse - “I had to prepare [Bobby] for the hard world” (142), he explains -
even while he knows that his “brutal sharp words” actually only inflicted “death by a thousand million cuts” (143). He concludes, “I knew I was doing it and I couldn’t stop” (143), suggesting that underneath Frank’s abusive exterior lies a well-meaning but damaged parental impulse.

In engaging with both the Oedipus and Cúchulainn myths, Ryan thus describes a patriarchal structure that is simultaneously self-perpetuating and self-defeating. This system of inheritance puts fathers and sons in conflict, while the realisation of either’s murderous impulse leaves no possibility for change: either the son internalises and replicates the father’s authority, or the father destroys the future he has worked to create. The critical similarity of these myths, however, and the reason that Ryan invokes both in his critique of Ireland’s patriarchal system, is that in each, the death of the son or father occurs because father and son fail to recognise one another. In order to accomplish change for the future, then, Ryan proposes a mutual communication of identity: fathers and sons, in other words, must tell each other their stories.

Of course, such communication is complicated in the novel by the traumas which afflict both Bobby and Frank. One of the defining characteristics of trauma is that it defies understanding, remaining inaccessible to conscious thought and narrative processing. As Caruth writes, trauma’s “insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred” (“Introduction” 151). The story of trauma, therefore, is an “enigmatic testimony,” one which “simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (Caruth *Unclaimed Experience* 5-6). As I will elaborate below, such communication between traumatised fathers and sons necessitates new ways of both speaking and listening; otherwise, the unwitting concealment of identity which characterises their relations leads, inevitably, to mutual destruction.

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34 In the story of Oedipus, an oracle foretelling the murder prompts Oedipus’ father to abandon his son, and, years later, unaware of each other’s identities, they quarrel on the road and Oedipus slays his father (Freud, *Interpretation* 261). In Augusta Gregory’s *Cuchulain of Muirthemne*, Cúchulainn leaves his son Conlaoch to be raised by his mother Aoife, who sends him, as an adult, back to Ireland with the command that he not reveal his identity to anyone. When Cúchulainn and Conlaoch meet on the battle field, Cúchulainn asks him his name, to which Conlaoch replies, “I will never give in to any man to tell the name, or to give an account of myself” (238, emphasis mine).
The novel’s primary critique of this patriarchal system, then, lies in the way its version of masculinity uses violence as a form of language. Behind the often-expressed concern of men in the novel not being able to “find the words” (15) to communicate what is most important to them, Ryan offers glimpses of why that might be the case. For example, Bobby explains why he was not able to do better in school: “A lad from the village wrote an essay one time and Pawsy Rogers praised him from a height... He got kicked the whole way back to the village” (14). This story echoes Frank’s own experience of abuse - his father beat him for being proud of his scholastic accomplishments (143) - and illustrates how masculine values are passed on. Not only are men not allowed to excel in verbal arts (Bobby says of his wife Triona, “no one stopp[ed] her doing honours English” (19, emphasis in original)), but this lesson is one that is communicated through violence, suggesting that men ought to speak with their fists rather than with words. This idea is picked up elsewhere in the novel, such as when the father of Lily’s child beats her for naming him as the father: “He said nothing, only punched me straight into my face... My eye swelled and closed and turned black... [A]nd he punched me again, right into my mouth” (27). Not only is the punch in the mouth a crude injunction to silence, but the punch in the eye is an attempt to negate or erase her subjectivity. The men who call on Lily as a prostitute are described as “eyes at [her] door” (28), while Lily is treated as an object without the power of a unique perspective. Elsewhere, Mickey beats up men in a bar when he cannot confront the boss who cheated him (11), Vasya’s brother starts the fight that kills him because he feels insulted (37), and so on. The particular form of masculinity valued in this community, then, teaches men to use violence as language.

What makes violence as a form of communication especially problematic, beyond the obvious physical and emotional trauma it causes which I will address below, is that pain inflicted through violence does not truly communicate anything, but rather isolates the individual and precludes meaningful connection. As Elaine Scarry writes in *The Body in Pain*,

> When one hears about another person’s physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person’s body may seem... as distant as interstellar events... The very temptation to invoke
analogies to remote cosmologies... is itself a sign of pain’s triumph, for it achieves its aversiveness in part by bringing about, even within the radius of several feet, this absolute split between one’s sense of one’s own reality and the reality of other persons. (3-4)

When Denis’s construction company is devastated by the crash of the housing market, for example, he is unable to confront his debtors - one contractor kills himself and Denis thinks, “What was I meant to say to his widow?” (121) - or to explain his despair to his wife. Driven by this unmet need to share his feelings - he explains, “I wanted to frighten someone, anyone, so I wouldn’t be the only one feeling this way” (124, emphasis in original) - he goes to Frank’s house looking for Bobby and beats Frank’s head in with a piece of timber. Rather than the emotional connection Denis wanted, he experiences a break with reality - “I thought I was killing my own father, just for them two or three seconds” (125) - that erases Frank as a distinct person in his perspective just as it leaves Denis curled in the foetal position and unable to speak (125). Violence as a form of language actually shuts down the possibility of communication or connection.

Ryan suggests, then, that the intergenerational trauma within the novel is perpetuated by damaging and ineffectual forms of communication: not only violence functioning as language, but also language functioning as violence. Ryan offers the example of Frank, who describes his treatment of Bobby as a repetition of the past even as he distinguishes between the physical abuse he suffers and the verbal abuse he inflicts. As Frank explains, “They say violence begets violence, but that’s not always true... I could only ever wound a person with my words” (144). As the word “wound” suggests, Frank’s words have the same force and effect as a physical blow; he elaborates on his abuse of his wife, “the brutal sharp words flowed from me; some making tiny little nicks, more tearing deep into her. Her soul suffered death by a thousand million cuts” (143). Frank’s violent language also isolates each member of his family, as Bobby and his mother stop speaking to each other for fear of upsetting Frank (18).

Ryan describes Frank’s abusive language in the same terms as physical violence to distinguish it from the kind of language that might instead be
healing. Frank, who is not normally short of words, is moved to silence when he meets his grandson for the first time. He says, “[W]hen my grandchild’s eyes first met mine, a powerful weakness overtook me... I was afraid to open my mouth for fear my voice would betray me. I knew I hadn’t it in me not to sound false or foolish or a kind of hollow, somehow... I hardly ever saw that child again” (143). Frank describes even the possibility of connection with his grandson, the moment of eye contact, as a “weakness” because the violent language of his masculinity prioritises barriers over openness. That he is afraid any non-violent language might make him seem “false” or “hollow” gestures towards the lack of masculine examples of emotional connection; without violence, he loses his masculinity and his sense of identity. Because of this lack of adequate language, Frank estranges himself from his grandson. Ryan suggests here that without an alternative means of communication, patriarchy creates a future which it then estranges and makes unknowable. Frank says that “The future is a cold mistress. You can give all your life to looking at her and trying to catch a hold of her but she’ll always dance away from your fingertips” (139), but it is actually his own damaged model of masculinity that perpetuates a traumatic past and precludes an alternative, hopeful future. When Marianne Hirsch describes the inherited traumas of the Holocaust, she distinguishes between

what [Toni] Morrison has called ‘rememory’ [in her novel Beloved] and what I am defining as ‘postmemory’ - between, on the one hand, a memory that, communicated through bodily symptoms, becomes a form of repetition and reenactment, and, on the other hand, one that works through indirection and multiple mediation. Within the intimate familial space... postmemory always risks sliding into rememory, traumatic reenactment, and repetition. (The Generation 82-3)

If traumatic memory, then, is uniquely associated with embodied reenactment, whereas healthy forms of memory require more complex forms of linguistic processing, then masculine cultures that prioritise reductive violence over “multiple mediation” through language are problematically disposed to the perpetuation of trauma.
Bobby’s experiences of trauma create another kind of temporal dislocation, as well; when the traumatic past is repeated, its belated and intrusive effects carried across generational boundaries, the traumatised individual becomes a kind of ghost. Along with Bobby’s loss of identity, he feels “suddenly useless” (15) and ineffectual; after his father’s murder, he turns “as pale as a ghost and as silent as the grave” (135), refusing to speak to anyone. Bobby’s metaphorical ghosting mirrors Frank’s literal haunting at the novel’s end, and echoes the other aforementioned dead sons who haunt the novel, suggesting that Bobby’s particular powerlessness is also symbolic of wider cultural conditions. Like Gina in Enright’s *The Forgotten Waltz*, Bobby is in a kind of temporal limbo. Also as in Enright, this novel’s narrative arc moves towards the acquisition of agency: Bobby’s friends and family anxiously await the moment he “snap[s] out of this waking coma he’s after falling into” (135). However, what differentiates Bobby’s lack of agency from Gina’s is that Bobby’s ghostly existence, like Frank’s and like the other male characters who haunt this novel, takes place against a masculine culture whose obsession with power is what champions the use of violence as language, and language as violence. It is in order to impose one’s will on others that the male characters in this novel use physical force or cutting words, though the ironic conclusion is that this use of force makes them powerless, insofar as they lack the linguistic resources to communicate. Ryan proposes through this example that it is necessary to revise what “power” signifies in masculine cultures; dialogic communication enables personal agency while unilateral communication, physical or verbal, only stunts the individual.

**Mythologisation and Constructive Power**

The problem, then, for the traumatized men in Ryan’s novel is that the patriarchal narrative structures available to them inevitably reinforce the power of the father and, consequently, their own powerlessness as sons. Madsen writes, “The theoretical ‘untranslatability’ of trauma makes survivor discourse especially reliant upon cultural scripting for the conditions of its own meaning, even when it resists these cultural ideologies” (267). Kali Tal describes this codification of traumatic experience according to dominant
cultural narratives as “mythologization,” a process which is inextricably linked to social power. As she writes in *Worlds of Hurt*,

> If survivors retain control over the interpretation of their trauma, they can sometimes force a shift in the social and political structure. If the dominant culture manages to appropriate the trauma and can codify it on its own terms, the status quo will remain unchanged. On a social as well as an individual psychological level, the penalty for repression is repetition. (“Chapter One,” emphasis mine)

Ryan suggests that, by narrativising their experiences of trauma through mythologised patriarchal narratives, the men in his novel actually perpetuate the patriarchal system through which their abuse is allowed to take place.

In their small Catholic community, the cultural scripting of fathers is rigidly shaped by the Church. As Rory explains, “Father Cotter used to say to us in school that a Christian, when faced with a moral dilemma, should ask himself only one question: What would Jesus have done? I’ve always stuck by that, except when I was young I substituted my auld fella for Jesus and when I got older, Bobby Mahon got the spot” (112). The Father is imaginatively merged with the image of an omnipotent and perfect God, while the traditional address of the priest as “Father” and the easy transference of the God/Father position to Bobby indicates the cultural ubiquity of this patriarchal narrative.

Fatherhood in the Mahon family, however, is understood not relation to God but to the Devil. Bobby describes his father as a malignantly supernatural force, animated purely by spite - “His heart is caked with muck and his lungs are shrivelled and black, but still he manages to draw in air” (10)35 - while Frank explicitly remarks that his father “gave the devil himself a good run for his money on his best days” (141). Frank also observes of his verbal abuse that “it was as if the words were whispered into my ear by the devil himself”

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35 The supernatural identification is reinforced in the novel’s opening lines, when Bobby remarks that his father lives “back the road past the weir” (9). This location references Conor McPherson’s 1997 play *The Weir*. As Ian Rickson, the original director of the play, explains of the titular image, “[T]he weir is important because, if you like, water is the unconscious, the paranormal” (qtd. in Kerrane 116). Frank’s location past the weir, which Bobby has to pass in order to see him each day, imaginatively links him to the spectres and fairies which haunt McPherson’s text.
(140), suggesting that his demonised father is the direct cause of the trauma he inflicts on Bobby.

Whether idealised or demonised, the Father in these narratives is imagined as all-powerful; the son has no agency in relation to him. For instance, as Bobby reflects on his traumatic childhood, he describes visiting his father daily, enduring his continued emotional abuse - “He smiles at me; that terrible smile... He laughs his crooked laugh” (9) - and waiting for him to die. He remarks, “When [Frank] dies, I’ll get the cottage and the two acres that’s left. He drank out Granddad’s farm years ago. After I have him buried, I’ll burn the cottage down and piss on the embers and I’ll sell the two acres for as much as I can get” (9-10). In Bobby’s narrative, he imagines that power, like the cottage and land, is inherited from the father. However, the power he imagines inheriting is destructive - “I’ll burn the cottage down” - a violent expression of dominance which Ryan has equated with a particularly toxic masculinity. Therefore, even in his express desire not to take up his father’s inheritance, Bobby becomes his father: Frank “drinks out the farm,” converting his inheritance into pints which he consumes and regurgitates (17), mirroring Bobby’s comparison of his inheritance to bodily waste when he imagines “piss[ing] on the embers” (10). Symbolically, both Bobby and Frank wanted to destroy the paternal past in order to escape it, but the fact that Bobby finds himself in exactly the same position as Frank indicates that this destructive power only recreates the past.

Just as Bobby and Frank imagine the literal destruction of their inheritance as a means of destroying the father, they each also imagine destroying the paternal image through becoming the exact opposite of the values and characteristics represented by their fathers. For instance, Bobby identifies his primary complaint about Frank as his verbal abuse, the way he “commented on everything” (18) his family did in tones of critique. It is little wonder, then, that Bobby grows into a man primarily characterised by silence, especially towards those he loves: he stops speaking to his mother in the last few years of her life (19), and remarks of his relationship with his wife Triona, “I wish to God I could talk to her the way she wants me to... Why can’t I find the words?” (15). Similarly, Frank, whose father physically abused him, finds himself with “no stomach for violence [his] whole life” (144). While the father
thus represents a negative ideal for these sons, he still provides the framework through which their identities are constructed. Thus, rather than becoming something wholly different, both Frank and Bobby become a kind of mirror image of their fathers; certain qualities are reversed, but the original image is still repeated.

Moreover, the powerlessness which marks the son’s experience within this flawed patriarchal structure, which I discussed earlier as a kind of impotence associated with the liminal, is intimately connected to the way that fatherhood is mythologised. For instance, in Rory’s case, the idealised father, who is imaginatively identified with God, precludes the son’s ability to successfully imitate this ideal, which then leads to the disabling experience of shame in his failure to live up to impossible standards. The main reason that Rory is unable to imagine a future that is not a disappointing repetition of the past - “I’ll be in town again next week. I’ll stand looking at the same poster, for a gig that will be over, wondering about the odds of her appearing again... [until] my cowardly heart settles back into the slow rhythm of time being wasted” (113) - is connected to his fear that his financial dependence, following the loss of his construction job, is a disappointment to his father: he refuses to ask for the money to realise his future plans.

While Rory’s father-as-God provides him with a set of ideals and goals, however unrealistic and unattainable, Bobby’s demonised father leaves instead a vacuum. The son, without a positive paternal example, is unable to imagine a future self. As I have already mentioned, Frank’s verbal abuse of Bobby primarily takes the shape of undercutting his positive self-image, denying the identity which Bobby had so far constructed for himself. Therefore, when Bobby loses his job after the housing market collapses, his experience of shame is acutely felt because it mirrors and reinforces the way his father always treated him. For example, when Bobby and his crew go to collect their PSRI, they learn that Pokey never paid it. He asks the clerk, “What’s the story?”, to which she replies, “There’s no story sir” (12), indicating that he had never been registered as an employee but gesturing more broadly to the way that the economic crash robs Bobby of his identity, his story. Thus, feeling undercut once again, his response is a feeling of
overwhelming shame: “You’re some fool, she said with her eyes. I know I am, my red cheeks said back” (12).

In both of these cases, the son experiences shame, which Ahmed defines as a form of self-identification; shame differs from guilt because guilt involves “punishment for wrong doing... while shame implies that some quality of the self has been brought into question” (Nathanson qtd. in Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 105). Shame, insofar as it forms the basis of self-identity, also involves an abdication of narrative agency. Sartre writes, “I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other” (246, emphasis in original), which entails the acceptance of what is perceived as an externally constructed self, but in reality, involves “an identification with the other... I see myself as if I were this other” (Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics* 106, emphasis in original). In other words, the experience of disabling shame involves a warped form of empathetic engagement, wherein the perspective of the other is imagined but exaggerated - for Bobby and Rory, the father is exceedingly cruel or impossibly good - and the self-identification which emerges from this imagined interaction is accepted without revision. Thus, the construction of a healthy, positive self-image necessitates both the recuperation of narrative agency and a more balanced, dialogic relationship with the other.

If Bobby’s imagined demolition of his father’s house represents a destructive relationship with the past, his work in the housing industry illustrates the possibility of a constructive positioning. As Bobby describes his career prospects before the recession, “Houses would never stop going up. I’d see babies like our own being pushed around the village below and think: lovely, work for the future, they’ll all need their own houses some day too” (13). Equating the construction of houses with a future-oriented perspective, Ryan likewise suggests that a constructive power is necessary to escape the intergenerational transmission of trauma. As when Tal argues that the possibility for change depends on the trauma survivor resisting the mythologisation of his or her experience, Ryan posits that there is redemptive possibility in the construction of new narratives, ones outside the limitations of patriarchal cultural scripts. However, as the next section will illustrate, the construction of alternative narrative frameworks is deceptively difficult.
**Absent Fathers and Repressed Memory**

While most of the fathers and sons in *The Spinning Heart* remain unable to narrate their life stories outside the dominant cultural narratives of patriarchy, Catholicism, and capitalist progress, Lloyd constructs his life in strikingly individual terms. An unemployed young man who lives with his single mother and spends most of his time playing online fantasy role playing games, Lloyd describes his attempts to find meaning in his life through looking inward: “What do I want from myself?” (106). This approach is revealed to be fundamentally problematic for a number of different reasons. First of all, like most of the other male characters in the novel, he is haunted by unresolved father issues which hamper his self-development. His father left him and his mother when he was a young child to start a family with another woman, and he concludes, “[T]hat’s why I’m still groping around in the dark” (105). Secondly, even though he has escaped the dominant cultural narratives, he still remains devoted to a Grand Narrative structure to explain his existence, which ensures that he is trapped by the same presentist, progressive pitfalls, just in another guise. Finally, Lloyd’s most striking problem, what defines the function of his narrative within the novel, is his inability to imagine others’ perspectives and narrate himself in relation to them. Lloyd describes himself as a solipsist: “I am alone in the universe; the universe is created by me and for me and nothing exists outside of my consciousness” (105). Through his profound blindness to the world around him, Ryan suggests that it is not enough to imagine alternatives to dominant cultural narratives, but that these alternatives must necessarily find a way to bridge the gap between self and other.

In stark contrast to the other narratives in the novel, most of which represent individuals who feel defined and trapped by the weight of history, Lloyd does not seem to obsess about the past to the same degree; most of his narrative is remarkably future-oriented, as he tries to figure out how to “become the being [he] was meant to be” (107). In this sense, Lloyd represents a younger mentality who cannot understand the relevance of the past. His obsession with virtual worlds defines him as a millennial, and Ryan depicts this interest as, somewhat predictably, out of touch with the “real world”: “I kind of thought actually that Trevor was gone completely mental
when he called up here a few weeks ago. Like, why would he not text or email or Facebook? *What’s with all the reality*, I thought. Does he not know he’s a million times cooler in virtual form?” (103, emphasis mine). Similarly, Lloyd barely acknowledges the traditional religious and cultural frameworks that shape most of the other characters’ narratives. He is not concerned with what he is “supposed” to do or become as a man in a rural Irish Catholic community, but instead looks within himself to discover his identity and purpose in life: “What do I want from myself?” (106), he muses. Rather than being “free” from the constraints of these restrictive frameworks, however, Ryan creates a character who is so profoundly self-absorbed - another critical stereotype of the generation Lloyd appears to represent - that he seems scarcely more stable than his schizophrenic friend Trevor. Lloyd, though perhaps an unfair exaggeration of a type, is exaggerated precisely to illustrate what is problematic about forsaking the past in pursuit of progress.

Despite the troublingly solipsistic way that Lloyd narrates his life, Ryan suggests that he, like the other men in the novel, has also been traumatised by patriarchy. When Lloyd describes the day his father left, for instance, the reader sees glimpses of the same kind of idealisation and demonisation that plague Rory and Bobby. Lloyd is somewhat in awe of his father - “I remember thinking he looked really cool” (104) - so his mother fabricates a story to explain his departure while maintaining this positive image: “Mom told me some bullshit story about how he had to go and do important work for the government to fix the hole in the ozone layer. I made myself believe that for years” (104-5). When he learns that his father actually left to start another family, Lloyd feels replaced - “He’d had another kid with another woman. A boy” (105) - though he tries not to think about it. Instead, his anxieties are physically manifested: “I started to grind my teeth that night, and didn’t stop for years, till finally I ground through to a nerve and the pain made me pass out” (105). Rather than process the emotional pain of being abandoned by his father, Lloyd subjects himself to physical pain as a more manageable alternative; moreover, the end result of this self-inflicted pain is the loss of consciousness, representing Lloyd’s aversion to thinking about the past at all. Lloyd’s refusal to narrativise his pain is reminiscent of Bobby’s retreat into
silence, which suggests that Lloyd’s “alternative” narrative framework is only superficially different than the traditional narratives he has rejected.

Lloyd’s narrative architecture, for example, also traps him in a destructive cycle of repeating the past. While Lloyd’s understanding of his relationship to his father is not shaped by the same frameworks as Rory or Bobby, the end result of his particular father complex is troublingly similar: he, too, continues to relive certain parts of his past. When Lloyd and his friend Trevor kidnap the young child Dylan from the Montessori where Trevor works, Lloyd’s interactions with Dylan are particularly illuminating.

Immediately after discussing the “other kid” his father had, he remarks without transition, “I dreamt I killed the kid” (105); though he is actually referring to Dylan, this does not become apparent until a few lines later when he observes the child “standing up looking at [him]” (105). Although he interprets this dream as an expression of his “urges to destroy” (106), “something [his] inner warrior wants to do and is not able” (105), the narrative connection between these two “kids” suggests that Lloyd harbours a veiled or repressed desire for revenge on the child he considers to have replaced him. Lloyd’s subconscious has not progressed past his childhood trauma; he appears to be, though he cannot admit it to himself, stuck in the past.

Moreover, Lloyd’s inability to think critically, or rationally, about his past is explicitly connected to his problems with imagining and actualising a successful future self. Lloyd recognises this connection; referring to his father’s desertion, he says, “I know now that all that shit was a series of tests I’d set myself. I think I failed some of them, that’s why I’m still groping around in the dark” (105). Lloyd’s emphasis on finding some lesson from this traumatic memory is not the problem. In fact, Ricoeur explains that individuals, or indeed communities, can “move on” from a traumatic experience by “extract[ing] from traumatic memories the exemplary value that can become pertinent only when memory has been turned into a project. If the trauma refers to the past, the exemplary value is directed towards the future” (Memory, History, Forgetting 86). Lloyd’s “project” of self-development, and his optimistic orientation towards the future, demonstrate two key components of a “healthy” memory, while the obvious madness of
Lloyd’s overall perspective illustrates that these components count for nothing without the one thing Lloyd’s narrative obviously lacks: an adequate recognition and understanding of the other. Lloyd’s solipsism, evidenced in his narrativisation of his traumatic childhood as “a series of tests I’d set myself” (105, emphasis mine), prevents him from constructing a complex and conglomerate narrative of his past.

One of the primary problems with the way Lloyd imagines the future is that he perceives it as moving towards some inevitable and narrowly defined end. For instance, he paraphrases his project of self-actualisation, “When I feel no fear, I’ll have completed my journey” (107), displaying his faith in a narrative structure which he perceives as intrinsic to his life. Hayden White has explained that the way we narrativise the past can have the effect of making that history appear inevitable, as if “events seem to tell themselves” (“The Value of Narrativity” 7). He expounds, “Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see the ‘end’ in every beginning?” (“The Value of Narrativity” 27, emphasis mine), suggesting in no uncertain terms that such is not the case. In other words, a singular narrative, applied to past events, can make its retrospectively traced patterns of cause and effect appear to be an integral feature of the “way things are,” and the trajectory of the future appear to be obvious. Lloyd’s sense of inevitability about the future is echoed in the narratives of the other men. Rory, for example, describes what he “knows” will happen after his conversation with Holly: “I know I won’t go in to that gig” (112), he explains, imagining a highly exaggerated scene of humiliation if he did. Similarly, when Bobby fantasises about killing his father, he details with certainty how the scene would play out: “I wouldn’t like to see his eyes while I killed him; he’d be laughing at me, I know well he would. He’d still be telling me I’m only a useless prick, a streak of piss, a shame to him, even and he dying. He wouldn’t plead, only laugh at me with his yellow eyes” (16). And just as Rory’s imagined future sends him back to the place he met Holly (113), so Bobby’s revenge fantasy has him returning to his father’s house: “I go there every day to see is he dead and every day he lets me down” (9). By imagining
that they know how the future will resolve, these men inadvertently repeat the past.

This myopic effect of narrativising history can be countered, Ryan suggests, by relying on multiple perspectives, and hence multiple narratives, to explain the past. In this project, the experience of shame is also critical, as shame actually creates the conditions for a meaningful change in perspective. As Elspeth Probyn suggests, “We must use shame to reevaluate how we are positioned in relation to the past and to rethink how we wish to live in proximity to others” (xiv), but such reevaluation is only possible if the lived experience of shame is subjected to closer scrutiny rather than “hidden away” (xiii), unexamined, as is often the case. As I have mentioned, Sartre uses the example of shame to illustrate how it is that we can know that the Other exists as an independent consciousness, as shame requires seeing oneself from a new perspective - “I am ashamed of myself as I appear to the Other” (Sartre 246, emphasis in original) - namely, considering the self as an object before another subject. This is a profoundly troubling moment of recognition, however, and Sartre explains that it is not easily accepted: “The reaction to shame will consist exactly in apprehending as an object the one who apprehended my own object-state” (312).

In the above examples, where past and future are narrated and understood as “inevitable,” the experience of shame leads to a retreat from the other’s perspective, rather than a complex engagement with it. Rory’s reaction to shame in his conversation with Holly is to objectify her body rather than acknowledge her own embarrassment as evidence of her subjectivity - he misconstrues a comment of hers as a veiled reference to his weight, and as her face goes “pure red” (111), he remarks that she had “a tidy little pair of tits... and a lovely arse” (111). Similarly, when Lloyd experiences shame, he retreats further into solipsism as a defence. Lloyd explains, “I remember when I told Trevor I’d decided to be a solipsist. He laughed like a fat, retarded duck” (106). Though he is initially hurt by this reaction, he is also reluctant to admit that Trevor’s opinion matters to him at all: “I disgusted myself by suddenly dropping my cloak of aloof superiority... and I slapped him in his fat face” (106). Rather than imaginatively engaging with Trevor’s perspective, however, Lloyd instantly denies it, explaining,
“This battle I’m having with Trevor is obviously some inner conflict” (106), though here too he remains unable to imagine what this conflict might mean, or how it might be resolved. Lloyd’s recourse to physical violence at this moment, moreover, aligns him with other male characters in the novel, and reinforces Ryan’s conception of violence precluding open communication.

Triona’s narrative, the last in the novel, offers the first real example of how remembering from the perspective of the other can open up the possibility of change for the future. In one particular instance, Triona feels shame as the women in her community gossip about her and Bobby, who has just been arrested on suspicion of murdering his father: “They looked at me and tut-tutted and whispered and nodded and shook their heads and counted off blessings on their rosary beads... Poor Triona, they said, but secretly they were delighted... My cough was after getting well and truly softened” (154). Triona’s immediate reaction is to imagine a future as bleak as any of the other characters - “that just showed you how terrible it all is and how the country is pure solid destroyed and there’s no end to the heartbreak” (155) - though this despair is cut short when Triona remarks, “God, I’m gone awful cross. People are scared, that’s all. I know that” (155). By imagining for a moment why these women have said such things about her, Triona is able to “put [things] into perspective” (155), and begin to imagine a future not overshadowed by the past. In what follows, I will examine how Triona’s perspective differs from others’ in the novel, and how her ability to empathise creates hope for the future.

**Empathetic Remembering and Imagined Futures**

Although Ryan demonstrates how a mythologised father figure engenders the repetition of the past, he does not suggest, as several of his characters do, that history is necessarily cyclical. Rather, he illustrates through Triona’s perspective how the religious and social frameworks that polarise the father figure make it difficult to imagine a past that is not similarly polarised. Through the way she questions these frameworks, her narrative offers a more balanced, and more complex, picture of her community.

Triona begins her narrative by remembering the way her aunt Bernadette’s fundamentalist Christianity shaped and ultimately destroyed her
cousin Coley: after years of Bernadette working to eradicate his “sinful pride” (146) through constant criticism, Coley committed suicide. Triona remarks, “Bernadette used The Word to torture Coley, just as Frank used his own spiteful words to torment Bobby” (147). Through this comparison, Ryan once more suggests that a Christian worldview can distort and disable masculinity. However, Ryan’s is not a blanket criticism of religion; as Triona explains, Bernadette “only used religion as a framework for her craziness. She could just as easily have been a Muslim or a Buddhist or a white witch” (147). Rather, the problematic component of Bernadette’s Christian framework is its tendency to oversimplify and to homogenize; though all frameworks, by definition, provide a kind of shorthand for making sense out of chaos, Ryan here critiques those frameworks that do not allow for complexity. Triona recounts the time that Bernadette asked Coley to carve for her a cross. Coley worked for hours to “add Celtic rings and swirls to its front” (146), for which Bernadette beat him; her preference for a simple and unadorned cross, like the unleavened bread she is always making, is representative of the narrowness of her fundamentalism. Just as she has no taste for the complexity of Coley’s cross, she also cannot countenance Coley’s artistic temperament: she “sent his chisel flying from his hand and his sinful pride flying from his heart” (146).

In much the same way that Bernadette’s singular and inflexible religious framework leaves no room for complexity, remembering from only one perspective causes problematic oversimplifications. Triona, as one of the only characters in the novel to criticize these limiting social frameworks, is also the only character in the novel who routinely expands her understanding of the past by imagining others’ perspectives. While she admits how much she hates Frank for the way he scorns Bobby at his awards ceremony, for example, she also forces herself to interrogate both her perception of this event and her judgment about Frank, by imagining the scene from his point of view:

But afterwards, after thinking and thinking about it, I wondered: why was he there at all? What brought him in to stand just inside the door of the Munster Tavern and watch his son? And even though I was so raging at him for casting a shadow on Bobby’s
moment, I started for the first time to think that there was more inside in Frank than just spite. (151)

This moment of insight at the end of the novel represents the culmination of an idea suggested in the opening chapter, when Bobby, reflecting that he has always been smarter than he let on, remembers reading Shakespeare’s *King Lear* in school. *King Lear*, like *The Spinning Heart*, begins with a problematic inheritance: Lear, dividing up his kingdom, disinherits his youngest daughter for refusing to flatter him; while Bobby, as he imagines inheriting his father’s house, remarks, “Every day he lives lowers the price I’ll get. He knows that too; he stays alive to spite me” (10). Similarly, both texts are concerned with the nature of the parent-child relationship: Lear’s daughters Regan and Goneril first heap exaggerated praise on him, then call him a fool behind his back, mirroring both the idealisation and demonisation of fathers within *The Spinning Heart*. When Bobby identifies Cordelia as the only positive character in the play, then, Ryan is also suggesting that Cordelia’s attitude towards her father is symbolically significant to the novel. Bobby paraphrases Cordelia’s speech to Lear, “You’re a man and no more, she said, you’re not perfect, but I love you” (14).

When Triona says that “there was more inside in Frank than just spite” (151), she exemplifies this lesson in seeing Frank as *just a man*. Ryan imagines this type of response as the ethical alternative to the damaged father-son relationships in the novel in that Triona exercises a critical distance from her own memory, questioning and revising the narrative she had thus far assumed. As I have already mentioned, Kali Tal suggests that the “mythologization” of traumatic experience through dominant cultural narratives means that these narratives are particularly resistant to change. “Bearing witness” to trauma, therefore, becomes “an aggressive act” (“Chapter One”), the articulation of a counter-narrative. Triona exemplifies what is to be gained from acknowledging complications to dominant cultural narratives. By imagining Frank as the archetypal tyrant father, Bobby remains locked in a narrative

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36 Although Tal describes this act as “a refusal to bow to outside pressure to revise or to repress experience” (“Chapter One”), the process is obviously complicated in the way that such “dominant cultural narratives” are very often internalised, meaning that one’s initial interpretations might very well be scripted by those “external” narratives, thus making “revision” necessary.
with no satisfactory conclusion. In complicating that narrative, however, Triona comes to an understanding of Frank that is simultaneously less exaggerated and more complex - in short, she sees his humanity - and is thus able to imagine a relationship that is not scripted by conflict. She accomplishes this shift in perspective through a particular kind of memory work, revising her understanding of the past through imaginative engagement with Frank’s perspective. Ryan suggests here that “dominant cultural narratives” can be challenged through an ethical, empathetic orientation towards the other. Triona’s anger with Frank does not disappear, but she is able to move beyond it into a future that is not dominated by, or orchestrated solely in response to, a painful past.

While it remains unclear at the end of the novel whether or not Bobby will negotiate a similar “demythologisation” of his father, this possibility is suggested earlier in the novel in a conversation recounted by Frank. As Frank is thinking about his own house, the same inheritance that Bobby imagines burning in the novel’s opening pages, he remembers, “Bobby was talking out through his hole one time about building an extension onto the back. I told him the only extension needed around here was to the end of his mickey. Himself and that girl that married him were trying to have a child that time and his seed wasn’t taking. The devil’s whispers again” (142). In happier times, before he loses his job and his sense of control over his own life, Bobby wants to renovate his father’s home rather than destroy it; he initially, then, imagines his future as a revision and creative engagement with what will soon become his inheritance. While Frank undercuts this proposal, and Bobby’s loss of purpose in the crash disables his creative capacity, Ryan includes this image to suggest that a healthy orientation towards the past involves a creative engagement: rather than wilfully repeating the past through traditional patriarchal inheritance, or inadvertently repeating it through the total destruction and disavowal of what came before, the revision of inherited cultural narratives provides the only possibility of change for the future.

If Triona’s reimagined narrative about her father-in-law represents a more productive, ethical orientation towards the past, then her reflections on the two children in the novel reveal how this orientation enables hope for the future. Triona’s narrative ends with short reflections on both Dylan, the child
who was kidnapped, and her own son, Robert, concluding the novel’s obsessively backward glance with a look ahead. She explains that when Dylan was found, his “little body was covered in weird marks... all in permanent marker, like tattoos drawn by a lunatic” (155), and his hair had been cut off, giving him the look of “a little refugee from a concentration camp” (155). This reference to the concentration camps, along with the physical markings on Dylan’s body, are suggestive of a traumatic experience that has been recorded on the body. However, rather than imagining a future dominated by this traumatic experience, Triona says simply, “He was fine except for the drawings all over him and the skinned head. They’ll wash off and his hair will grow back and he’ll forget all about the whole thing” (155). The notion that the marks on Dylan’s skin can “wash off” not only distinguishes his experience from actual concentration camp victims, but suggests that the type of trauma perpetuated in this community is not necessarily permanent, and does not have to determine the course of the future.

Though Triona’s optimism about Dylan’s future is commendable, it also remains superficial. The novel does not describe Dylan in distress - rather, Ryan emphasises that his kidnappers gave him “a beanbag... a DVD of Bob the Builder... [and] a bowl of ice-cream” (155) - so it also does not invite serious speculation about Dylan suffering any lasting trauma. Her own son, Robert, raises more serious questions about the transmission of trauma, the repetitions of history: will Bobby unwittingly damage his son the way Frank traumatised him? The answer to this question is also illuminated by a parallel between the novel’s opening and closing chapters. In the final lines of the novel, Bobby watches his son, and Triona says, “Tears spilled down his face. I just said oh love; oh love, what matters now? What matters only love?” (156). In Bobby’s chapter at the beginning of the novel, he describes watching a play with Triona, concluding with lines which mirror the ending of the novel quite closely: “On the way home in the car, tears spilled down my face. Triona just said oh love, oh love” (20). The reason Bobby tells this story about the play is to illustrate his observation about the benefits of marriage: “Having a wife is great. You can say things to your wife that you never knew you thought. It just comes out of you when the person you’re talking to is like a part of yourself” (20). In the problematic relationships of the novel, as I have already
discussed, the other person is imagined as a goal, positive or negative, which reflects a distorted and disabling image of the self. In contrast, Bobby imagines Triona as “part of [him]self,” suggesting both that he is comfortable imagining her perspective as well as his, and that this empathetic understanding of Triona boosts his own self-conception. Additionally, while the novel’s problematic relationships end up recreating the past, Bobby’s relationship with Triona enables him to “say things... that [he] never knew [he] thought” (20). In other words, this empathetic relationship is what allows him to think new things, suggesting that this sort of relationship might also be the only possibility for imagining a new and changed future, one that is not merely a repetition of the past.

In the final lines of the novel, however, Bobby “said nothing” (156); after Frank dies, Bobby falls into a “waking coma” (135) and refuses to speak to anybody. As I have already suggested, Bobby’s often-observed propensity for silence is a response to Frank’s verbal abuse. Bobby’s refusal to speak, then, is potentially dangerous; it represents the possibility of passing on his inherited trauma to yet another generation. However, the parallel to his earlier remarks suggests that the possibility of a different future remains available to him, provided he broadens his perspective through empathetic engagement. As the final lines propose, this work is primarily an effort of “love” (156), positioned here as the opposite of, and corrective to, the forms of violent, unilateral communications which Ryan problematizes throughout the novel.

Anne Enright’s *The Forgotten Waltz*

*Temporal Dislocation and Narrative Unease*

*The Forgotten Waltz* begins with a profound sense of temporal dislocation. From Gina’s repeated references to the awareness afforded by hindsight - “He is about to turn around - but he doesn’t know it yet” (5) - to her recognition of the constructedness of her own memories - “I add in the late summer light and the view” (5), and later, “The light is wonderful and wrong” (9) - Gina narrates the novel from a position of self-conscious confusion and uncertainty.

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Enright has described this sense of temporal confusion as her “modernist impulse”: “Conventional novels are all about cause and effect: the idea that if you put one event followed by another event in a novel, then there is a link between the two. I have retained a kind of modernist impulse; *I don’t think that our lives are necessarily explicable in that simple way*” (Popkey, emphasis mine). Within the novel, Gina offers a similar explanation for the irregularities of her narrative: “Still, I can’t be too bothered here, with chronology. The idea that if you tell it, one thing after another, then everything will make sense. *It doesn’t make sense*” (46, emphasis mine). As Enright bristles against the narrative constraints of the novel, Gina expresses a similar dissatisfaction with the narrative structure of her life thus far. Gina’s goal within her narrative, then, is to find a way of telling her story that allows her to overcome the sense that her life is meaningless, or, as she puts it later in this chapter, that her husband Conor is “fucking [her] entire life” (48).

Although these two concerns might at first glance appear to be rather different complaints, Gina regularly expresses her discontent within both her romantic relationships - with her husband Conor, as well as with her lover Seán - as matters of narrative fit. For instance, Gina describes with distaste the way that Seán talks about her to people:

> [T]here was this thing he did if I knew something he didn’t, or if I had been somewhere he had yet to go... he managed very quickly to be proud of these achievements, to boast about them on my behalf. And this irritated me: he made it sound like he was responsible for my being so generally clever and gung ho...I wanted to be free of it, this bag he kept putting me in. It got so I wanted to sleep with him - to love him even - just to be myself again, undescribed. (56, emphasis mine)

Gina experiences Seán’s narratives about her as a “bag” within which she is constrained, a device by which he exerts control over her sense of identity, “like he was responsible” so that she no longer feels like herself. Gina’s desire to be “undescribed,” then, explains her frequent irruptions of uncertainty about the way she constructs her own narrative. Every time she starts a section with confidence - “Let’s start with Conor. Conor is easy” (11) - she
quickly backtracks, revises, and complicates the story as she tells it: “But this was later. Or perhaps it had happened already, perhaps it was happening all along... I don’t know” (19). Her experiences being contained or trapped by certain narrative structures - crucially, the ones imposed on her by her male partners - lead to a distrust of the metanarratives at her disposal to organise, and make sense of, her life.

These metanarratives are symbolised within the novel, as in Ryan, by the houses that Gina occupies. During the Celtic Tiger, she and her then-partner Conor begin the process of buying a house together. In all the houses she visits, including the one she eventually buys, Gina is both unable to imagine her future - she can imagine her “Eames chair” in the corner but “I didn’t know what my life would be like in that chair” (13) - and unable to successfully relate, as she sees in hindsight, to Conor - “I loved Conor then... all the versions of him I had invented, in those houses... the sense of him I carried around with me, which was confirmed each time I saw him, or a few strange seconds later” (14, emphasis mine). This temporal delay in her relationship with Conor is a gesture towards the disconnect, not only between them, but between the narratives or “versions” of Conor which Gina imagines, and who he “really” is. Gina imagines these narratives in the houses they visit, signalling the role of heteronormative, capitalist cultural narratives in shaping more personal ones - she imagines the future in “Sunday-supplement dreams” (13), where she and Conor share “[m]ortgage love. Shagging at 5.3 per cent” (15).

Gina’s experience of the economic crash as trauma enables her to understand these narratives as faulty. The house itself, the structure within which their lives are taking shape, is, she is disturbed to realise, “fitted Lego-like with its neighbour... it was only half a house until you went upstairs. It was like the place had suffered a stroke” (15). Though Gina remarks that this is “not a problem [she] could identify” (15), her characterisation of the house as suffering a stroke registers her sense that there is something paralysing and incomplete about the narrative structure of her life at that moment. Crucially, however, this is a problem that she only registers as a problem in hindsight. While I will address below the particular circumstances which enable this change in Gina’s perspective, this observation illustrates what
Erikson refers to as the “wisdom” of trauma, the idea that “the traumatized view of the world... [though] pathological in the sense that it induces discomfort and pain... [also] conveys a wisdom that ought to be heard in its own terms” (198). Erikson notes that communal traumas have a way of “forc[ing] open whatever fault lines once ran silently through the structure of the larger community” (189), suggesting that the experience of communal trauma exposes and magnifies the pre-existing weaknesses within a community. The economic crash is thus depicted here as a *narrative crash*, where Gina’s operative cultural narratives before the crash are revealed as inadequate.

For example, Gina’s story of her life with Conor is marked by a sense of helplessness, or lack of agency; she describes every major moment of her life as outside her conscious control. Gina explains, “I fell in love with him because it was the right thing to do. How could this be possible?” (12). When they buy a house, “There was no big decision... it just made sense” (12). Getting married was a mad impulse, “the silliest thing we had ever done” (15), and they had now begun “actively thinking, or pretending to think, about starting a baby” (48, emphasis mine), that is, forgetting birth control and thinking, “What the hell” (48). In each of these milestones, the lack of a conscious decision, both on her part and Conor’s, indicates that their lives are driven by a socially regulative patriarchal narrative of heterosexual love, marriage, property ownership, and reproduction. Gina also describes her affair with Seán in similar terms; while she maintains, for the most part, that there was “nothing fated” (7) about any part of their relationship, she does consider it an inevitability. Remembering the first time she and Seán have sex, for example, Gina observes, “I remember knowing what we were about to do. It seemed that choice had nothing to do with it, or that I had chosen a long time ago. Not him, necessarily, but this...” (33), and moments later, “My memory skips the beginning of it, like a needle in an old record, so I have lost the moment of decision” (34). In describing both of Gina’s relationships this way, Enright critiques not, or not only, the restrictive institution of heteronormative marriage and family, but patriarchal narratives more generally. For example, Gina concludes her thoughts about her own narrative not making sense with the following remarks: “In a story that is supposed to
be about sleeping with one man or another, our bodies did not always play the
game in the expected way” (48). It is Gina’s notion that her story is “supposed
to be about... one man or another” that Enright questions; Gina senses that
these narratives are somehow inadequate to her lived experience, but it is
not until she revisits and renarrates her mother’s story that Enright begins to
reveal why.

An undercurrent in the heteronormative “flow” of Gina’s life, what
threatens to disrupt the narrative and pull Gina under, is the death of her
mother Joan. The entire novel is narrated from a point in time after Joan’s
death, so that even in the narration of events which occurred before she died,
Gina references Joan’s death at odd, disjointed moments. When Gina
struggles to remember the timeline of her affair with Seán, for example, she
remarks without elaboration, “My mother had that old-fashioned thing, an
easy death. But not yet” (46). Thus, part of the temporal dislocation of the
novel’s structure - Gina’s narrative revisions and temporal leaps - also
represents Gina’s traumatic response to her mother’s death. Enright uses a
similar narrative strategy in her 2007 novel, the Man Booker prize winning The
Gathering, to capture the narrator Veronica’s experience of trauma in
witnessing an act of child sexual abuse within her family. The narrative, in
effect, “attempts to replicate the damaged psyche of the trauma survivor”
(Harte, “Mourning Remains Unresolved” 189).

Of course, the nature of the trauma in The Gathering is on an entirely
different scale. Veronica’s witness of child sexual abuse disrupts her psyche
so violently that, rather than the mild confusions and evasions of Gina’s
narrative, Veronica’s narrative radically disrupts even the possibility of truth,
as much of her narrative is overtly and unapologetically fictionalised.
However, Enright consciously draws upon the same narrative strategies in The
Forgotten Waltz in order to emphasise the communal trauma of the economic
crime: “Anyone can do the dates... Our mother died in May 2007” (130), Gina
observes, gesturing toward the general recognition, in retrospect, that mid-
2007 marked the crash of the Irish property market which, in turn,
precipitated the larger economic disaster (see Donovan and Murphy 171-96).
Additionally, though, Enright tells the story of the country’s economic crash
through the framework of a specifically maternal trauma to emphasise the
untold and incommunicable stories lurking behind the present tragedy. Much as Veronica’s “search for causal factors requires her to probe more deeply into family history, to a time beyond the reach of personal memory” (Harte, “Mourning Remains Unresolved” 190), so too does Gina’s crisis in the present - a failed marriage, a complicated affair, and, not least, the economic effects of the crash - prompt her to revisit her mother’s history.

Enright’s alignment of the economic crash with the death of Gina’s mother, moreover, also references Luce Irigaray’s argument that the mythological death of the mother underwrites the culturally dominant narratives of Western culture. Irigaray writes,

> When Freud describes and theorizes, notably in *Totem and Taboo*, the murder of the father as founding the primal horde, he forgets a more archaic murder, that of the mother. [...] The culture, the language, the imaginary and the mythology in which we live at the moment... the whole of our western culture is based upon the murder of the mother. (36, 47)

Both the mother’s death and its effacement by patriarchal narratives highlight the ways that women’s histories have been systematically forgotten. Cahill argues that Enright “explore[s] and question[s] the dominant narratives that served to support the Irish state, particularly in relation to questions of genealogies and generations (maternal and otherwise), occluded histories, and the material bodies that are affected by such repressions” (19). Enright’s decision to locate Joan’s death at the precise moment of Ireland’s economic crash identifies the mother’s death not, or not only, as the foundation of Western cultural narratives, but as the very point at which they break down, signalling the need for non-self-destructive cultural narratives to take their place. Marianne Hirsh, in *The Mother/Daughter Plot*, suggests that

> The Oedipus story is the story of the son’s relation to father and mother, male and female origin. To find the story of the daughter and the mother, alternative mythologies - female counterparts to Oedipus - with equal power and resonance... can indeed be discussed. And they do suggest alternate patterns of development, as well as alternate narrative patterns. (28, emphasis in original)
While *The Spinning Heart* provides a damning critique of the dominant cultural narratives of patriarchy, Bobby remains trapped in the “flux” of his experience because he is unable to find such “alternate narrative patterns” to fill the void following the narrative collapse of the Crash. In *The Forgotten Waltz*, Gina is only able to resolve the traumatic flux of her own experience through the articulation of a specifically maternal genealogy.

The search for alternate narrative patterns is the driving force behind Gina’s narration of *The Forgotten Waltz*, moreover, and highlights another important difference in the way that Enright utilises the stylistic representation of trauma in *The Forgotten Waltz* and *The Gathering*. As Liam Harte suggests, Veronica’s narrative in *The Gathering* is allowed to remain uncertain, contradictory, and provisional precisely to emphasise that “testimonial acts are not inherently or facilely transformative, nor can they necessarily be taken to presage the complete reconstitution of personal subjectivity, let alone the social order of things. Recovery is never absolute; the past lingers beyond the reach of full understanding; mourning remains unresolved” (“Mourning Remains Unresolved” 202). While Veronica’s narrative is prompted by grief for her brother’s suicide, a direct result, the novel suggests, of his childhood abuse experience, Gina’s narrative is motivated not by a child of the *past*, but one who represents the future and the burden of responsibility. As the opening lines of the novel attest,

> If it hadn’t been for the child then none of this might have happened, but the fact that a child was involved made everything that much harder to forgive. Not that there was anything to forgive, of course, but the fact that a child was mixed up in it all made us feel that there was no going back; that it mattered… [W]e had to face ourselves properly, we had to follow through. (1)

In other words, Gina’s narrative explores what Ricoeur refers to as the “duty to remember,” which “consists not only in having a deep concern for the past, but in transmitting the meaning of past events to the next generation” (“Memory and Forgetting” 9). If traumatic experience, as Caruth suggests, “simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (*Unclaimed Experience* 5),
then *The Gathering* might be understood to engage the former imperative, and *The Forgotten Waltz*, the latter.

**Mothers, Memory, and Creative Mourning**

Following the various disruptions in Gina’s life which prompt her search for the aforementioned “alternate narrative patterns” for her experience, she and Seán are living together in the house she inherited from her mother. This house, the way it “hold[s] the past” (126), stands in for the traditional, inherited family values and narratives within which Gina and Seán, in their “non-traditional” family arrangement, find it difficult to make room for themselves. Gina notes how “odd” (127) it feels to sleep with Seán in any of these rooms from her childhood, so they only tentatively occupy this space: “We leave very little trace” (127), she observes; elsewhere she insists that they are “not living here” (122, emphasis mine), indicating the difficulty of establishing or articulating any kind of life within a family structure that is not suitable to present circumstances.

Critically, however, it is only through returning to her mother’s home, engaging with her maternal inheritance, that Gina is able to create space for herself and her new family. Enright’s vision of maternal inheritance is shaped by Melanie Klein’s psychoanalytic theories on the maternal role in childhood development. Enright has frequently remarked on the influence of Freudian thought in her writing, and especially the importance of Klein.\(^{37}\) Klein’s work is often considered a revision of Freud, particularly concerning the relative importance accorded to the father and mother; as Kristeva writes, “The modest place, at best, that Freudian theory accords to the mother encouraged his successors, including Klein, to be dogmatic in the other direction” (115).

Of particular relevance to *The Forgotten Waltz* is Klein’s theory of the reparative drive, or the mother’s role in enabling complex, creative thought. While Freud interprets adolescent development through the problematic idealisation of the father, Klein focuses instead on the infant’s relationship

\(^{37}\) Enright says in an interview, “I see how important my reading in psychoanalysis is to my work. I read all of Freud when I was in college... I am also quite interested in Melanie Klein. So the process of... remembering and forgetting and undoing the forgetting and re-remembering... these are great... questions” (Bracken and Cahill 30).
with the mother, or more specifically, with the mother’s breast. The breast, Klein contends, is conceived by the child as a *part-object* which is *good* when it satisfies the child’s desires, and *bad* when it is absent. It is the struggle of the child’s development to reconcile both the good breast and the bad breast to the single figure of the mother; Klein positions *envy*, the paradoxical position of simultaneously loving and hating the same object, as central to human development. The child’s separation from the mother - effected through the “awareness that the mother exists outside his field of vision... [and the] apprehen[sion of] his mother as a whole, ‘both good and bad, but at once one and different’ from him” (Kristeva 75) - is experienced as matricide, and thus engenders the *reparative drive*, or the desire to recreate the mother the child has lost. Klein understands this reparative response to symbolic matricide as “the origin of our capacity to think” (Kristeva 13):

> [T]he pain of loss, the suffering of mourning, and the reparative drives that overcome manic defences result in the reconstruction - that is, in the symbolization - of the internal and external lost object. It is thus that pain, suffering, and reparation are at the foundation of creativity and sublimation. (Kristeva 80)

In sum, this portion of Klein’s theory of development posits that the child must first adopt a complex and ambivalent understanding of the mother as Other, and then embark on a continually renewing project of reparation, creating and re-creating the mother in word and thought. Klein is critical, then, in understanding the role of the mother in Enright’s *The Forgotten Waltz*: Gina can only address her own problems of identity by revising her narratives about her mother, Joan. Moreover, this specifically maternal capacity for reparation - the ability to create and revise - is Enright’s vision of maternal inheritance; Gina learns, through revisiting her maternal relationship following Joan’s death, how to exercise the agency to create and revise the narrative structures of her own life.

Joan’s presence in Gina’s narrative serves primarily to establish her absence; as Joan has died before Gina begins her story, the narrative is punctuated with references to things Gina feels she ought to have noticed about her mother, but which she only sees through hindsight. Even within the narrative, Joan’s comings and goings are described with uncertainty: “You
would look around and find her gone, then just as mysteriously back again” (39). Drawing on the literary trope of the dead Irish mother who returns to haunt, Enright represents Joan as ghost-like even before death, an enigmatic and flickering presence which her children struggle to explain or understand; “Our mother spends such a long time in the bathroom,” Gina muses, “it used to make us anxious; wondering what she was up to in there, and when she would emerge” (45). After her death, Joan reappears at unexpected moments in Gina’s narrative, such as when Gina, as I mentioned earlier, observes without elaboration in the middle of her thoughts about Seán that “My mother is still dead” (158). Joan’s absences are made visible in the text to highlight the various ways her presence has been obscured or forgotten, because as Gina makes clear, Joan begins to disappear before she actually dies. As Gina notes early in her narrative, “With hindsight it was clear that there was something wrong with Joan long before my hotel encounter, that she hadn’t been entirely right for some time. But there were so many reasons we could not see it, not least of which was that she did not want us to” (38).

Part of Joan’s maternal invisibility is connected, at least in Gina’s narrative, to Joan’s concern with “appearances” (38), manifest in her “hundreds of rules about foundation, lipstick, about whether to conceal or reveal” (39). Gina elaborates on the vast difference between her mother’s public performances - “she worked hard to keep the show on the road” (38) - and the “downside” (38) her family would see in their own home. Rather than suggesting that Joan’s concern with appearances somehow masks her essential or “real” self, or even that Joan’s “rules” about makeup are prescriptive and internalised social conventions, Enright focuses on the ways that the pressures of performance, her need to live up to the cultural scripts she feels obligated to fill, fragment Joan’s identity in such a way that makes it difficult to narrate. For example, Gina describes Joan’s “addiction to the phone. And her avoidance of the phone. There were days she let it ring out, for reasons too painful and absurd to explain. It always worked both ways for

38 “Contemporary Irish writing... abounds in hauntings, silences that become faintly audible, and non-linear temporalities... These ‘hauntings’ tend to circulate around the figure of the mother in much contemporary Irish fiction... highlighting the problematic space she holds in Irish culture” (Cahill 21).
Joan” (38-9, emphasis mine). In Joan’s focus on appearances, she is always either “concealing” or “revealing” certain parts - “arms over forty, shoulders over fifty, the lines on your neck” (39) - but in this negotiation between private and public selves, Joan loses a coherent sense identity.

In addition to Joan’s fragmentation, the make-up and fashion rules that she feels so strongly about are also socially trivialised as women’s concerns. For example, when Gina attends her mother’s funeral, she praises Seán’s performance: “[H]e does it all perfectly. The country manners coming out in him... [he] knew the line between doing something sincerely and doing it well... The only ritual act of touching: hand on my shoulder... The whole sequence perfectly timed” (134). While Seán’s behaviour is recognised as scripted, she praises his ability to do it well. About her and her sister’s performance, however, she speaks rather sardonically: “We are the kind of woman who walks out of a funeral service talking about their foundation. ‘Is there a line?’ I said to Fiona, indicating the underside of my chin. Said it, and meant it” (134). She acknowledges in her tone that their behaviour would probably be construed as heartless, while Seán’s similarly artificial “public gesture” is attributed to good manners.

This sort of gendered trivialisation of appearances is also figured within the text as a kind of erasure, such as when Seán buys Gina a Hermès scarf. He buys her this impersonal sort of gift as part of the “mistress game” (103) they are playing, not acknowledging that Gina is “not a Hermès kind of girl” (103). She asks him afterward if he has “done this before” (104), and it turns out that he has, suggesting that Seán understands Gina only in generalized, archetypal terms. She is as interchangeable to him as the commodities which, arguably, Seán gives her in order to express his own financial largesse rather than anything about her own identity, anyway. It is not only Seán’s blindness, however, but a larger cultural narrative that trivialises and obscures women. When Gina remembers her mother, for example, she laments the fact that she could not see the extent of Joan’s mental illness through the distorting lens of her concern with appearances:

That winter, Joan complained of swelling in her feet, which, for our mother, was a terrible comedown, the row of shoes she had, going back thirty years, all forsworn for Granny boots... She got
supplements in the health food shop and complained of depression... and it never occurred to her, or to any of us, to do anything about it except mope and talk on the phone about kitten heels. (30)

The kitten heels, like the Hermès scarf, carry a deeper significance for these women that is obscured by their status as trivial, specifically feminine, material goods. The result of these dual processes of fragmentation and trivialisation of female identity is that: (1) Joan is socially pressured to “conceal” parts of her identity and “reveal” others, while (2) what is “on show” is devalued and dismissed. Moreover, Joan’s translation of her depression into remarks about her shoes recalls Gina’s similar behaviour at Joan’s funeral: unable to acknowledge her grief and anxiety, Gina discusses her foundation with Fiona. These women, therefore, lack the narrative resources to process and communicate the difficult emotions which, according to cultural scripts, ought to remain hidden.

If Joan is presented in the text as fragmented and misunderstood, then Gina’s task becomes the restoration and reinterpretation of her mother through narrative. Enright has written about how The Forgotten Waltz addresses the trivialisation of women:

There is an amount of mischief in The Forgotten Waltz. I found myself, after the success of my previous novel, The Gathering, in the surprising position of being able to tease, a little, the snobbery and sexism that exists in the literary world. I did this, and it gave me great pleasure, by writing a book set in an important historical moment (the collapse of the Irish banking system) but using an “unimportant” subject (the foolishness of a woman in love). (Enright, “The Forgotten Waltz”)

Enright’s “mischief” is to interrogate her readers’ expectations about what “counts” as important, and what ideological infrastructures stand behind such assumptions. In addition to these ethical imperatives of uncovering women’s histories, which links Enright’s work to that of Barry and O’Connor as discussed in chapter two, Enright explores in this novel the personal side of such ethical duties. Gina, as previously mentioned, feels unmoored from her present moment, and without a stable sense of identity, until she begins to
redress her maternal history. As Gina explains about her inability to see her mother’s depression, “I might have been able to listen better to my mother on the phone, or think better, but it was like I had gone to the edges of myself, and what was in the centre was anyone’s guess. Nothing, that is one answer” (30). As Klein’s reparative impulse makes clear, it is through the ongoing process of symbolically reconstituting the fragmented mother that psychological maturity is reached. Gina’s wish that she had listened and thought better about her mother’s story indicates her desire to revisit these narratives, while her remark about a fundamental loss of identity suggests a connection between her problematic maternal relationship and her present identity crisis. As I discussed in relation to Barry’s exploration of ethical witnessing in *The Secret Scripture*, this form of active listening would involve the mutual negotiation of narrative structures, the ethical witness thus allowing the speaker to say precisely that which has previously eluded speech. While Gina was unable to help her mother in this way during Joan’s life - because, as I mentioned, Gina is hampered by the same narrative deficiencies - she applies this framework of ethical witnessing to her memory work. In so doing, she imaginatively reconstructs what remains hidden and sees Joan as a whole person, in turn providing herself with a richer narrative framework for her own identity.

After Joan’s death, Gina moves into her mother’s house to sort through her belongings and maintain the house until it can be sold. During this time, Gina describes herself as occupying a liminal position: “We are in between things. We are living on stolen time” (122), she observes. She states on several occasions that she is “not living” (132) in the house, meaning that her residence there is intended to be temporary but suggesting also that her life is in some sense suspended. She also writes, “If you asked me my age, in the weeks after Joan died, I would not have been able to say. I seemed to shift from hour to hour around some heavy, unchanging thing. I felt ancient. I felt like a child” (129). While these statements echo the sense of temporal dislocation expressed in the opening chapter of the novel, they also suggest that Gina has become a ghost, haunting her mother’s house: in limbo, not quite “living,” and peculiarly ageless. While Joan was described as ghost-like during her life, Gina takes on this position herself following her mother’s
death. Walking around Joan’s house, Gina “go[es] about on her familiar track” (128), “step[ping] over some version of [her]self; a girl of four or six” (127) sitting on the stairs. In becoming her mother’s ghost, Gina imaginatively and empathetically engages with her mother’s perspective. Sorting through Joan’s material possessions enables a deeper meditation on her character, as Gina “wonder[s] what Joan saw when she looked at this faded plastic” (129).

Without Seán or Conor or her brother-in-law Shay there to rush the process - “Isn’t that what men are for? To tell you it’s only a skirt, for God’s sake... But the men left us to it” (130) - Gina, with occasional help from her sister Fiona, is able to deepen her understanding of Joan precisely through the “trivial” material objects that were used to obscure her in life.

It is also important to note that Enright’s empowering imagination of the liminal, and specifically of Gina as a ghost, is dramatically, and intentionally, at odds with the way Ryan imagines ghosting as a kind of impotence. I argued that Bobby and Frank become ghostly in Ryan’s novel in order to suggest that masculine culture’s conception of power as violence is actually disabling. Enright, on the other hand, revises the socially marginalised position into which masculine cultures assign women as a subversive means of regaining agency. If Enright complains that mothers in Irish fiction are “very often dead or left out of the narrative” (qtd. in Moloney and Thompson 61), then she turns that marginal position into one of agentic potential.

Furthermore, Enright’s description of the process of grief and narrative revision as a liminal state emphasises that Gina’s foray into “the past” is also equally tied to the present; she is not trying to recapture a lost past, but enter into an imaginative space outside of time in order to facilitate more productive connections between past and present. When Gina finds her mother’s old perfume bottles, for example, she focuses on the evocatively labelled Je Reviens, which translates from French as “I come again” or, according to the fragrance’s website, “I will return” (“History”). Referencing the ghostly overtones of the phrase in the context of Joan’s recent death, Gina smells the perfume and “tr[ies] to conjure her out of there” (132). Rather than trying to “hold on to these last moving molecules” (133), however, Gina observes that “the scent of perfume will always be the smell of
my mother leaving” (133), referencing Joan’s habit of spraying the perfume right before she left the house, but also suggesting that Gina’s engagement with her mother’s memory is more about coming to terms with her death in the present than returning to the past. Moreover, the use of the future tense - “will always be” - indicates that this process is not one that can ever be finally and satisfactory concluded. Narrative engagement with the past, then, is neither about returning to the past nor about “settling” it, but about the constant integration and balance of past and present.

While Gina describes her mother at the beginning of the novel as “mysterious” (39) in her absences and contradictions, she remarks at the end of the middle section of the novel, “There were times, in the last years of my mother’s life, when she could not walk out the front door, and on that day, moving from room to room, I think I understood why. Inside was unbearable, and outside beyond my imagining” (182). Through imaginatively inhabiting Joan’s perspective, Gina is able to reunite these fragmented components of her mother’s identity, and in so doing, she creates the temporal links that enable a more grounded sense of her own self. For instance, around the same time that Gina expresses this sentiment of “understanding” her mother, she is finally able to articulate her frustration with Seánn:

I just don’t know how to explain it. I thought it would be a different life... I don’t know what I expected... [T]here is nothing so wrong with any of this, but sometimes the intractability of him, perhaps of all men, drives me up the wall. It’s like they don’t know you exist unless you are standing there in front of them. (179-80, emphasis mine)

After Gina has made sense of her mother’s “mysteriousness,” she is able to understand her own experience within that same framework: she, too, has been fragmented and obscured through her relationships with men. This understanding allows Gina to renarrate her own story in more empowering terms. Immediately after this epiphany, Gina returns to the opening scene of the novel - “Seán in my sister’s garden in Enniskerry...” (180) - but with an important difference: “So the man who is standing at the bottom of the garden is just a little rip in the fabric of my life. I can stitch it all up again” (180, emphasis mine). This time, nothing is fated, inevitable, or outside her
control; Gina has discovered the agency to narrate and structure her own life story. Through situating her experience within a maternal genealogy, she no longer feels the temporal confusion expressed throughout the first part of the novel.

Maternal Genealogies and Remembering for the Future

In *Making Babies*, Enright’s book of autobiographical essays about motherhood, she writes in “Time” about the complexities of memory as she watches her daughter grow up:

> We moved when she was nearly eight months old, and it was another two weeks before I got round to stringing up the mobile for her again... She remembered it. In order to do this she needed to see three things: the mobile in the old flat, the new room without the mobile, the new room with the mobile. *Memory is not a single thing.* (71, emphasis mine)

This idea of memory’s multiplicity, bringing different temporalities to bear on one another, is mirrored in the maternal genealogy Enright traces. She notes in her essay that “[her] head begins” (65) in an early childhood memory of her grandmother’s house, which she discusses with her mother but which the rest of her family disbelieves, while simultaneously wondering what memories her own daughter might retain from the first time Enright left her with her own mother. These girlhood memories, formative of identity, gain their meaning in the intergenerational conversations by which they are situated, augmented, and affirmed.

In *The Forgotten Waltz*, Gina’s memory is also “not a single thing” - the memory project of “reclaiming” her mother’s stories cannot be complete until Gina turns her gaze from the past to the future, namely onto her step-daughter, Evie. While Gina’s revelation that she can “stitch up” the fabric of her own life has a conclusive feel, it is in fact only a turning point in the narrative: the novel ends, as it begins, with Evie. At the beginning of the novel’s third and final section, Gina observes of her relationship with Seán, “If love is a story we tell ourselves then I had the story wrong... Now, I feel if I can figure out what happened to Evie, I can tell the story properly” (189). This rearrangement of her narrative so that Evie occupies its centre echoes
the opening sentiments of the novel, in which Gina posits that Evie’s presence is a reminder of, and reason to assume, responsibility: “If it hadn’t been for the child then none of this might have happened... The fact that a child was affected meant we had to face ourselves properly, we had to follow through” (1). However, the final section of the novel is not Gina “facing herself” but facing Evie, the child who has haunted the periphery of her narrative despite her presence at its beginning; as Gina notes in her elaborate description of the first time she met Seán, for instance, “I can’t, for the life of me, recall what Evie looked like that day... Evie is just a kind of smudge in the picture, which is otherwise so clear” (10). In the final section of the novel, Gina applies the same interpretive framework she uses to make sense of her mother’s experience, to make sense of Evie. What this illustrates is that, as Ricoeur argues, the work of memory is not only a backward glance, but an orientation towards the future, as well. The maternal genealogy in which Gina situates herself is, crucially, a pathway into the past but with a trajectory into the future.

Enright suggests, moreover, through the way Gina traces her maternal genealogy, that the narratives used to structure that backward glance have a determining impact on the future. Kinga Földváry, for example, argues that Evie symbolises a future that is both a terrifying unknown and “a consequence of the sins of the past, of a generation that knows itself to be compromised, but cannot save its descendants from the looming sceptre of a disappointing future” (216). It is my argument, however, that while Evie is presented as mysterious for most of the novel, the final section suggests that she is made mysterious by the narrative structures through which she is understood, in much the same way that Frank, in Ryan’s novel, estranges his son and grandson through his reliance on a violent model of patriarchy.

As Gina begins the novel’s third section by telling Evie’s story, she notes at its end that what she has just told is not actually Evie’s story but Seán’s: “I know Evie’s story mostly from Seán’s point of view” (200), and “it is not the whole truth” (202). The most prominent aspect of Sean’s story is the medical narrative of Evie’s illness. She is introduced in the novel as a medical anomaly; as Gina notes, “there was... an amount of ambivalence about Evie, the sense of things unsaid. Even the doctors - especially the doctors - kept it
vague, with their, ‘Wait and see’” (1). Her “diagnosis” only reveals its own inadequacy; she “suffer[s] from benign rolandic epilepsy of childhood (BREC)” (200), though all this term signifies is that she has seizures with no discernible cause. As Gina puts it, “There was nothing wrong with her… except for this thing that was wrong with her” (197). The fact that these medical narratives fail to make sense of Evie is what makes her such a terrifying unknown. For example, Aileen is especially distraught about how Evie has been “changed” by both her seizures and the medications she takes to prevent them; she worries, “I want my little girl back… It’s not her anymore” (197). The uncertainty of her diagnosis has created an uncertainty about Evie’s identity. Gina indicates that this does not have to be the case, however. After one of her seizures, Evie tells her mother, “It’s just not me, you know?” (201). While Evie, at five years old, very well might have been parroting her mother’s concern that “it’s not her,” Gina interprets Evie’s statement differently: “Evie was saying that this might happen inside her, but she was outside it… It was just a bad thing that happened to her” (201). While Evie becomes mysterious to her parents by being forced into a medical narrative that fails to make sense of her, Gina calls attention to the parts of Evie’s identity outside the limits of that narrative.

Similarly, the way that Evie is located within a narrative of patriarchal inheritance also makes her strange – as Gina notes throughout the text, Evie has “her father’s too-beautiful eyes” (41), which makes Gina “uneasy” (41); she describes them as “spooky” (207). The uncanny replication of Seán’s eyes in Evie’s face signifies a troubling repetition of the past, not unlike the traumatic repetitions which characterise Ryan’s novel, but it is also connected to her “mysteriousness” or unknowability. For example, when Evie’s medical condition causes her to wander off in inexplicable fugue states that Gina describes as “disappearances” (213), Seán tries to find her but is unable to describe her to the police; “She has big eyes” (215) is all that he can offer. This emphasis on Evie’s patriarchal inheritance impedes Seán from finding her. Gina demystifies Evie when she begins to appreciate the differences between Seán’s and Evie’s eyes: “Seán’s pupils are ringed with a gold so pale it is nearly white. In Evie’s, the grey gives way to a burst of amber, quite intense” (228). Noticing the physical differences enables Gina to
see Evie as something more than an unsettling repetition of her father. Later she remarks that Evie “looks out on the world with his eyes, from a mind that is entirely her own” (229). Significantly, Gina changes the emphasis from Evie’s eyes as physical objects to the eyes as symbol of perspective, and with this shift from object to subject, with the recognition of Evie’s potential agency, Evie becomes much less unsettling.

As Gina steps into the maternal role for Evie in the novel’s final section, Evie forcefully reminds her, “You’re not my mother!” (224, emphasis in original). It is precisely in this moment, however, that Enright illustrates the novel’s vision of a uniquely maternal perspective. In emphasising Gina as not a mother, Enright questions and deconsecrates the “iconized mother figure in Irish literature” (Enright qtd. in Maloney and Thompson 61); Gina represents an alternative, but no less valid, means of fulfilling the maternal role. Moreover, through Gina’s position as both mother and “not mother,” Enright gestures towards the complexity that a maternal perspective enables. For example, when Gina accepts that she is not Evie’s mother, she remarks, “I cannot mirror her mood, or throw it back at her” (224), suggesting both a model of intergenerational replication already revealed in Ryan to be problematic, and the Lacanian “mirror stage” of childhood development whereby the child develops a coherent self-image through gazing at her reflection. While Gina does not participate in either kind of “mirroring,” Enright suggests that she actually fulfils a more meaningful role in Evie’s process of growth and maturity.

In her essay “Time,” Enright muses on the process of child development, “Of course the first difference between this and the other is not between… baby and ‘baby in the mirror’, but between one breast and… the other! If women had five teats, then mankind might, by now, be living on the moon” (69). She locates the beginning of complex thought and identity development in the child’s relationship with the maternal body, referencing Melanie Klein’s theory about the “good breast” and the “bad breast.” According to Klein, learning to reconcile the “good” and the “bad” within the one coherent mother-figure initiates the child’s ability for creative and complex thought; this process “bring[s] together the infant’s contradictory impulses, lead[ing] to a greater synthesis of the good and bad aspects of the
object. This means that people can be loved in spite of their faults and that the world is not seen only in terms of black and white” (Klein 255).

Significantly, this ability to reconcile the good and the bad, associated here with the maternal, is remarkably similar to the perspective that Triona offers in Ryan’s novel, acknowledging Frank’s ambivalent relationship with his son. Thus Gina, in her ambivalent position, enables this kind of complex thought which allows Evie to make sense of herself, symbolically transforming an uncertain and frightening future into one full of hope and promise.

It is under Gina’s ambivalent maternity, for example, that Evie’s “disappearances” become less mysterious. Gina relates Evie’s tendency to be “not where she was supposed to be” (213) to her predilection for liminal spaces: “Thresholds made her stall. All journeys were difficult, not for her, but for the people around her... *Come along, Evie.* So this was nothing more than another failure, on her part, to grow up” (213-4, emphasis in original). Evie’s fascination with pushing and questioning boundaries is also illustrated in the way she “followed each wall with the tips of her fingers... as though she was testing the edges of her world; finding the point where objects began and space stopped” (209). Gina describes Seán’s aversion to this kind of touching as an anxiety about “some idea of contamination; whether she would dirty things or be made dirty by them...” (209). While her physical disappearances obviously warrant a concern for Evie’s safety, the way Seán’s anxiety about “contamination” is described indicates an underlying unease with the liminal, with Evie’s resistance to easy categorisation or containment, mirroring the masculine conception of liminality as impotence I discussed previously in relation to Ryan’s novel. Gina, however, recognising from her experience in Joan’s house the agentic potential of liminal states, gives Evie freedom to explore these “in-between” spaces. Gina’s attitude toward Evie shifts, for example, in her approach to Evie’s age. At first, Gina asks repeatedly about Evie’s age, displaying a desire to temporally locate her and fix her in some respect; by the final section of the novel, she acknowledges that Evie could “pass for any age” (226), echoing her own feelings of agelessness as she clears out Joan’s home and indicating that Evie’s identity is, in some crucial respect, in flux. Later, when she is talking with Evie, Gina notes, “Evie is always correcting herself. This is because everything she says comes out in the wrong
order” (226), recalling the many revisions and temporal confusions within Gina’s own narrative. Gina, then, in allowing Evie to inhabit this liminal position, relinquishes her own anxieties about Evie despite not having a narrative resolution. When Gina tries to imagine what Evie will look like in the future, for example, she concedes to uncertainty, but without the anxiety: “I [try] to guess how she might morph over the years... but I can’t hold it: her changing features drift away from each other and her future face falls apart... Though she still has those lovely, watchful eyes” (223, emphasis mine). Referencing once again Evie’s eyes as symbolic of her subjectivity, Enright suggests that part of accepting the future’s uncertainty is recognising that, while it might be out of one’s own control, it is within the capable hands of others.

What makes this uncertainty acceptable, what allows Gina to be optimistic where everyone else is anxious about Evie, is that Gina grounds Evie in a maternal genealogy that is just open enough to enable exploration without being overdetermined and stifling. For example, when Gina takes Evie out shopping and Evie does not accept Gina’s maternal guidance (“You’re not my mother”), Gina brings in other maternal voices to guide their interactions; she not only asks Evie “What does your Mum say?” (224) a few times, but references her own mother, as well. When Evie decides on a perfume she likes, Gina notes that it is “so much the one my mother would have chosen” (222), recalling the earlier scene where Gina’s strongest memories of her mother are conjured from her perfume bottles. By drawing this connection between her mother and her step-daughter, Gina imagines the best possible way of “fulfilling” her mother’s memory; she says that she does not “want to hold on to these last moving molecules” (133) of her mother’s scent, and by passing on this maternal memory to Evie, she “lets go” of that legacy in a more fulfilling way than leaving it behind. After Evie tells the shop girl she’s “just having a free go” (222) of the perfume, for example, she and Gina “move on; me pushing the small of her back, both of us trying not to laugh” (222, emphasis mine). Gina is able to move on from her mother’s death and her initial awkwardness with her step-daughter by situating them both within a maternal genealogy. Moreover, the fact that Gina draws for Evie maternal connections with herself, Aileen, and Joan indicates that the strength of a
specifically maternal genealogy lies in its ability to cross family lines. Just as women are traditionally considered to join their husband’s family, so a maternal lineage enables making multiple connections between past and present; the future need not be considered a replication of the past, as in patrilineage.

In one of Gina and Evie’s final conversations in the novel, Enright illustrates how placing Evie within this maternal genealogy creates hope for the future. Gina observes, “It is strange to me that Evie does not remember herself as a child, and I do remember her” (225), but when Evie asks her, “What was I like?”, Gina responds, “You were very like yourself, actually” (228). Rather than telling Evie what she was like, as Evie has been narrated by others throughout the novel, Gina asks Evie what she remembers about her childhood, occasionally helping her to make sense of her memories, but most importantly offering her the opportunity to narrate herself. This brief exchange finally allows Gina to express optimism, rather than anxiety, about Evie’s future: “Evie will be all right, I think. Despite everything. Despite all our best efforts, you might say, the child has come good” (229). Where Evie has been made strange by others’ narratives, she “comes good” in the narrative that begins with Gina’s memories but which passes agency on to her at the right moment.

Evie’s transformation into the narrator of her own story, for instance, begins at a make-up counter. Just as Enright revises the masculine perception of liminality as impotence, so too does she revise the gendered trivialisation of make-up. While Joan is presented in the novel as bound by cosmetic “rules,” Gina observes women in the department store “turning their uncertainty into a stroke of this, a dab of that” (223); Enright writes cosmetics as an instrument in the larger project of self-construction. Moreover, while Gina describes her mother disappearing into a bathroom to complete her “mirror work” (45), Enright sets this scene of cosmetic artistry in a public setting, suggesting that wearing makeup need not be a form of erasure or concealment. Finally, the row ending with Evie’s declaration that Gina is “not [her] mother” (224) is the result of Gina telling her not to apply a “lipstick that is so purple it is almost black” (224); thus, Gina’s concession - letting Evie try all the makeup that breaks her mother’s “rules” - is her
fulfilment of a new kind of maternal role, indicating her desire that Evie not be obscured, fragmented, or limited by the rules that defined her own mother’s life.

Their final exchange, however, illustrates the other important part of this message, which is taking responsibility for the self-narratives one creates. When Gina apologises to Evie for her parents splitting up, she concludes, “I just think, it was going to happen one way or another. I mean, it could have been anyone, you know?” (230), echoing the sense of fate that Gina expresses throughout the novel as she experiences major life events happening “beyond her control.” Evie sets her right on this, however, concluding the novel: “But it wasn’t... It was you” (230), reminding Gina of the agency she fought to assume over her own life story. Critically, the shift from “anyone” to “you” suggests that one’s sense of identity actually develops out of this act of taking responsibility, through narrative, for the actions and decisions one makes. Enright indicates here that a maternal genealogy enables and passes on the agency to construct one’s own identity, whereas in a paternal genealogy, sons simply inherit identity from their fathers. Thus, Enright’s maternal genealogy is not only empowering for women, but also for society at large as it imagines a re-written future which escapes the perpetuation of the past without being completely unmoored from it.

This kind of relationship to the past is evidenced in the way that Gina negotiates an alternate narrative structure for her life from within the home she inherited from her mother. While this house initially felt awkward and inappropriate for her new life with Seán, it begins to feel more comfortable when they renovate the spare room for Evie, buying her a duvet and a rug (164-5) and remaking the room to suit its new purpose. This revision of inherited structures recalls both Bobby’s proposed renovation of the family home in The Spinning Heart, as well as Joan’s own creative acts of reshaping the house to suit her own needs - Joan had “painted the rooms in those floating northern colours between blue and green... She did it herself, the lines were not quite true” (128). This act of revision stands in stark contrast to Bobby’s pathologised desire to burn his father’s inheritance - throwing out the problematic narrative structures of the past - or even Gina’s plan with Conor to buy something “entirely new,” which, as I have already established,
was similarly problematized. Remembering in post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, in other words, requires a creative engagement with the past. If the experience of communal trauma highlights, in retrospect, the “fault lines” within Ireland’s traditionally dominant cultural narratives, then both Ryan and Enright propose a revision of those narratives through the creative work of memory, rather than their destruction or replacement.
CHAPTER 4

“TO KNOW THIS, AND IN SHAME TO TURN AWAY”: INSTITUTIONAL ABUSE AND THE ETHICS OF WITNESSING

Maybe instead of strings it’s stories things are made of, an infinite number of tiny vibrating stories; once upon a time they all were part of one big giant superstory, except it got broken up into a jillion different pieces, that’s why no story on its own makes any sense, and so what you have to do in a life is try and weave it back together, my story into your story, our stories into all the other people’s we know, until you’ve got something that to God or whoever might look like a letter or even a whole word...

Paul Murray, *Skippy Dies*

I felt the guilt of it but could do nothing.
John Boyne, *A History of Loneliness*

Introduction

In the opening scene of his 2010 novel *Skippy Dies*, Paul Murray writes Skippy’s sudden and unexpected death during an eating race with his best friend Ruprecht at Ed’s Doughnut House. As he struggles to take his final breaths, Skippy “keeps gurgling, like he’s trying to tell Ruprecht something” (4), until he decides instead to write out his final words in raspberry syrup on the restaurant floor: “TELL LORI” (4). When Ruprecht fails to make sense of this, another student helpfully clarifies for him: “Tell Lori he loves her!” (5). Once his message has been understood, Skippy smiles and breathes his last.

The motivating factor in Skippy’s death, which is later discovered to have been a lethal overdose, is the sexual abuse he suffers at the hands of his swimming coach, Tom Roche, at an overnight swim meet. Although Skippy’s experience of abuse is not revealed until the last of the novel’s three sections, Murray suggests from the beginning that the novel ought to be read in light of Ireland’s institutional abuse scandal, from the bare suspicions ignited by the unexplained death of a boarding student at a Catholic boys’ school, to more overt references to the “relentless stream of scandals” (94).
surrounding the Catholic Church in Ireland. Throughout the first two sections of the novel, then, Daniel Juster, called Skippy by his friends, struggles to deal with his repressed memories of abuse. As a coping mechanism, he takes the prescription pain killers originally given to him by Tom to facilitate the sexual assault and quell his panic thereafter.

School officials register Skippy’s ‘odd behaviour’ before his death, ranging from vomiting in class (92) to playing frisbee by himself (343). While the reader understands these behaviours as reactions to a variety of circumstances in Skippy’s life - including the assault and his subsequent drug usage, but also his mother’s terminal illness, his new relationship with Lori, and his rivalry with the school bully Carl - Seabrook’s acting principal Greg Costigan remains baffled. He gives Howard Fallon, Seabrook’s history teacher, the responsibility of investigating Skippy’s odd behaviour and acting as a kind of mentor: “I’d like you to have a word with him. ... It doesn’t have to be anything formal. Just a quick chat. Take his temperature. If he’s got some sort of issue, set him straight” (93-4). Alongside Skippy’s struggle to process his traumatic experience, then, the novel also presents Howard’s attempts to understand and to translate Skippy’s embodied reactions to that experience. In the final section, which takes place after Skippy’s death, the novel follows the various attempts to remember Skippy, from the grief and trauma of Skippy’s closest friends to Seabrook’s cover-up of the abuse, and Howard’s uneasy positioning between these two poles of remembering and intentional forgetting.

Evidently, then, the opening depiction of Skippy’s attempt to communicate just before his death encapsulates the novel’s larger thematic concerns with the challenges both of testimony and of witness. Just as Skippy’s gurgling speech and cryptic scrawling gesture to the “crisis of witnessing” (Felman and Laub ii) which leaves trauma victims unable to testify to their experience, Ruprecht’s inability to understand Skippy’s message, as well as his initial failure even to recognise that “Skippy has been on the floor for almost a minute now” (Murray 1), indicates the profound difficulties in witnessing another’s trauma. Murray expresses the most significant challenge to witnessing, however, when Ruprecht runs outside the restaurant to await the belated arrival of emergency services. In his grief,
“The universe at this moment appears to him as something horrific, thin and thready and empty; it seems to know this, and in shame to turn away” (6, emphasis mine). Ruprecht’s failed attempt to hold the universe to account for Skippy’s death, and the shame that serves to avert its gaze from the atrocity altogether, echoes the way that Irish society has been implicated in recent abuse scandals; Mary Raftery and Eoin O’Sullivan identify one of the major sources of grief for survivors of child abuse as “the decades of disbelief, denial and indifference which they as adults had faced at the hands of Irish society” (10). As such, the novel is not primarily about traumatic memory but the social responsibilities and ethical challenges of witnessing trauma.

Skippy’s teacher Howard – as well as Odran Yates, the protagonist of John Boyne’s A History of Loneliness, which I will address in section two of this chapter – functions primarily as witness to the psychological development of the perpetrator as well as the troubling, though often unrecognised, signs of the victim’s abuse.

In John Boyne’s A History of Loneliness, Odran is a Catholic priest who complicates, without entirely upsetting, the stereotypically negative implications of that position in a modern Ireland. While Odran is a mild-mannered spiritual advisor with humble and admirable aspirations – “All I ever wanted was to be a good priest, to help people somehow” (39) – he has also turned a blind eye to the abuse going on around him, including the numerous instances of child sexual abuse committed by his close friend of several decades, Father Tom Cardle. Odran struggles to make sense of his own complicity through his silence and wilful ignorance. The novel, structured as a series of flashbacks recounted in non-chronological order, represents Odran’s memory work as he questions his recollections of the critical moments of his life, from his childhood memories of the deaths of his father and brother, his tumultuous years in the seminary, to his current occupation as teacher and librarian at Terenure College, a Catholic boys school in South Dublin (where Boyne himself was educated (Mahony)).

As witnesses, Howard and Odran act as stand-ins for the Irish public, who, since the 1990s, have witnessed overwhelming evidence about the child abuse which has historically proliferated in the institutions run by the Catholic Church and the Irish State. The numerous and extensive State- and Church-
sponsored public inquiries into abuse allegations\textsuperscript{39} were largely instigated in response to media reporting, and subsequent public outrage, about child abuse scandals. The most notable example is the 1999 RTÉ documentary \textit{States of Fear}, which prompted a public government apology and the establishment of a commission into Ireland’s industrial and reformatory schools whose investigations were to continue for a decade (Ferriter 737). In addition to the many journalistic exposés on Ireland’s institutional abuse\textsuperscript{40}, there has also been an explosion of memoirs and novels exploring the topic.\textsuperscript{41} Despite the corrective function these works have fulfilled in promoting awareness of an issue that has for too long been kept silent, Emilie Pine has argued that the “anti-nostalgic” portrayal of institutional abuse in most of these works - they depict “a world that is now gone” (43) and offer a “one-dimensional representation of the religious orders as inherently wicked” (44) - “allows contemporary audiences to distance themselves from the implications of what they are seeing” (48). While these “anti-nostalgic” works address problems of the past, they fail to connect these issues to ongoing problems in the present.

While this chapter addresses novels about child sexual abuse in a Catholic boys’ school (Murray) and committed by a parish priest (Boyne), it is important to note that the social context for abuse of the vulnerable in Ireland is much wider, including the physical, emotional, and sexual abuse of women and children within the full range of institutions comprising Ireland’s “architecture of containment” (Smith), as well as the comparable scenes of abuse happening within the home. I mention this here not only to address the

\textsuperscript{39} Including the Ferns Inquiry (2005); the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse Report, also known as the Ryan Report (2009); the Commission of Investigation Report into the Catholic Archdiocese of Dublin, or the Murphy Report (2009); and the Commission of Investigation Report into the Catholic Diocese of Cloyne, or the Cloyne Report (2010) (McLoone-Richards 397).

\textsuperscript{40} For example, see the following documentary films: \textit{Dear Daughter} (1996), \textit{Sex in a Cold Climate} (1998), \textit{Suing the Pope} (2002), \textit{Cardinal Secrets} (2002), and \textit{Deliver Us From Evil} (2006); as well as \textit{Suffer the Little Children} (1999), the follow-up book to Raftery’s \textit{States of Fear}.

\textsuperscript{41} Some of the more well-known memoirs are Paddy Doyle’s \textit{The God Squad} (1989); Patrick Galvin’s \textit{Song for a Raggy Boy} (1990), adapted into a film of the same name in 2003; Patrick Touher’s \textit{Fear of the Collar} (1991); and, more recently, Colm O’Gorman’s \textit{Beyond Belief} (2009). Novels include Bernard MacLaverty’s \textit{Lamb} (1980); Gerard Mannix Flynn’s \textit{Nothing to Say} (1983); Patrick McCabe’s \textit{The Butcher Boy} (1992), adapted into a film of the same name in 1997; and Edna O’Brien’s \textit{In the Forest} (2002).
similar trends in media representations of domestic child abuse\textsuperscript{42}, but more importantly to stress that this abuse is a systemic problem in the broadest sense - it is not only a function of Ireland’s institutions but of the social and religious ideologies underpinning them - and, as such, a wide range of stories \textit{needs} to be told in order to address the full scope of the issue. Abuse of the vulnerable, in institutions and in homes, is about so much more than “paedophile priests.”

Arguably, however, media interest in institutional abuse is beginning, if not to wane, then certainly to change. Mirroring Boyne’s observation that “criminal cases involving priests were receiving less attention” in the news as a “new set of national obsessions... had taken over” (455), other media engagements have similarly decreased in frequency; as Mick Heaney somewhat caustically notes, “the market for ‘misery lit’ has peaked” (“Assault on the Senses”). While there have certainly been few novels written on the topic since the publication of the Ryan Report in 2009, those which have emerged consciously redirect and complicate the discussion. Addressing the problematic anti-nostalgia of earlier works, these novels encourage contemporary audiences to rethink their assumptions: the abuse in \textit{Skippy Dies}, for example, happens in a recognisably modern world and the abuser is not a priest but a lay teacher, while \textit{A History of Loneliness} offers an uncomfortably empathetic portrayal of a Catholic priest who enabled child abuse.\textsuperscript{43} Most notably, however, these novels eschew the “misery lit” generic guidelines in favour of the perhaps surprising mode of humour. \textit{Skippy Dies}, like Kevin Maher’s \textit{The Fields} (2013), explores child sexual abuse within the contours of a comic \textit{bildungsroman}. \textit{A History of Loneliness} is punctuated with Odran telling, and hearing, awkward jokes which highlight the characters’ struggles for successful communication. And Kevin Holohan’s \textit{The Brothers’}

\textsuperscript{42} Including, to name a few of the most well-known novels, John McGahern’s \textit{The Dark} (1965), Jennifer Johnston’s \textit{The Invisible Worm} (1991), Roddy Doyle’s \textit{Paddy Clarke Ha Ha Ha} (1993), and Anne Enright’s \textit{The Gathering} (2007).

\textsuperscript{43} Boyne writes about the necessity, as well as the difficulty, of complicating these stereotypes in the pursuit of empathy: “And to my astonishment, I began to feel something that I had never expected to feel towards a priest: empathy. ... It would be very easy to write a novel with a monster at the centre of it, an unremitting paedophile who preys on the vulnerable without remorse. The challenge for me was to write a novel about the other priest, the genuine priest, the one who has given his life over to good works and finds himself betrayed by the institution to which he has given everything. ... Their pain, and their compassion for the victims of abuse, moved me and forced me to confront my own prejudices” (“The Catholic Priesthood”).
"Lot" (2011) treats institutional abuse through the lens of comedic satire. While reviewers might be sceptical of this rhetorical strategy - Christina Hunt Mahony questions of Boyne’s novel “why we’ve ventured so far into Father Ted territory in a book that sets out to cover very different ground” (“New novel”) - the fact that such humour represents a new trend in Irish writing on institutional abuse indicates that, while the “misery lit” genre might have run its course, the content of this conversation has not reached its conclusion.

In fact, given that these novels’ use of humour is a direct response to the overabundance of “misery lit” which has come before them, it stands to reason that one of the ways these writers approach the issue of abuse is to consider how extensive media coverage of Ireland’s abuse scandals has changed the way that such testimonies are produced and witnessed. As Frosh and Pinchevski argue, the ethics of witnessing have changed through the proliferation of mass media: “If anything, the question today is not how violence takes place without us knowing about it, but how violence takes place when it is almost impossible not to know about it” (7, emphasis in original). It is this question which Murray and Boyne take up in their fiction. The primary critique of contemporary novels about Ireland’s history of institutional child abuse seems to be that everything that needs to be said on the topic has been well and truly covered; one particularly scathing review of Skippy Dies suggests that it “is the latest and most egregious example of the overexposure of child abuse in recent Irish fiction. ... Raking over child abuse for the sake of a story devalues the subject. ... [T]he truth is so devastating there will be no room for fiction” (Heaney, “Assault on the Senses”). However, I argue that Murray and Boyne’s novels, which think through the challenges of witnessing rather than simply “rake over” one more story of child abuse, move the public conversation in important new directions.

One of the innovative strategies Murray uses to engage with the ethics of witnessing is to situate the reader as a particular kind of witness. While witnessing in the sense of receiving “reports by others about the events they have experienced” (Frosh 50) is considered by some to be “one of the central communicative modes of modern media” (Frosh 51), and hence the reader-as-witness is itself not a unique trope, Murray’s depiction of witnessing is distinctive. Rather than witnessing the events in a chronological, omnipotent
narrative, or receiving a first-person account of those events, Murray’s reader witnesses Skippy’s death at the doughnut shop and is then catapulted backwards in time several weeks; the reader-as-witness here performs the important memory work of looking through “the past” for clues which might explain Skippy’s death. Witnessing in *Skippy Dies* thus bears critical similarities to Peters’ conception of witnessing as “repentance: retroactively caring about what we were once careless of. A later moment revisits an earlier one in which consciousness was not fully awake” (40). As such, Murray suggests that witnessing is a messy process which requires not a passive *seeing* of events but an active *re-vision*.

This re-vision, in Murray’s novel, takes place primarily through a critical awareness of the narrative schemata structuring our perceptions and memories of events. As Nünning suggests, “witnessing... is always already mediated in various ways, shaped not only by individual and cultural memory but also by genre conventions... by the stories we tell each other in order to... make sense of both our lives and the events we witness everyday” (109). In focusing on such narrative schemata, Murray challenges the overly simplistic accusations which blame the Catholic Church for Ireland’s history of institutional abuse; far from exonerating the Church, however, he traces the problem back to its narrative frameworks. During the events of the novel, for example, Seabrook’s leadership is transitioning from the Holy Paraclete Fathers to a lay principal, the economics teacher Greg Costigan (Murray 13). In an imagined “acceptance speech,” Greg narrates the transition as follows:

> Although the Paracletes may be gone, for all intents and purposes, their values will live on. Maybe the men upholding them will wear a suit and tie instead of a dog collar... and maybe ‘common business model’, not ‘God’, will be the name of the bridge they use to bring communities together. But although appearances may change, the values themselves remain the same. (607-8)

Murray not only suggests that Ireland’s business and religious communities share a particular ideological framework; he also repeatedly and satirically links “team sports” together with this set of values, such as when one of the priests suggests that Skippy’s “Attitudinal Problems” (409) might be addressed
through joining the rugby team: “God, in his wisdom, has supplied us with the means to avoid these deadly traps of the spirit, in the form of the wonderful gift of sport” (411). In tracing these similarities, Murray suggests that Irish society in general is informed by a particular narrative logic, one ostensibly based on values but actually predicated on the conservative maintenance of Ireland’s social order. This particular narrative framework, as I will elaborate below, enforces close adherence to a strict social script, a process which disables agency, complicates responsibility, and poses serious impediments to ethical witnessing.

Boyne utilizes many of the same rhetorical strategies as Murray for structuring his discussion of ethical witnessing, the most notable examples including: a protagonist with an archival occupation (Howard as history teacher, Odran as librarian) to signal a preoccupation with practices of remembering, ordering, and “settling” the past; repeated references to the First and Second World Wars (Murray and Boyne, respectively) as a means of understanding child abuse as a large scale social trauma; a sustained and, as I have mentioned, somewhat unusual reliance on humour for the representation of such a horrific and recent tragedy; and blurred boundaries between the Catholic Church and a secular, capitalist economy in order to implicate Ireland’s larger social frameworks for the scope and longevity of Ireland’s child abuse problem. What Boyne’s novel adds to this discussion is the impact of mass media, both in the way that media outlets structure social conversations, and also in the way that media systems position their audiences as passive, analytical, and occasionally empathetic consumers of news, a construct which Boyne suggests has come to shape the individual psyche even outside the event of media engagement. The implications of media witnessing not only help Boyne to answer the question of why such tragedies continue to happen despite their media coverage, but also enable him to reconceptualise social responsibility, taking advantage of the media witness’s privileged and “detached” position in order to imagine new avenues for social intervention.
Paul Murray’s *Skippy Dies*

**Developing Agency through Game Narratives and Scientific Narratives**

Insofar as *Skippy Dies* is concerned with both Skippy’s memories of traumatic abuse and the ways that Skippy is mourned and memorialised after his death, the novel contrasts the usefulness of various memory practices in recovery from trauma. Central to this process of recovery, as suggested within scientific and popular discourses alike, is the recuperation and exercise of individual agency. Judith Herman Lewis, for example, writes that “[t]he first principle of recovery [from trauma] is the empowerment of the survivor. She must be the author and arbiter of her own recovery” (133). However, the exercise of agency is complicated where it concerns children, whose capacities for agency and personal responsibility are still being developed. In fact, one of the primary dilemmas within the emerging field of childhood ethics, as Carnevale et al. have identified (521), concerns two conflicting approaches to the development of the child as agent. The “best interests” approach, acknowledging the child’s limited capacity for “moral reasoning or assuming full responsibility for their choices and conduct” (512), argues that, in order for the child to “benefit from the greatest possible outcomes within their respective circumstances” (512), a child’s parent or guardian ought to act on behalf of the child. Alternatively, a growing recognition of the child as agent maintains the importance that “[c]hildren’s choices and actions [be] recognised” (519), allowing the child to make decisions for him- or herself. At this intersection of the child’s development of agency and recovery from trauma, Murray’s novel explores two alternative frameworks governing the interaction of children and adults whereby the child (ostensibly) develops the capacity for agency, and thus the capacity for healthy remembering. As a kind of shorthand, referring to the contexts in which these frameworks are developed within the novel, I will refer to these alternative models as the game narrative and the scientific narrative, a terminological decision I will elaborate below.

The novel develops these two frameworks as alternatives through the way that Skippy, in the first two sections, attempts to process his repressed traumatic memories of abuse, in contrast with the strategies used by
Ruprecht, in the final section, to recover from the trauma of watching Skippy die. Throughout the novel, each of these boys is characterised by a singular obsession which in turn shapes his perception of the world around him: Skippy spends most of his free time playing *Hopeland*, an adventure role-playing video game (RPG), while Ruprecht is a devoted follower of Professor Hideo Tamashi, a Stanford physicist with ground-breaking insights into multi-dimensional string theory and the origins of the universe. Also, crucially, each of these boys uses a memory strategy based on these obsessions to process his trauma: Skippy finally recovers his memory of abuse while playing his RPG (449-57), while Ruprecht develops a scientific experiment combining string theory with Victorian spiritualism as a way of commemorating Skippy (620-1).

While both Skippy’s game narrative and Ruprecht’s scientific narrative provide a structuring framework for developing the agency required to construct a memory narrative, several key differences in these frameworks illustrate the distinction between a problematic and an ethical approach to memory.

Before I address how these frameworks are employed within Murray’s novel, I need to clarify my choice of terms. First of all, there is debate about the extent to which either games or scientific discourse can be considered as narrative. While the debate about the role of narrative in scientific discourse largely mirrors Hayden White’s pioneering claims about the role of narrative in historiography⁴⁴ - Sheehan and Rode write, for example, that “when we study scientific texts as narratives… we see the scientific discourse not as an expression of eternal truth but as a story about what the scientist observed and what that scientist thought it should mean” (356) - the role of narrative in games is somewhat more contested. In the nascent field of games studies, for example, there exists, as Henry Jenkins describes it, a “blood feud... between the self-proclaimed ludologists, who [want] to see the focus shift onto the mechanics of game play, and the narratologists, who [are] interested in studying games alongside other storytelling media” (118). The primary

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⁴⁴ See White’s “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” wherein he argues that historians bestow meaning and significance in the act of narrativising their material: “Common opinion has it that the plot of a narrative imposes a meaning on the events that comprise its story level by revealing at the end a structure that was immanent in the events all along. What I am trying to establish is the nature of this immanence in any narrative account of real events” (23, emphasis in original).
critique of such ludologists is that the interactivity of games prohibits them from being properly considered as narratives: “Interactivity is almost the opposite of narrative: narrative flows under the direction of the author, while interactivity depends on the player for motive power” (Adams 1999, qtd. in Jenkins 118).

While recent research on hypertexts and other forms of interactive media might question such a simplistic demarcation between interactivity and narrative, I will frame my critique from the theoretical perspective of cognitive narratology. Cognitive narratology “encompasses the nexus of narrative and mind not just in print texts but also in face-to-face interaction,” positing that “stories function as... a means for making sense of experience—a resource for structuring and comprehending the world” (Herman, “Cognitive Narratology”). Narrative functions in such a capacity through frames (or schemata): “Frames are general concepts that we employ as brackets or boundaries around experiences in order to be able to understand them better. ... Frames provide conventional, default knowledge, which narratives can activate and then complicate by deviating from the standard models” (Scholes et. al. 290).

In the relationship between frames and individual experiences scripted according to such frames, the interactive potential of narrative becomes clear; individuals learn, engage with, and revise social narratives in the construction of their personal narratives. Moreover, this cognitive narratological understanding of interactive narratives maps nicely onto one of the ways that Jenkins imagines the relationship of games and narratives: “one can imagine the game designer as developing two kinds of narratives - one relatively unstructured and controlled by the player as they explore the game space and unlock its secrets; the other prestructured but embedded within the mise-en-scene awaiting discovery” (126). In other words, the game provides a pre-scripted “frame” within which the player’s individual narrative is constructed, mirroring to a certain extent

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45 For example, Rob Cover argues that interactivity complicates rather than negates narrative possibilities: “[R]ecent theorizations of interactivity work to reconceive the author-text-audience relationship... [s]uggesting that all media forms - historical and contemporary - can be reconceptualized in light of recent understandings of interactivity” (139).
the ways that scientific experiments construct meaning in relation to larger conceptual theories.46

The critical differences between these two frameworks are the type of collaboration each system enables and the qualities of the narrative under construction, both of which considered together inform the degree of agency afforded to the individual. Within the game narrative, the player collaborates with the game designer in the completion of a narrative whose parameters have already been firmly established. As Papazian argues, “[W]hile the player has choice and agency, the choices and degree of agency are limited by... the text’s internal narrating components” (456); or, as Simons puts it, “the courses of action open to the player are scripted into the design of the game” (“Narrative, Games, and Theory”). Whereas collaboration in the game narrative is thus something like the relationship of the puppet master and his vessel, collaboration within the scientific narrative is characterised throughout the novel as an equitable partnership, from Professor Tamashi “holding an online roundtable” (Murray 155) to discuss the implications of his ground-breaking new theory, to the field of Victorian spiritualism as a “concerted scientific effort to undo the final mystery of life after death” (586, emphasis mine). When Ruprecht is inspired by Oliver Lodge’s contributions to the occult sciences and decides to take up the mystery himself, he describes the moment “as if [Lodge] had reached across the decades and tapped him on the shoulder” (585-6), indicating his position as co-author of this scientific narrative.

Furthermore, while the game narrative has already been scripted in advance and the player experiences only the illusion of agency in the way it plays out - “The trick of the trade of game design is indeed to make the player believe she is in control” (Simons, emphasis in original) - the theories constructed through a scientific narrative are endlessly negotiated and amended based on new contributions. As one of the other teachers at

46 Through interactions with the observable world in the form of controlled experiments (similar to the mechanics of game play), the scientist is able to extrapolate natural laws of the universe, or “principles that are taken to be universally applicable” (Lafferty and Rowe 524), mirroring the rules of the game. Scientists then use these laws as building blocks in the construction of a theory, which is a more comprehensive explanation of some aspect of the natural world (narrative), or “a set of ideas, concepts, principles, or methods used to explain a wide set of observed facts” (Lafferty and Rowe 592, emphasis mine).
Seabrook derisively observes, “Every couple of years some scientist comes along with the [new] grand unified theory that supposedly ties everything together” (137). Or, in response to changing cultural priorities, the end goal of the narrative itself might be revised, as happened when Victorian “attempts to speak to the dead” (586) were repurposed and “scientists turned away from the spectral, confined their attentions to this side of the veil” (587), a recalibration which led to the development of “almost all twenty-first century communication technology” (586). As such, scientific narratives, while functionally authoritative as grand narratives explaining the universe, contain the possibility for progress through revision.

**Remembering through Game Narratives**

While Skippy’s death is made known to the reader through the novel’s title and opening pages, his experience of sexual abuse is only revealed much later in the novel, through a traumatic flashback that Skippy suffers while playing his RPG. Immediately preceding Skippy’s flashback, he is preparing to encounter the third and final demon of his quest when it suddenly appears before him with an all too familiar face:

> You wish Coach would stop looking at you, out of the screen. But he doesn’t stop. … You pick up the controller where you’ve dropped it at your feet. Maybe you can just run past him? But without appearing to move he blocks your way. … You let out a cry, lunge at him with the sword. … The blows have no effect, he keeps coming forward. (452-3)

Following this disturbing hallucination, Skippy remembers the sexual assault and shortly thereafter overdoses on prescription painkillers.

This relationship of the child’s game to the horrors of traumatic recall evokes Freud’s description of the game of “fort-da,” in which a child re-enacts in play the trauma of his mother’s departure: “In the case of children’s play we seemed to see that children repeat unpleasurable experiences… [so] that they can master a powerful impression far more thoroughly by being active than they could by merely experiencing it passively” (Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle” 35, emphasis mine). When Freud compares this child’s game to the flashbacks of the trauma victim - “He is obliged to repeat the
repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, remembering it as something belonging to the past” (18, emphasis in original) - he suggests that traumatic experiences are replayed by the subconscious mind in an attempt to regain mastery, or conscious control, over their content.

While Skippy’s experience of game play certainly exhibits characteristics of the development of agency and the “working through” of trauma - he observes at one point while playing that he has “done this part so many times it’s stopped being scary” (Murray 108) - the moment of his traumatic flashback as it converges with the game is particularly and troublingly marked by the experience of passivity. As he remembers “the Door” (454) of the hotel room in which he was molested, Skippy disengages from consciousness:

[You know what’s going to happen but it’s like you’re locked into the movements, like you’re watching yourself. ... Do you understand now, Skippy? You cannot run any longer. You’ve come fifteen trillion light years to the very place you started from. That’s the shape of the universe, that’s called the Way It Is, it’s a door that pulls you like a black hole into the future: and everything that promises to take you away from it, a girl, a game, a portal, these are no more than stray gleams and sparkles of light, shining at you from somewhere you will never be able to go. (454)

While game frameworks theoretically offer the potential for developing agency, the game narrative in Skippy’s imagination has become warped into a nightmare script pulling him helplessly towards a “black hole” of despair. This description is a common enough representation of the traumatised psyche, but Murray’s particular point here is that the conceptual tools at Skippy’s disposal have failed him. As I will demonstrate below, I argue that this emphasis on the failed game narrative constitutes Murray’s critique of Ireland’s social and religious infrastructures which promote conformity at the expense of agency.

Claire Lynch notes that “Skippy’s world view is informed more generally by the grammar of videogames” (Cyber Ireland 158), although it is
not only Skippy who sees the world this way; Murray also draws distinct comparisons between the RPG and Seabrook as an institution. Beyond the aesthetic parallels established in the initial descriptions of both the aging school building and the game world - Seabrook’s “Our Lady’s Hall,” presided over by “the Virgin with the starry halo,” is held up by “pocked and crumbling” walls and adorned with “generations of cobwebs” (87); Skippy’s game avatar descends the “crumbling steps” into a similarly cobwebbed “Great Hall,” once ruled by a princess who appears to “sparkle like a far-off star” (108) - the common game narrative structure is made explicit when Greg Costigan explains the school’s purpose as follows: “Here at Seabrook we take care of each other. Play by the rules, listen to your captain, and we’ll always find a place on the team for you” (489, emphasis mine). In a prosaicised take on “saving the realm,” Greg articulates the end-goal of the school as “to give [students] the best possible training... to get up there on the world stage and duke it out with the best of them” (90). Most significantly, Murray describes the process of growing up as the navigation of a progressively narrowing path, a process he evocatively terms “de-dreamification,” which mirrors the RPG player’s progress through a series of doors within the game world:

Now, with every day that passes, another door seems to close...
until as the weeks go by and the doors - GET BITTEN BY SNAKE, SAVE WORLD FROM ASTEROID, DISMANTLE BOMB WITH SECONDS TO SPARE - keep closing, you begin to hear the sound as a good thing, and start closing some yourself, even ones that didn’t necessarily need to be closed. (25, emphasis in original)

While this passage initially reads as a sort of wistful nostalgia for the illusion of endless possibilities in childhood prompted by the dull requirements of day to day adult life - “weekend trips to the DIY superstore to buy floor-tiles” (25) - it also gestures to the problematic over-scriptedness of the game narrative endorsed by Seabrook.

Although a common and necessary characteristic of both RPGs and responsible childcare models is the balance of agency with an authorial or parental guidance, Murray suggests that Seabrook’s game narrative is so heavily tilted toward the “guidance” end of the spectrum that the possibility of any real agency is ultimately a fantasy, one which, as I will elaborate
below, actually creates the conditions for abuse. This over-scripted game narrative is best represented in the novel through the question and response structure of classroom lessons. As Ruprecht, Seabrook’s star pupil, sees it, “the universe [is] a series of questions posed to its inhabitants, with the answers waiting like prizes for the boy lucky and diligent enough to find them” (521). This assessment gestures both to the ways that institutional frameworks inform students’ larger worldviews, and also how the game narrative operates: the answers represent the object of the student’s “quest,” which he finds by learning and repeating the pre-existing script. As with Skippy’s RPG, the interactive element in this narrative provides only the illusion of agency, as the entire script, though hidden from the student, has been prepared in advance.

The first section of the novel begins with several such classroom scenes of question and response, though this paradigm is revealed as problematic in Father Green’s classroom, when he interrogates Skippy about sexually suggestive song lyrics, culminating in the question, “Are you a virgin, Mr Juster?” (74). As the narrator observes, this question is a “double bind” (74), one for which there is no correct answer, a positive response earning him his classmates’ mockery, and a negative one earning him Father Green’s punishment. The narrator proposes that this dilemma is entirely intentional, noting “the formal perfection of [the question’s] construction, the work of a real expert” (74), suggesting that this game narrative is flawed, offering the student no possibility of “winning.” In response, Skippy “opens his mouth and vomits all over” (75) his classmates, parodying the expectation of the student “regurgitating” pre-formulated responses, with the added commentary that this kind of framework is toxic. Moreover, the particular question of Skippy’s virginity is also, in retrospect, an oblique reference to Skippy’s sexual abuse, suggesting that these over-scripted narratives allow no possibility for Skippy to communicate his experience, so he expresses it bodily instead.

If Seabrook is presented as operating according to a game narrative, then a closer consideration of its rules and ‘winning conditions,’ the end-goal of its narrative architecture, will reveal why and how such over-scriptedness has come to characterise this system. While Greg frequently describes Seabrook’s mission in terms of the values taught to students - he applauds
“the Seabrook values of faith, decency, various others” (608) - this clearly hollow rhetoric is consistently parodied throughout the novel; it is only a thin veil of respectability covering a blatantly capitalist machine. Greg expresses overtly - “Teaching’s a premium service these days. Parents [want] full value for money” (88) - what has always been the more or less unspoken purpose of the school, which is to generate productive members of an increasingly capitalist society. Howard recollects his own experience at Seabrook’s careers day, for example, where “Seabrook fathers and old boys” (559) came to interview final-year students for jobs and the boys dream about the financial success they see embodied: “Ryan Connolly’s dad leaned back in his chair, expanding at length on the futures market... [while] the young Howard thought deeply about Ryan Connolly’s car, Ryan Connolly’s enormous house with swimming pool, the exotic-sounding holidays... and Ryan Connolly’s incredibly hot mum” (559). “Winning,” at Seabrook, then, is superficially about moral development but actually about economic prosperity.

The emphasis on wealth as a ‘winning condition’ is significant because, as Howard reflects only moments before this recollection, the boys at Seabrook are “set up for life” (546); they are born into the economic success they ostensibly “achieve” as adults. While social critics recognise “the fact that people’s life-chances and who they become are strongly influenced by the accident of their natal class and the inequalities which follow from this” (Sayer 1), class is an “embarrassing and unsettling subject” (Sayer 1). While its influence on social life is rarely registered consciously, the subject of class is often further obfuscated by rationalisations stemming from the myths of freedom and equal opportunity under capitalism; wealth and social status are (ostensibly) earned. As bell hooks writes about the white, economically privileged people in her neighbourhood, “The fact that they have so much while others have so little does not cause them moral anguish, for they see their good fortune as a sign that they are chosen, special, deserving” (Where We Stand 3, qtd. in Sayer 13, emphasis mine). These rationalisations posit that a person’s socioeconomic success is a sign that they have “won.” The illusion of agency in this scenario alleviates the guilt of “moral anguish” - if economic success is “won,” then the distribution of wealth is fair - and allows the preservation of a relatively stable, if largely unacknowledged, class-based
social system. Therefore, the illusion of agency within Seabrook’s over-scripted game narrative is not simply a case of “over-parenting,” or an unwillingness to let children make their own decisions stemming from genuine concern for their wellbeing, but a systematic requirement for the preservation of Ireland’s social order.

However, in maintaining social order through disallowing agency, Murray suggests, through the example of Tom Roche, that even those who ostensibly benefit from such a system are actually damaged by it; this game narrative creates both victims and perpetrators of abuse. Manus Charleton uses Erich Fromm’s moral psychology to offer an explanation for the rampant abuse in Irish Catholic institutions: “[I]f a person unthinkingly sacrifices his or her own capacity for individual thinking in blind obedience to the demands of the belief system, then there is a substantial risk that he or she will behave in an excessively authoritarian manner, which can include abusing others under his or her power” (329). Such psychology applies not only to the Catholic Church, but also to the “belief system” of Seabrook’s game narrative. While Tom now serves as the swim coach, he had once been one of Seabrook’s most promising student athletes before a bungee jumping accident in his final year left him partially paralysed, destroying his career prospects as an international rugby star. Although alcohol and youthful bravado clearly play a role in Tom’s ill-advised decision to dive over the edge of Dalkey Quarry, the fateful accident is narrated in communal memory with Howard himself to blame, as Howard’s cowardice in declining to jump first supposedly prompted Tom to attempt the jump in his stead (432-40).

Tom, through his victories on the rugby pitch, is the paradigmatic winner of the Seabrook game, a “hero” (487) whose success at Seabrook all but guaranteed a “call-up to the national team” (67). The same game narrative which understands Tom’s unfulfilled future as a “reward” for his achievements also narrates his injury as an undeserved “punishment”; rather than considering individual actions and consequences, a schema which would privilege individual agency and responsibility, the game narrative, like the ideology of the Church, involves a kind of deferred responsibility whereby God or fate is the ultimate author of the individual life narrative. Therefore, communal memories which narrate Howard as the loser, and Tom’s injury as
Howard’s rightful punishment - “If there were any justice,” Greg says to Howard, “you would have been at the bottom of that quarry, not him!” (487) - reinforce the explanatory power of the game narrative. These stories explain away the game narrative’s apparent failure in Tom’s case through denying Tom’s agency in the incident, a rhetorical strategy which unsurprisingly leaves Tom embittered and prone to acting out his anger.

This pathological subscription to the game narrative, moreover, becomes even more problematic in this generation’s legacy at Seabrook, the architecture in which Skippy becomes trapped. Because Tom never learns to assume responsibility for his actions, his tearful admission to sedating Skippy after the swim meet, molesting him, and sedating him again afterwards to suppress a panic attack is followed by the sickening excuse, “I didn’t mean for this to happen” (484). Moreover, a consequence of Tom’s own inability to assume responsibility is that he cannot properly teach his own students, Skippy included, how to develop a healthy sense of control over their own lives. When Skippy writes Tom a letter explaining that he no longer wishes to be a part of the swim team, Tom refuses to acknowledge his decision, ripping up the letter in front of Skippy and “propos[ing] that… we just carry on where we left off” (401). In negating Skippy’s decision to quit the team, Tom denies him agency, recreating the helplessness of the sexual assault itself and creating an environment where Skippy can only imagine freedom from the position of “a soul” freed from his “clunky human bod[y]” (455).

**Scientific Narratives as an Alternative Framework**

If Skippy’s adherence to the school’s game narrative offers him no possibility of developing agency and hence “working through” his traumatic memories, the novel explores through Ruprecht’s experience an alternate interactive narrative structure within which agency, and healthy remembering, might be possible. Ruprecht, after watching Skippy die, is, as Skippy had been himself, plagued by traumatic memories over which he has no conscious control: “In Ruprecht’s dreams every night now he is back in the Doughnut House - back amid the shouts, the lights, the people crying, doughnuts scattering the floor, and Skippy... slipping away through his fingers, even while Ruprecht is holding him” (521-2). After Ruprecht’s grief begins to disrupt normal class routines -
he gets kicked out of his classes for shouting out wrong answers (522) and, during orchestra rehearsal, discordantly playing his French horn in “a calculated and mindful assault on music itself” (528) - he is summoned to speak with Father Foley, the school guidance counsellor, about the “correct way” (535) to experience and express grief. Father Foley, following a trite overview of the “five stages of bereavement” (534), emphasises “getting Ruprecht to the Acceptance stage sooner rather than later” (534), creating a game narrative out of the mourning process whereby “winning,” or progressing to the final stage, becomes the overriding concern. Murray expresses both the hilarious inadequacy of this narrative and its connection to the school’s larger game narrative when Father Foley’s practical recommendation to Ruprecht is to participate in “team sports” (536), recalling his earlier, and similarly inadequate, advice to Skippy (411).

Ruprecht expresses his grief, however, in a pointed refusal to follow this game narrative. While he had previously imagined answering questions correctly in class as achieving “prizes” (521) for his scholastic success, his departure from the question-and-answer script of the classroom registers his rejection of that narrative. He begins by answering every question incorrectly, but “from straightforward wrongness it soon degenerates into something much more unsettling. A hydrogen atom has two dads, the main export of Russia is C sharp. … [H]e shouts things out… turning whole lessons into gibberish” (522). Ruprecht, then, not only rejects the school’s game narrative, but, through the incomprehensibility of his responses, suggests that it lacks explanatory power; he no longer “believe[s] in explanations” (521). Ruprecht’s disruption of the question-and-answer script mirrors Skippy’s earlier bout of vomiting during class (75), and similarly suggests the inadequacy of the school’s game narrative to contain or explain the experience of trauma, but Ruprecht’s protest is an active choice, indicating that he possesses a degree of agency that Skippy was unable to find.

Of course, Ruprecht’s agency here is also a factor of the public nature of his trauma - Skippy’s death was a widely witnessed and openly, if not always helpfully, acknowledged tragedy - while Skippy’s trauma, in contrast, is private. Not only does no one else know of Skippy’s abuse, but the ones who might at least have noticed that something is wrong with Skippy are
decidedly not talking about it, as when Skippy and his father “replace almost all words with the word great” (239). Whereas Ruprecht has only to change the form of the conversation, Skippy was unfairly tasked with the challenge of starting a conversation - indeed, inventing a discourse - for which he, as a child, was obviously ill-equipped. These boys’ contrasting circumstances thus also illustrate the ethical necessity of having such difficult conversations - about child abuse, or institutional corruption - within the public arena. Even when Ruprecht’s teachers get the narrative “wrong,” they provide him with a language and a platform from which to begin the process of expressing and working through his trauma. This protest in itself, however, does not resolve Ruprecht’s trauma; the “exponential increase in Ruprecht’s doughnut intake” (522) indicates that he is still acting out his traumatic memories - Skippy dies in a “doughnut-eating race” (1) - rather than consciously, narratively processing them. He has not yet found a narrative that works.

The school’s proposed narrative of mourning, part of what Father Foley refers to as the “correct way” (535) to grieve Skippy’s death, will culminate in its Christmas concert, originally proposed to celebrate the 140th anniversary of the school but recalibrated “in a spirit of commemoration” to raise funds for “the refurbishment of Daniel Juster’s beloved swimming pool” (526). While Ruprecht does memorialise Skippy at this concert, he certainly does not follow its script; he devises a plan to translate the frequency of his quartet’s performance at the concert into one which he hypothesises will be capable of reaching Skippy in the afterlife (620-1). In the advancement of this plan, Ruprecht participates in a scientific narrative of theoretical debate, hypothesis, and experimentation which the novel presents as an alternative to the game narrative endorsed by the school. While I will discuss the results of Ruprecht’s public memorial strategy in the following section, I will elaborate here how Ruprecht’s personal shift from the game narrative to a scientific narrative enables the meaningful development of his agency.

As I mentioned earlier, the game narrative only allows its participants the illusion of agency insofar as the narrative developed through gameplay has, to a large extent, already been scripted. The scientific narrative, meanwhile, enables true agency primarily because its participants are directly involved in the shaping of its “grand narratives.” The first sign that Ruprecht
has shifted to a more enabling framework is when he asks to meet with Howard to discuss in more detail the work of Oliver Lodge, a Victorian occult scientist whose attempts to communicate with the dead Howard had tangentially mentioned in class (555). During this conversation, Ruprecht inverts the question-and-answer structure symbolic of the school’s game narrative. While Howard attempts to lead their conversation by offering to “coach [Ruprecht] through” (577) his grief, Ruprecht ignores this comment to ask his own series of questions about Lodge’s experiments (578-82), indicating that his path of grief recovery will be one scripted on his own terms.

Moreover, when Howard’s explanation of Lodge’s experiments is unsatisfactory - “[they] failed, obviously, I mean it was wrong, it was all wrong. ... There was no mysterious substance joining everything to everything else. Lodge became a laughing stock” (580) - Ruprecht does his own research, and “he finds quite a different story from the one Howard told him” (586). The story Ruprecht finds is one which includes a long list of respected contributors, including “Alexander Graham Bell... Thomas Edison... [and] John Logie Baird, inventor of television (to whom Edison’s ghost appeared in a seance)” (586), whose “concerted scientific effort” (586) progressed towards a paradigm-shifting explanation of the human experience, where “the whole of reality warped and rippled, as if with the shape of invisible fingers endeavouring to push through the skin of what was” (587). The revolutionary potential of such a project appeals to Ruprecht as much as the possibility of communicating with Skippy, and his decision to blaze this abandoned “trail” (587) of inquiry attests to his previously-expressed interest in rewriting the explanatory theories of the universe; as he puts it, “history books have been written in pencil” (375).

While Ruprecht’s attempt to communicate with the dead eventually fails, and he thus does not actually revise the grand unified theory of the universe, his project does succeed in several significant respects - which, in itself, complicates the game narrative’s narrow fantasy of “success” as the completion of its script. One of Ruprecht’s successes is that, through his engagement with the “grand narratives” of string theory and life-after-death, he has developed the ability to change these narratives, even while he has not managed to do so yet. Ruprecht relocates his positioning towards such
grand narratives; when he asks Howard, for example, “How do you know [Lodge] was wrong?” (581, emphasis in original), he enacts his interest in the construction of meaning (“how”) rather than its consumption and regurgitation. Through this process, Ruprecht has situated himself within a different interpretive framework, one which enables the use of agency, not in the shallow, illusory sense of “choosing one’s path” from a set of predetermined options, but in shaping the larger structures governing which choices are available in the first place.

**Public Commemorations and False Witness**

When Tom’s sexual assault of Skippy becomes known to the Seabrook authorities - Tom confesses his crime to Howard, who then reports it to Greg (482-3) - the school board holds a secret meeting to discuss how these allegations will be handled. Unsurprising to anyone familiar with the “slowness of the Irish hierarchy to acknowledge the problem [of abuse] and the clear pattern that existed of moving abusing priests from area to area” (Raftery 255) as a means of maintaining secrecy, Seabrook authorities decide to “handle [it] in private” (485). This decision is defended with a number of rhetorical strategies - Tom “didn’t mean for this to happen” (484); no one would benefit from “dragging this whole thing into the open” (485); there is no definitive proof that Tom’s abuse led to Skippy’s death by overdose (486); or, most disturbingly, that Tom’s “very devotion [to the boys] has led him to make this terrible mistake” (487) - which, while sickening to read, illustrate that Seabrook’s reaction is not simply a cover-up but also a concerted self-delusion. Thus, Greg’s decision to brand the school’s Christmas concert as a commemoration of Skippy is a kind of false witness, a response to trauma which involves a reconstruction of memory to avoid facing the unacceptable (Caruth, “History as False Witness”). Far from excusing such behaviour, Murray uses the commemorative concert to illustrate the cognitive complexity of witnessing trauma, both from the perspective of the institution’s memorial failure and from Ruprecht’s act of ethical memory.

At Seabrook’s Christmas concert, Ruprecht and his quartet are scheduled to perform Pachelbel’s Canon in D. In addition to Ruprecht’s plan to transmit the song into the afterlife, he and his friends have updated the
song in another way: Geoff, who has observed throughout the novel that the song “reminds [him] of something” (282), finally realizes that Pachelbel’s melody has been recycled in a famous pop song (596), and the group decide to merge the two in their performance. The pop song, ‘3Wishes’ by Bethani, is a fitting memorial for Skippy, as it forms the soundtrack to his relationship with Lori. Lori dresses as Bethani for the school’s Halloween dance and sings the song before their first kiss (213), after which Skippy drives his friends crazy by playing the song on repeat in his dorm (259). Lori herself provides the vocals for the concert performance, singing the song into her cell phone from her room in the residential treatment centre for the eating disorder she has developed since Skippy’s death (623). Lori’s voice, described as “a ghost’s... haunting... spare, spectral” (623), combined with the classical accompaniment, give the Bethani song a powerful new resonance: “even parents who view Bethani with suspicion or disapproval... find themselves swept up by its sentiments... both heart rending and also somehow comforting - because their sadness is a sadness everyone can recognise” (624). The group’s performance creates a moment of profound connection within the auditorium, where everyone is “resonating to the same chord, the same feeling... of living in a world of apartness... [and] although you can’t overcome the distances, you can still sing the song” (624-5), before Ruprecht’s altered sound system malfunctions and fills the room with an “unthinkable, impossible” noise (625, emphasis in original).

This performance at the memorial concert metaphorically illustrates several critical challenges to the ethical witness of another’s trauma. Lori’s “ghostly” voice becomes the voice of trauma attempting to testify to its pain; as Caruth writes, “trauma... is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. ... [I]t simultaneously defies and demands our witness” (Unclaimed Experience 4-5). The song lyrics’ depiction of loss, which I will address below, narrates Lori’s bereavement in a way that she is unable to express herself - “At school she doesn’t make a big thing out of [her] Personal

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47 This use of “unthinkable, impossible” noise to disrupt the audience’s expectations and awaken a new form of thinking echoes Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty, a spectacle-based theatre designed to disturb the audience’s passivity. He writes, “In the true theater a play disturbs the senses’ repose, frees the repressed unconscious, incites a kind of virtual revolt... and imposes on the assembled collectivity an attitude that is both difficult and heroic” (28).
Tragedy” (499) - while the audience’s “resonance to the same chord” (624) indicates a rare moment of genuine communication, connection, and empathy. While the song’s sudden eruption into “unthinkable” (625) noise gestures to the difficulty of putting the traumatic experience into a communicable framework, the brief moment of connection suggests that such communication is a possibility, though fraught with challenges.

What makes this communication possible within the performance is the transposition of the Bethani lyrics into a different framework. The Pachelbel accompaniment changes the way the audience understands the song’s message. While the Bethani lyrics presented earlier in the novel suggest a youth culture that has become unabashedly corrupted - “I wish I was eighteen so you could photograph me / We’d put it on the Internet so everyone could see” (40) - the lyrics excerpted in the memorial concert section represent instead the genuine heartbreak underlying the boldness of the earlier lines: “And the night don’t fall and the birds don’t sing / And your door don’t open and my phone don’t ring” (624). The former expresses a stereotypical dismissal of youth culture, while the latter indicates an empathetic, “truer” understanding of the same. In other words, changing the framework of the message enables the audience to hear it.

There are a number of reasons why such a change of framework might enhance the reception of its message. By defamiliarising the Bethani song which had saturated popular culture, the Pachelbel remix enacts a change of perspective which allows the audience to rethink its assumptions. Alternatively, in pairing the pop song with a Baroque masterpiece, the students might be said to have ‘legitimised’ the Bethani song, although such a reading is complicated in that the novel repeatedly stresses that Pachelbel’s Canon, too, has been ‘cheapened’ through its commodification, “worn threadbare by endless TV commercials for cars, life insurance, luxury soap... any number of attempts to invoke Old-World Elegance, accompanied by haughty waiters bearing trayfuls of tiny cubes of cheese” (622), to the point that the Acting Principal repeatedly refers to the piece as “the Citroën ad” (611, 397). Most significantly, however, this particular performance achieves its success, as communication and as memorial, by virtue of its dialogical structure: Bethani and Pachelbel speak to each other, Bethani reinvigorating
Pachelbel and Pachelbel intensifying the emotional resonance of Bethani. Drawing on Ruprecht’s recourse to the interactive and cooperative frameworks of scientific discourse, this memorial performance he orchestrates is successful because it incorporates the contributions of all those who knew Skippy best. As his friend Geoff explains, “[W]hen we’re all together, it’s like Skippy’s there too, because each of us has his own little jigsaw piece of him he remembers, and when you fit them all together, and you make the whole picture, then it’s like he comes to life” (633).

The school’s concert, meanwhile, irrespective of Ruprecht’s quartet, is, within the novel, a failed memorial because despite the diversity of contributions to its program, its narrative is singular, inflexible, and entirely unresponsive to its participants. As I mentioned earlier, the concert is originally planned to commemorate the school’s 140th anniversary (91). The concert is later reimagined as “The Father Desmond Furlong Memorial Concert” (340), even though, as Howard reminds Greg who is all too eager to assume control of the school from Father Furlong, the man “isn’t actually dead yet” (340), only recovering in hospital from a heart attack (88). It is only in an attempt to address the “growing anomie” (523) in the school following Skippy’s death, as well as to “quell doubts about the very idea of a lay principal” (524), that Greg proclaims the concert as a commemoration of Skippy; he believes that the commemorative angle “lends it that extra touch of gravitas,” and that “in some ways they were quite fortunate to have had Juster in the wings, so to speak, not to be crass about it” (527). Clearly, the memorial label is an empty gesture, its commemorative narrative meaningless, as the content of the concert and its explanation exist independently of one another. More than that, however, the reader is painfully aware of the irony in “refurbish[ing] Daniel Juster’s beloved swimming pool” (526) as a commemorative act publicised at the concert, and of presenting an award to Tom Roche “for his years of dedicated service to Seabrook” (603), given that Tom’s abuse of Skippy at a swim meet is directly related to the boy’s fatal overdose. This commemorative concert constructs an entirely fictional narrative of Skippy’s life at Seabrook, and its purpose is expressly political: to bolster Greg’s career, and to capitalise on “a significant opportunity for brand reinforcement” (91) by performing the “Seabrook
values” (608) and narrating the school’s history as “140 Years of Triumph” (92).

To return to the issue of the ethical challenges involved in witnessing another’s trauma, the school’s commemorative concert as a form of “false witness” illuminates several aspects of the school’s response to Skippy’s abuse and death. As I have mentioned, “false witness” refers to traumatic experiences which not only resist narrative emplotment, but are ‘covered over’ by alternative narratives and various forms of acting out which recode the original experience in a more palatable form. The concert’s function as Skippy’s memorial is enacted deliberately as a kind of “quick fix” to alleviate the trauma of Skippy’s death on the students of Seabrook. Ruprecht is not the only student unable to process his grief: “The whole of the second year is undergoing some dark psychic metamorphosis whereby each of them is less and less himself. Test results are plummeting, indiscipline soars” (523). Like Father Foley’s attempt to channel Ruprecht’s grief into the more “constructive” (534) channel of team sports, Greg designates the concert a memorial in order that the school as a whole will not “have to stay depressed till June” (526).

While Greg’s explanation of this narrative reconfiguration of the way Skippy is remembered is remarkably tactless, gesturing indisputably to the supremacy of self-interest over genuine sympathy in his motivations, this memorial as “cover up” is immediately followed by process of self-deception. In a kind of rehearsal for Tom’s celebratory retirement at the concert, Greg announces Tom’s transfer to the Mary Immaculate School in Mauritius to a full staffroom. While Howard recognises that this announcement is “an act, put on for the benefit of the onlookers” (544), he also registers that there is “nothing veiled or calculating” (544) in Greg and Tom’s performance; “It’s as if, for them, their lie has already replaced the truth” (544). While this self-deception is certainly no excuse for their behaviour, it does explain, to some extent, the peculiar force and duration of the systematic concealment of child abuse in Irish institutions. Because of their “false witness” of Skippy’s abuse and death, those responsible and complicit have, rather than taking steps to alleviate the trauma, only furthered the extent to which the traumatic event has become “unthinkable.”
Finally, the school’s false witness is unequivocally damned in the suggestion of the novel’s closing lines that, in covering up Skippy’s abuse and transferring Tom to another institution, the school’s dysfunctional memorial practices have created an ongoing and systematic cycle of abuse: as Greg writes to alumni and parents, “We will all be sorry to lose ‘Coach’; still... we are proud to know that... the Seabrook message is, as the founding fathers dreamed it would, still being carried to far-off countries, and to new generations of boys” (661). Since the ‘Seabrook message’ is, as I have argued, part of an ideological infrastructure creating the conditions for abuse, its unaltered perpetuation suggests that these ‘new generations of boys’ will face the same dangers that Skippy has suffered.

If the school’s memorial narrative serves to illustrate the challenges inherent in overcoming traumatic memory, then Ruprecht’s memorial through the Pachelbel-Bethani song illustrates, in microcosm, the kind of ethical witness which trauma requires. Caruth suggests that a truly effective witness in such situations would be a “witness to false witness” (“History as False Witness” 167): “Such a witness does not take place as a simple seeing of truth (a straightforward memory of the past) but rather as a truly political act, an act of rupture that breaks through the false image of glorious action in the myth or image of war... It is this political act of witness that testifies to, even as it breaks from, the repetitive erasure of history” (“History as False Witness” 167-8, 171, emphasis in original). Ruprecht’s memorial not only voices a narrative of loss, but, as I have mentioned, challenges its wider audience to recognise the ways that this narrative, represented by the Bethani lyrics, has been misunderstood on the basis of moral disapproval. Howard, in his position as the school’s history teacher, follows this same basic framework of witnessing as a political act - recollecting not only the trauma but its systematic erasure - in a more pointed critique of the Irish institutions which have historically turned a blind eye to the abuse and deaths of its children.

*History, Responsibility, and Witness as a Political Act*

While Howard, as Seabrook’s politically conscious history teacher and unofficial mentor to Skippy, is the authority figure within the novel closest to
the kind of witness-as-political-act described in Caruth, his performance of this duty is fraught with failures and complications. One such example is the collapse of his relationship with his long-term partner Halley. While Howard had created a romanticised and ultimately unreal version of Halley because of her American origins, he realises near the end of the novel that this form of false witness is related to his propensity to look for “[e]scape routes out of [his] own life” (493), a revelation which finally allows him to see in Halley “the real person seeping through the illusion” (629). While this awareness comes too late to save his relationship, Howard is able to use this new wisdom to effect a more ethical witness in other areas of his life. As I will argue, Howard’s experiences illustrate how the two components of Caruth’s definition of witness as a political act - both seeing the truth of the other’s testimony and uncovering the ways that institutional narratives have made that truth difficult to see - are intrinsically related to one another, and how performing such acts of witness pose a host of complex challenges even to those with a genuine desire to speak out against the injustices of the system.

Throughout the six weeks during which the novel’s events take place, Howard teaches his history classes about the First World War. This educational programme begins as an attempt to get the boys interested enough in the material to remember some of it; when the abstract material Howard has “copied out of the textbook” (10) fails to make any intellectual impact on the students, he takes the suggestion of another teacher to read them excerpts from Robert Graves’ first-person accounts of trench warfare (18). Howard’s decision to spend more time on this material is in itself a form of protest against “official narratives” - Greg repeatedly berates Howard for his failures to follow the script and simply “[t]each what’s in the damn book!” (562) - but the ideas he discusses with his students also concern a distrust with the narratives produced by those in charge. With his shift from the textbook’s account of the war to individual perspectives, Howard becomes interested in the ideological questions of how, and for what purposes, the war is narrated: how soldiers were recruited through idealistic propaganda (329), for example, and why Ireland’s involvement in the war is still left out of history textbooks (332).
In this respect, Howard’s lessons about the First World War approximate a form of witnessing as a political act. He calls students’ attention not only to the horrors of war, but to the way that the official narratives of the war - “the war of the generals and the dons as well as the dull school textbook, proliferate[d] with causes, strategies, notable battles, and... fought in the moral light of the so-called ‘Big Words’ - Tradition, Honour, Duty, Patriotism” (329) - make it difficult to witness the “sprawling, senseless confusion” (330) of the soldiers’ traumatic experience. To the reader, the parallels between the war as Howard teaches it - the “sacrifice of the... younger generation to the stupidity and self-protective alarm of the elder” (474, emphasis in original), young boys “lost in a machinery too huge and powerful to be understood” (330) - and the systematic institutional abuse of children serve as a haunting indictment of the latter. Moreover, when Howard becomes aware of the abuse Skippy suffered before his death, he makes this connection of themes explicit. Discovering that Skippy’s great-grandfather served in the war, Howard reflects that “maybe this is a way of bringing Daniel back into the classroom, and forcing them to see him. Two ghosts, briefly rescued from oblivion; a small act of reclamation, a chance to make amends” (543, emphasis mine). Howard’s classroom activities, then, provide a way for him to fight back against the narratives of authority which are blinded to the traumas of the vulnerable.

And yet, despite these noble acts of political witnessing, Howard still remains, in one significant respect, blinded by the same official narratives he attempts to expose. While he teaches an important lesson on institutional “false witnessing,” he remains unable to see beyond the general narrative framework or game narrative through which he organises his own experience. As I discussed earlier, the game narrative at Seabrook and, as Murray suggests by extension, Irish society at large, is based upon a fundamental faith that people “get what they deserve”; socioeconomic status is interpreted as either a reward or punishment for the way one navigates the “game.” As I will demonstrate, Howard continues to believe in this structuring principle for most of the novel; even when these ‘winning conditions’ are not fulfilled, it does not mean to him that the framework is false so much as somebody failed to perform their prescribed role.
When Howard is teaching about the First World War, one of the key themes emerging from his lectures is “betrayal” (391). The soldiers were encouraged to enlist through idealistic propaganda which characterised the war as “the Game” (443); as Howard puts it, “they’d imagined the war to be no more than an extension of their clashes on the rugby pitch, the heightened danger merely guaranteeing the glory there to be won” (540). However, not only was this expectation not borne out on the battlefield because of “incompetent generals” (391) whose negligence caused needless casualties, but when they returned home to Ireland, “[t]he jobs the soldiers had been promised would be kept for them had mysteriously disappeared. They could be heroes and wear medals, but no one wanted ‘war-damaged goods’” (391). In this narration, the authorities - “their teachers, the government, the press” (391) - failed to honour their commitments; it is not that the narrative was false so much as the authorities chose not to implement it.

However, Murray narrates a somewhat different story: Howard, “who looks like he hasn’t slept much lately, or washed, or shaved” (391), is only interested in betrayal because he feels he has been betrayed by his love-interest and co-worker, Aurelie. After their brief fling at the Halloween Dance, Howard fantasizes about her, breaking up with his girlfriend “as a kind of prayer to [Aurelie], a declaration of faith on which to found a different kind of life” (327, emphasis mine), although shortly thereafter Aurelie gets engaged to a partner Howard knew nothing about. Rather than acknowledging that their relationship was only a fantasy, Howard feels betrayed, and he uses the same distorted logic to narrate the soldiers’ inglorious return home as a betrayal, rather than understanding their entire experience of war as the fulfilment of a narrative that was a lie all along.

The novel also illustrates that Howard’s belief in the game narrative dangerously limits his perspective. On the anniversary of Tom’s accident, which Howard marks by getting drunk at his local pub, Howard drives home past Seabrook and nearly hits Skippy, who is outside playing frisbee by himself. Although there is a reasonable explanation for this apparently odd behaviour - Skippy has taken to practicing his frisbee skills because of his girlfriend’s interest in the game - and, more importantly, the oddness of Skippy’s behaviour bears little relevance to Howard’s drink-impaired driving,
Howard jumps out of his car and berates Skippy. He not only blames Skippy for the near-accident - “Are you trying to get killed?” (445), he asks, a rhetorical question which might have been understandable as an adrenaline-fuelled displacement of his own guilt - but he lectures Skippy on the importance of following social protocol. “Nothing strikes you as off about playing frisbee in the dark, on your own?” (445), he asks; “Don’t you understand... that there’s a right way and a wrong way of doing things? You exist in a society, in the society of this school, you’re not an island who can just, you know, do what he wants” (445). Through this lecture, Howard narrates the experience following the same script as the story of Tom’s injury: it was not an accident, nor the result of his own impaired judgement or poor decision to drive while intoxicated, but because Skippy had somehow failed to follow the social script dictated by Seabrook’s game narrative.

The correlation of Howard’s overt endorsement of the game narrative and his literal inability to see Skippy, who “appears out of nowhere” (444) in front of Howard’s car, is suggestive; Howard’s perspective is so skewed - by the alcohol as well as his social framework - that he cannot witness what is right in front of him. Not only is Howard blind in this situation, but deaf as well; when Skippy finally responds to Howard’s last question about his upcoming swim meet, he “mumbles something Howard does not hear” (446). This deafness is not unique to Howard; in nearly every conversation Skippy has with an authority figure, his responses are not even represented in the text because the adult in question fails to register them. For example, Father Foley repeatedly mishears Skippy: “He sees the boy’s lips, after a moment of deliberation, begin to move. Did he say thoughts? It sounded like he said something about thoughts” (411); and later, when Father Foley insists that Skippy stay on the swim team, Skippy erupts into a “long stream of speech, by the looks of it not short on emotion, bellowed at the very top of his lungs” (412) but Father Foley simply continues to speak over him, insisting that team sports will help Skippy “get his life back on track” (413). These literal impediments to witnessing mirror the way that Skippy is regularly misinterpreted by authority figures at the school. Following Skippy’s episode of vomiting in response to Father Green’s question about his virginity, for
example, Greg asks Howard if he has ever “had any trouble” (93) with Skippy, suggesting that his vomiting somehow marks him as “the wrong element” (93).

In each of these examples, Skippy expresses a disturbed response in reference to the swimming team or to sexual activity, a failed attempt to testify which is met with a failure to witness. I do not mean to suggest that any of these authority figures should or even could have known from these exchanges that Skippy had suffered traumatic abuse, especially considering that Skippy himself had repressed those traumatic memories. However, the fact that none of them are able to see or hear Skippy at all indicates that there was never any possibility of communication, even if Skippy had been able to testify to his experience.

While Howard, thus blinded by, and to, his allegiance to the school’s game narrative, is unable to be an ethical witness to Skippy or to his partner Halley, Murray provides the example of two unlikely friends – Skippy’s best friend Ruprecht, and Skippy’s girlfriend Lori – to illustrate how ethical witnessing necessarily incorporates not only listening to the other but getting beyond the limitations of one’s own schemata. Recalling Howard’s propensity to look for “escape routes” (493) out of his own life, Lori and Ruprecht initially share a melancholic perspective in which “the future [is] merely… an EXIT sign leading into a black void” (650), “both of them running from some horror of the past… without thinking, without seeing, away from each other and into death” (651). Halley had connected Howard’s search for “escape routes” to his understanding of life as a “quest” (494), the terminology gesturing both to the game narrative and to Howard’s fundamental acceptance of the social frameworks where “people couldn’t help sliding into the positions left by their fathers and mothers” (629). While the limitations of Howard’s world view thus lead him to see others as “escape routes” or fantasies, distorting his understanding of who they are and what they are trying to tell him, Lori expresses with startling wisdom a strategy by which she and Ruprecht might overcome the debilitating grief that has them searching for “exits”: “[I]nstead of searching for ways out of our lives, what we should be searching for are ways in” (652, emphasis in original).
In her gloss on a Paul Éluard quote - “There is another world, but it is in this one” (652, emphasis in original) - Lori explains that people’s natural inclinations to improve their lives by looking for alternatives might be better accomplished through a re-evaluation of their current perspective: “[I]nside this world that seems so boring and ordinary, if you look hard enough, there’s a totally amazing magical beautiful world” (653). Most importantly, this re-evaluation requires a meaningful dialogic exchange: “But things like the world-inside-this-one are too big to hold in your head by yourself. You need someone to remind you, or else, you need someone you can tell, and you have to keep telling each other, over and over, throughout your whole life” (654). Through this exchange, other people’s stories become less an “escape route” than a meaningful way to change the structure and significance of your own.

Lori, then, performs an act of political witness in the final pages of the novel: recognizing the ways that people’s structuring narratives prevent them from “see[ing] the world they’re actually in” (652), she begins to understand Ruprecht by forging connections between her own ideas about Éluard and Ruprecht’s fascination with string theory. When she explains that “all the answers are right there where you are right now. In your life” (653), Ruprecht asks, “Like strings?” (653). Initially sceptical, she finds a way to “weave” their stories together (654): “Well, no, not really, she said uncertainly, but then she thought about it and changed her mind. No, actually, totally like strings. Because you told me they’re everywhere, right? They’re all around us” (653). Through this dialogue, Lori truly hears Ruprecht and, so doing, saves him. He tells her that he is planning to run away to Stanford, though she recognizes that he, like her, is “running… into death” (651); when she tells him to “stay… for a little while more, at least” (653), then, she is responding to this suicidal subtext. This conversation actually saves both of them. As I mentioned, Ruprecht has responded to Skippy’s death by pathologically overeating (522) while Lori has stopped eating altogether (514), but after their conversation, Ruprecht leaves behind his box of doughnuts and Lori finally decides to eat (654-5), a gesture which, while overly simple in its treatment of eating disorders, illustrates metaphorically the “puzzle-like”

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48 This quote is elsewhere attributed to W.B. Yeats, although its provenance has never been definitively credited (Llewelyn 307).
way their stories fit together and the psychological necessity for reassembling them as such.

Even though Howard struggles to learn the lesson exemplified here by Lori and Ruprecht, his revelatory insight near the end of the novel, seeing Halley as a “real person breaking through the illusion” (629), suggests that he has finally come to recognise the limitations of his own narrative framework and, as such, might be equipped to function as an ethical witness. This change is borne out when a fire erupts at the Seabrook dormitory and Howard, returning to his car in the school’s carpark, is described as “witnessing... the arrival of an insuperable future” (643). As a witness to this catastrophe, Howard not only hears what others do not - “It sounded like... music” (643) he says, to which Tomms, the Dean of Boarders, responds, “I didn’t hear anything” (643) - but, by breaching the flames to search for the boy trapped inside, he challenges the conception that he is powerless to act, that, as Tomms suggests, there is “nothing more we can do” (643). In this assumption of responsibility, Howard challenges both the reputation he has earned as a “coward” following Tom’s injury - as Greg accuses, Howard “will never have the courage to do anything for anyone” (565) - and the larger negation of agency accomplished by the game narrative.

Moreover, the music he hears from inside the building is the Bethani song which, as I discussed earlier, appears throughout the novel. The boy trapped inside the burning school is Carl, Seabrook’s drug-dealing bully and Lori’s other love-interest; Carl, like Skippy, becomes obsessed with the song because of Lori, and sets it as his phone’s ringtone (359), which Howard then hears through the burning. The recurrence of the Bethani song at this moment, then, links Howard’s act of witnessing to the memorial concert, which as I have discussed exemplifies how a shift of narrative framework enables a truer form of hearing. The song is additionally significant, however, because the phone calls which capture Howard’s attention come from Lori who, after her revelatory conversation with Ruprecht, tries to reach out to Carl - “she imagines the phone ringing in the place that is his life, the music rising through the air to touch his ears” (655) - suggesting that Lori’s insight into the necessity of “weaving together” stories enables Howard to hear Carl’s virtual cry for help.
Finally, Howard’s rescue of Carl from the burning school represents a significant redemption of one of Seabrook’s “casualties,” a perceived “loser” of its game narrative. Carl is generally considered by both the students and faculty at Seabrook to be “off his head” (547); when he spots Carl wandering around the school after he’s been suspended, Howard “foresees something awful” and tries to “see where he might conceal a firearm” (547-8). Carl, whose perspective has been skewed by hallucinogenic drugs as well as by internalising such judgments, has started the fire at Seabrook in order to avenge Skippy’s death by “kill[ing] the Demon” (644), first considered to be Father Green but then, in a devastating moment of self-loathing, he realises that “[t]he Demon is not the priest. The Demon is him. ... He is the one that has to die for the game to be over” (645). While Carl thus accepts the general consensus that he is not worth saving, Howard metaphorically sees through the distortions contributing to this assessment, putting his own life at risk to attest to the value of Carl’s. In Howard’s final redemptive act of witnessing, therefore, Murray illustrates the ethical significance of witnessing as a political act: by challenging accepted narratives, and thereby truly hearing the testimony of the other, one can fulfil the real-life heroic “quest” of saving a life, whether by entering a burning building to rescue a child or simply sharing a doughnut.

John Boyne’s A History of Loneliness

Silence as Complicity: Media Witnessing and Responsibility

While John Boyne’s A History of Loneliness also explores the ethical obligations attendant on witnessing another’s trauma, he productively complicates Murray’s optimistic suggestion, valuable but perhaps naïve, that sharing stories saves lives. Structured as a series of disconnected flashbacks, the novel reflects the memory work of Father Odran Yates as he struggles to understand and, crucially, to admit his own knowledge of his friend Tom’s role as victim and, later, perpetrator of child sexual abuse, including an assault on Odran’s own nephew, Aidan; as he summarises in the novel’s final lines, “[I]n my silence, I was just as guilty as the rest of them” (471). Odran’s
silence in these matters is connected to his largely self-imposed isolation, and in many ways, the most important lesson that Odran learns is the same insight that Lori, Ruprecht, and Howard achieve in Murray’s novel: that ethical witnessing requires a continual process of “weaving together” individual stories, and that his failure to speak out about either Tom’s suffering or perpetrating sexual abuse is also a failure to witness.

However, this is a lesson which Odran knows, at least in theory, all along; he expresses his “shame” (9) on the first page that he has not kept in touch with his sister after her husband’s death, as well as the guilt he feels as he “do[es] nothing” (28) to intervene in any number of situations requiring his attention. Just as the concept of silence as complicity is hardly a new one, Boyne is interested in why people routinely fail to witness, and to intervene, even in circumstances where they feel and acknowledge an ethical obligation to do something. To this end, I argue that Boyne posits three complications to the communicative act of witnessing as outlined in Murray. First, the witness who feels “powerless to act” often willingly, though perhaps not consciously, underestimates the degree of agency actually available to him in an effort to avoid responsibilities. Second, one form of power always available to the witness is the act of narrative construction and interpretation, “remediating” the material witnessed for new audiences (Erl and Rigney 4); this performance entails an ethical obligation to be “faithful” to the past, in the sense of “getting something right about the significance of the past as judged from the standpoint of the present” (Campbell, “Our Faithfulness” 362). And third, ethical witnessing through the construction of narratives has to take place within the context of dialogue not only because individual perspectives are incomplete (as Murray rightly points out), but because responsibility only makes sense within a larger narrative project, where the individual is understood as one agent within a complex power network and the causes and effects of one’s actions are contextualised within a longer temporal frame.

Boyne accomplishes this critique through the concept of the media witness, defined by Frosh and Pinchevski as “witnessing performed in, by, and through the media,” a process characterised by “the systematic and ongoing reporting of experiences and realities of distant others to mass audiences” (1, emphasis in original). Two critical components of media witnessing are central
to Boyne’s vision of the ethical witness. First is what John Ellis refers to as
the “forensic attitude” of the media witness. He writes,

> Through TV we witness communicative attempts rather than
> successful communication. … [T]his emphasizes the constant
everyday negotiations that constitute social life. We are equally
aware of the performative aspects of communication, the fact
that communication is [not] a direct window into the soul… and
[this] encourages a more forensic attitude to the [audience’s]
sifting of information. (81-2)

In other words, the media witness is less a “passive audience” than a
participant in the act of narrative construction. Secondly, the media witness,

> “[s]eeing through the camera or hearing through microphones, is always [in] a
position of analysis… [but] action is not possible. It is impossible to offer help
or console” (76), even though we often feel, at least to some small degree,
implicated to do so. This is the ethical problem: what is the responsibility, if
any, of the media witness when direct action or response is impossible? Boyne
uses the trope of the media witness both to address the responsibilities of an
Irish public who have witnessed - through news outlets, television
documentaries, and fictional engagements - the systematic abuse of children
within Irish institutions, but also to explore a more nuanced conceptual
network linking agency, narrative communication, and social responsibility
more generally.

In what follows, I will trace these concepts through three key case
studies from *A History of Loneliness*: Odran’s voyeuristic obsession with a
woman during his year in Rome, his belated admission of responsibility in his
“failed witness” of a boy Tom abused, and his final conversation with Tom
when he begins to integrate his disparate memories into a wider narrative
context. Given that Boyne covers much of the same conceptual ground as
Murray, as I have addressed earlier, I will focus on these targeted sections of
the novel to address the ways that Boyne complicates the representation of
power dynamics within the narrative project of ethical witnessing.

In the first case study of Odran’s year in the Vatican, I will address
Boyne’s contention that the lack of agency associated with institutional
narratives and the cognitive positioning of the media witness is actually part
of a more complex network of power relations. Odran’s experience within the Catholic Church is partially characterised by an illusion of agency similar to the boys at Seabrook, beginning with his insistence that he “had made [his] choices at a young age” (12) despite his mother’s orchestration of that “choice” to enter the Church. However, Odran maintains this illusion with a certain amount of cognitive dissonance. He frequently acknowledges the degree to which his life is scripted by the Church, and accepts this scripting both when it matches his intentions - he describes his year of study in Rome as “meet[ing] my destiny” (251) - and, significantly, even when it does not: when he is offered additional responsibilities at the Vatican, he observes, “I felt I was being led down a road that I might regret walking upon. But what else could I say but ‘Of course’” (252). This cognitive dissonance is significant in that it clarifies the way that power operates. As Foucault suggests, institutions most effectively regulate individuals not through force but through discipline, where the individual “inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection” (Discipline and Punish 202-3). As such, Odran is more like a party in a contract, albeit an imbalanced one, than a cog in the machine.

This contract illuminates the key element of Boyne’s critique: a significant component of Odran’s “lack of agency” is his desire to be controlled. This desire is clearly evident in one of the self-described “traumas” of Odran’s life, the disastrous consequences of his obsessive interest in a woman at a café. Odran acknowledges his time spent at the café as “the only time of day which was mine” (264), a self-directed departure from his highly regimented routine. Nonetheless, he narrates his growing interest in the woman in passive terms: at the start of his infatuation, he “was lost” (261); as he pursues her, he “found [him]self back at the Café” (262); and as he cultivates his obsession, “ludicrous thoughts... passed through [his] head” (263). At this juncture - when Odran maintains his “lack of agency” even beyond the remit of institutional narratives - Boyne introduces the concept of the media witness to illuminate the power relations which Odran is so reluctant to admit. Odran’s metaphorical position as media witness is made explicit here, as he reflects, “She was a television
programme, this woman. She was living her life for my pleasure before my eyes” (363). Boyne’s primary critique of Odran’s behaviour in this passage is the way that his passive watching is animated by a desire for power and control, even while Odran persists in characterising himself as fearful, timid, and socially detached. As Odran admits, “I felt a sense of ownership over her” (363). Odran’s proprietorial gaze echoes Laura Mulvey’s famous argument that the “pleasurable structures of looking in the conventional cinematic situation” (18) position the audience as the active male voyeur of an objectified woman, effectively hegemonising the power of the “male gaze.” Odran, as a real life voyeur, is bolstered in his position of power and control, even while blinded to the objectifying influence of his gaze, by carrying over notions of the cinematic fourth wall into the real world.

Implicit in the notion of the voyeur’s objectifying gaze is that the voyeur’s object, though ostensibly a woman, is actually a constructed image or fantasy. As Odran watches the woman with her co-worker at the café, he “concocted... in [his] imagination... an elaborate history for the two baristas” (263), constructing them as a widowed father and his single daughter, burdened with an illegitimate child that he might be able to raise with her if she were “able to settle in Dublin” (263). In this sense, Odran’s voyeurism resembles a “false witness,” wherein he uses fantasies to avoid facing both the loneliness of his future life, but also the inevitable hardships of a real-life relationship. Of course, these fantasies are a “false witness” in a more literal sense, as well. Odran’s puzzling insistence that “she did not waken a dormant sexuality inside me” (362), along with his misreading of the baristas’ relationship as paternal when they are in fact lovers (368), allows him to avoid thinking about sexuality altogether, a repression which is symptomatic of his own experience of being sexually abused by his parish priest when he was a young boy.

Odran narrates around his experience of abuse in one brief section of the novel. The parish priest, alone with Odran, asks him a series of dirty questions, after which Odran believes he “faint[ed] then, for when [he] opened [his] eyes again [he] was lying back on the bed” (144); he then “went to the bathroom [and] washed [him]self” (144) before going downstairs to his mother. Odran never says that he was abused, and he only references the
encounter once more following his decision to “[move] some things to one part of my mind, and other things to another, where they stayed for many years to come” (145). The only other reference to this assault is a flashback he experiences when the woman from the café discovers him after he breaks into her apartment and goes through her lingerie. She asks him, “What is it you want?” (368) and Odran, insisting that he does not want anything, relives the assault – “There he was... his hands tugging at my pants, reaching inside” (369) - before he runs out of the apartment.

In Odran’s “false witness” of the woman from the café, Boyne combines the distorting effects of trauma with the delusions of the media witness as voyeur to clarify a more complicated understanding of the way power operates. Odran is at once both victim and perpetrator of abuses of power; he acts out a response to his traumatic experience even as he objectifies and stalks someone else. This dual position indicates that: (1) power not always imposed from above as in a traditional understanding of authority, but also (2) it is not unidirectional, either. People do not have or lack power but exercise and experience influence in a variety of ways. As such, power is not something one can avoid. While Odran imagines that he is invisible, a passive spectator rather than an active participant in his life, Boyne corrects this misconception. Odran, for example, believes that he is “keeping at a safe distance so she would not see me” (361), but the woman breaks his illusion of the “fourth wall” by insisting otherwise: “Do you think I did not know that you [were] down there?” (367), she derisively asks. Odran’s illusion of passivity - that he is an observer rather than a participant in his life - reflects his inability to acknowledge either his agency or his victimhood, that he influences others or is influenced himself. As I argue below, this position of multidirectional influence is a key component of both individual and social responsibility.

While Odran’s “false witness” of the woman in the café is obviously problematic in its voyeurism and objectification, it is also problematic in the particular way Odran constructs the narrative connections of cause-and-effect. For example, while Odran observes that this woman has “an indentation around the fourth finger of her left hand” (263), he imagines her as single to serve his own romantic interests - “I did not want her to be
married” (263). And while there is no evidence to suggest whether or not she is a mother, Odran “picture[s] her with a small child of her own” (263) to facilitate the fantasy of himself as the saviour of a ‘fallen woman.’ These self-serving narrative connections suggest, in their failure, that an ethical witness requires a responsible narrative construction. Ricoeur argues that personal responsibility is a function of narrative identity - “Being responsible [is] in the first place to ‘respond,’ to answer the question ‘who did this?’ ... Imputability is the capacity to be taken as responsible for one’s acts as having been their actual author” (“Autonomy and Vulnerability” 82-3). I suggest that this narrative understanding of responsibility can be applied to one’s social relationships, as well: one has an ethical duty to identify and trace “true” cause-and-effect relationships in the events one observes, based on rational analysis rather than wish fulfilment.

In fact, the second complication that Boyne introduces to the project of ethical witnessing is to suggest that witnessing always requires narrative interpretation; as such, one has a duty to perform this action with an awareness and respect of the individuals and power relationships involved. As I argued earlier, Murray promotes a “political act of witness,” calling attention to the distorting narratives of false witness in order to enable a “true” or unimpeded vision; after clearing away misconceptions, ethical witnessing is, in this model, a mostly passive enterprise. Boyne, however, uses the concept of the media witness to suggest that witnessing is always active. As Ellis argues, the media witness “is always [in] a position of analysis” even when “action is not possible” (76, emphasis mine), suggesting that, when intervention is not possible, one at least exercises the authorial agency of interpretation. Thus, as I will demonstrate in the next case study, when Odran finds himself in the position of bystander, he positions himself as a media witness - “pressing [his] face to the glass” (299) as he watches the scene, unobserved, from his window - to avoid facing the responsibilities which his witness necessitates. However, Boyne demonstrates the fallacy in Odran’s thinking through highlighting the narrative connections and interpretations that Odran makes even in his “passivity,” suggesting that ethical witnessing requires a conscious ownership of one’s authorial agency.
During the summer of 1990, Odran goes to visit his friend from seminary, Tom Cardle, who has recently been transferred, for the fourth time in roughly ten years, to a new parish in Wexford. While Odran notes that this quick succession of transfers is “almost unheard of” (276), he does not ask any questions about it, nor about Tom’s unusual interest in the young Brian, who visits him for private hour-long sessions once a week. One night during Odran’s stay, he is awoken during the night by a noise outside; as he peers out the window, he sees Brian slash the tyres of Tom’s car. While Odran ends his story there, he is forced to revisit his memories when he meets Brian’s mother eighteen years later at Tom’s trial, Tom having been charged with multiple counts of child sexual abuse. When Brian’s mother questions him about his involvement with Tom, Odran narrates a startling confession:

When I told that story earlier, when I told you about 1990, did I mention that I had reported what I had seen to Tom the next morning, who had called the Gardaí in? And that I had told them what I had seen, identifying the boy in his own house later that same day? (395, emphasis in original)

Even when Odran maintains his ignorance - he insists to Brian’s mother that he “didn’t know,” he only “thought there was something wrong with the boy” (395) - he makes a significant acknowledgement in his original narration of the event: “I...didn’t know what to think. But there’s the lie. Because I did know what to think. Only I could not bring myself to think it” (299).

Odran’s indirect acknowledgement of Brian’s sexual abuse demonstrates the importance of making narrative connections as an act of personal or social responsibility. While Odran sees through his “false witness” enough to label his own ignorance a “lie,” he never explicitly states his suspicions. Odran, who is in the unique position of having observed all the “facts” of the case, refuses to identify and name the necessary connections. This reluctance is illustrated in the way he narrates Brian’s act of vandalism, asking and answering “easy” questions based on observation - “Was it a cat, perhaps? No, not right for a cat… A young boy… And was he in his pyjamas? He was indeed… Was it a Stanley knife? It was” (299) - in order to avoid facing the more difficult question, left unasked: why was Brian damaging Tom’s car? While the reader might initially overlook the significance of Odran’s rhetorical
strategy, considering not only that the inference is obvious (Brian was sexually abused and acting out) but that Odran is already obviously at fault for his presumed refusal to intervene (he “got back into bed” (299) and ended the story there), it becomes clear on closer inspection that Odran’s refusal to interpret is suspicious. To narrate cause-and-effect relationships - what caused x to happen, and what was the result of its happening - is to acknowledge and identify power relationships; as Kafalenos argues, “[N]arratives of many genres are often explorations of power... the power that causes a... disruption in relation to the power that a [protagonist] needs to resolve it” (67). In refusing to make these narrative connections, Odran fails to acknowledge his place, as well as others’, in a complex power network - and, subsequently, he neglects the individual and social responsibilities stemming from those positions of power.

In fact, Odran’s refusal to make narrative connections informs the overall structure of the novel: as a series of disconnected and fragmentary memory narratives, the novel can be read as the representation of traumatic memory, or at least the messy work of creating narrative coherence out of life’s chaos. However, the particular way each fragment of memory ends reveals a more important truth about Odran’s character. For example, after Odran narrates his witness of Brian’s vandalism, he concludes the chapter with a brief recollection of a previous time he witnessed evidence of another’s trauma, part of another complex memory which I will discuss in more detail in the next case study. Here, too, he offers only sensory descriptions - he observes on Tom’s back a “great blossoming bruise on his shoulder, the purple on the outside, the green in the centre” (300) - leaving the reader to make her own inferences about their significance. He only gestures towards interpretation in the way he links these memories of Brian and of Tom: “And the guilt of it now, as I think of it. The guilt. The guilt, the guilt, the guilt” (300). Rather than explaining these memories, however, this “guilt” indicates only Odran’s reluctance to explore them further. He promptly ends this chapter - and, in fact, contemplates ending his life by “mak[ing] [his] own way down there to Curragloe beach” (300) where his father committed suicide - in his avoidance, and jumps forward seventeen years in his narrative as if he is running away from his past.
Nearly every chapter in the novel ends in this manner. For example, Odran concludes his reflection on his mother’s insistence that he has a vocation for the priesthood with a question too uncomfortable to answer: “[S]he must be right. For wasn’t that the way I’d been brought up, after all?” (85). And before that, he closes the first chapter as follows: “I knew without question that the world as I had always known it, and the faith that I had put into it, was about to come to an end, and who knew what would take its place?” (31). These ambiguous endings signify that, even when Odran has begun to question his “false witness” - whether that be his ignorance of Brian’s suffering, or his understanding of the world through a narrow religious framework - such questioning is clearly not sufficient to effect an ethical witness.

However, Odran’s reluctance to form narrative connections and interpretations is complicated by my previous point, that passivity is an illusion. As I suggested, the connections that Odran neglects to make are completed through the reader’s inferences; Odran only defers that responsibility. Furthermore, even when Odran fails to narrativise Brian’s act of vandalism as a form of acting out traumatic experience, Odran’s lack of interpretation becomes part of the narrative he *enacts* - as he admits much later, he passes along his ‘innocent’ observations to Tom, who takes control of the situation from there (395) - and part of Brian’s story as related by his mother, Kathleen. Finally, this refusal to narrate is anything but passive. When Tom’s housekeeper tries to enlist Odran’s help in protecting Brian from Tom, and he insists that he does not understand her insinuations, she corrects him: “Ah, you do now... Don’t be giving me that old manure... Sure aren’t you all the best of pals” (290). In other words, Odran’s refusal to narrate Brian’s story is motivated by his desire to maintain and protect the narrative of his friend Tom as a respectable parish priest; choosing what *not* to say is, in itself, a narrative act.

It is significant that Odran only corrects his memory of Brian following a conversation with Brian’s mother as this illustrates Boyne’s contribution to thinking about ethical witnessing: if witnessing requires the active construction of narratives, then this construction must take place through dialogue with another in order for one’s responsibilities to become clear.
Kathleen amends Odran’s passive narration by placing him back into the story. Like the woman in the café, she breaks his illusion of the “fourth wall” by emphasising Odran’s actions - “[Y]ou remember Brian... [you] report[ed] him” (395) - as well as forcing him to confront the results of these actions, and the continuation of Brian’s narrative: after “the Gardaí scared him half to death” (395), his visits with Tom were increased to “three days a week for an hour every time” (395). Kathleen’s imputation of Odran mirrors the dialectic of self and other which Ricoeur develops as part of his narrative understanding of personal identity and responsibility; as he writes, “[T]he self-designation of the agent of action [is] inseparable from the ascription by another, who designates me in the accusative as the author of my actions” (Oneself as Another 329). In other words, the narrative construction of our selves whereby we become responsible agents is only possible through dialogue.

However, Odran and Kathleen’s exchange of stories is hardly the harmonious reconciliation that Murray imagined when people “weave” their individual narratives together like “puzzle pieces.” In Boyne, dialogue is not the solution whereby we suddenly see each other clearly; rather, it is a tool we must use in the long and difficult project of understanding our own place within a vast network of individual and institutional powers, so that we might more effectively use our own agency on behalf of those who need it. This narrative project requires recognising not only the extent but the limits of one’s agency, as well as tracing the causes and effects of one’s actions (or inactions) through an extended temporal frame.

In my third and final case study, I will consider the way that Odran negotiates another failed witness in his past through a conversation with Tom. While Odran is visiting Tom in Wexford, he sees a store called Londigran’s which reminds him of a boy he knew from seminary nearly twenty years earlier. Daniel Londigran told the school authorities that, while he was asleep in his dorm, someone had come into his room and attempted to sexually assault him. Daniel fought off the masked intruder but could not “see who it was... [or] even tell whether it was a boy or a priest” (296). The Canon, shocked at these allegations and labelling Daniel “a deceitful sort and probably a sex maniac” (297), had him transferred to another college. Odran concludes that “that was the end of that” (297), although later that day in
Wexford, after he witnesses Brian’s act of vandalism, he returns to his memory of Londigran, conceding that on the day after Londigran fought off his attacker, he noticed that Tom had a “great blossoming bruise on his shoulder” (300). He kept this fact to himself at the time, and does not make any explicit connections even as he narrates the memory twenty years later.

Another twenty years after Odran’s trip to Wexford, he goes to collect Tom upon his release from Mountjoy prison, where he has served five years for his crimes. Odran has not spoken to Tom in many years, but they have a long conversation now, discussing Tom’s family life, his thoughts about the Church, his assault of Odran’s nephew, and the circumstances of Daniel Londigran’s expulsion from the seminary. Odran finally voices his suspicions - “I saw you... The big bruises on your shoulder... It was you that leaped on him” (461) - and Tom provides an interesting counter-narrative. According to Tom, he and Daniel were in his room looking at “pornographic magazines” and “touch[ing] each other in [their] frustration” (462). When one of the priests opens the door, Daniel, while the lights are still off, punches Tom in his shock at the intrusion and “turn[s] in a story to explain it all” (462).

This conversation bears many critical similarities to Odran’s exchange with Kathleen, both in that Odran assumes authorial agency over an event he had witnessed but previously neglected to narrativise, and also in that he assumes the role of the other who “designates” Tom “in the accusative as the author of [his] actions” (Ricoeur, Oneself as Another 329). While Odran has thus begun to think about responsibility in a way that he had previously neglected, he is still tied to a problematic conception of personal responsibility as an autonomous action. Boyne reveals this understanding to be problematic, however, in two respects. First, Odran’s “revised” memory of Daniel - in which he narrativises Tom’s bruises and acknowledges that he “should have reported [Tom]” (461) - is incorrect because, despite not having all the facts, Odran assumes that he does; he attempts to narrativise and assign responsibility from the limitations of an individual perspective. Secondly, when Odran expresses his reluctance to believe Tom’s version of the story, Tom situates these events within a larger context, in which his abusive father “forced [him] into” (460) the priesthood, where the Church taught him “that everything that made [him] human was shameful and dirty...
They twisted and distorted [him]” (463). Odran resists these explanations, insisting that “It had nothing to do with [Tom’s father]. It was all you” (459), and that the priests at the seminary “did nothing to you that they didn’t do to me... [and] hundreds of other boys. And we didn’t end up doing what you did” (463). While Odran’s insistence on personal responsibility is a significant ethical development, this belief in individual agency overlooks the network of power relations within which the individual agent acts. Personal responsibility for the way we influence others must be tempered with an acknowledgement of the ways that others influence us.

Furthermore, the way in which Tom and Odran contextualise the Londigran episode also illustrates that exercising social responsibility is necessarily part of a much larger narrative project, including not only the aforementioned additional perspectives but also an extended temporality, connecting the past to the present and projecting those narrative arcs into the future. First of all, this longer narrative enables Tom and Odran to see more clearly the social structures within which their stories take place. While these social frameworks might be invisible within a singular episode, they become apparent in a longer narrative insofar as patterns begin to emerge. For example, as the conversation shifts from singular episodes of Tom’s sexual assaults to Odran wondering “what could have led the boy that [Tom] once was to somewhere like this” (469), they are able to discuss the Church’s ideological framework that “twisted” and “distorted” (463) Tom into the person he is now. And while Tom obviously bears individual responsibility for his actions, so too should the Church be held responsible for the way they “taught [Tom] to hate [his] body and to feel that [he] was a sinner... [with] no release for any of the natural desires that a human being has” (463).

Secondly, this temporally extended narrative helps Odran to think about his responsibilities more broadly. While he has learned to rethink the ways he ought to have acted in isolated events, Tom questions the very way that Odran has scripted his life within the ideological framework he claims to support: “You locked yourself away in that school of yours... and never did a single thing that a good priest, as you put it, is supposed to do” (464). Odran is guilty not only in the way he has failed to respond to the direct imputation of others, but also in the way that he has failed to orchestrate his life such
that it might follow the Christian grand narrative to which he has committed himself.

Finally, this extended understanding of responsibility is fulfilled when Odran turns his gaze from the past to the future. Although Odran is transformed through his conversation with Tom - he notes in the novel’s closing lines that “it had taken a convicted paedophile” (471) to convict him of his own guilt - he reaches an impasse when Tom refuses his prayers and concern and finally asks Odran to leave. Boyne draws once again on the media witnessing paradigm - Odran “walk[s] over to the window and stare[s] out across Dublin” (465) at this point in the conversation - to illustrate Odran’s “powerlessness” in this situation. Odran feels a sense of responsibility towards Tom that Tom’s distancing behaviour prevents him from exercising. However, as Odran’s conscience has now been fully awakened, he no longer isolates himself from the world, nor excuses himself from intervention; instead, he imagines all the people who are in need of help, from drug addicts abandoned by their families to old women who “couldn’t afford to keep warm” (465).

The ethical significance of this moment can be illuminated through Ricoeur’s understanding of responsibility as a function of narrative identity. If, as I have suggested earlier, responsibility is “the capacity to be taken as responsible for one’s acts as having been their actual author” (“Autonomy and Vulnerability” 82-3), Ricoeur notes elsewhere that this definition of responsibility is “incomplete” insofar as it is “turned toward the past rather than the future” (“Fragility and Responsibility” 16). Responsibility is fulfilled in the “appeal coming from fragility. ... We are directed towards the future of a being in need of help to survive and grow” (16, emphasis mine). Narrative is essential in this future-oriented responsibility, as well. As Ricoeur writes, “[W]ith the help of the narrative beginnings which our reading has made familiar to us... we stabilize the real beginnings formed by the initiatives... we take. ... [Narrative] helps us in a sense to fix the outline of these provisional ends” (Oneself as Another 162). In other words, the narrative structuring of life can help us to imagine “endings,” or narrative trajectories into the future. When Odran concedes, “I could hide behind those school walls no longer” (470), imagining “all of these people” (466) who might benefit from his help, Boyne suggests that his conscience-awakening conversation with Tom
has sparked an outward-directed and future-oriented responsibility to his community.

*A History of Loneliness* testifies to the pervasiveness of media witnessing; as our daily lives have become saturated with endless cycles of media reports, our interactions with the world around us are increasingly negotiated from the position of media witness, a role which encourages analysis, judgement, and detachment. While Boyne problematizes Odran’s retreat into the position of passive observer, he illustrates through Odran’s television-induced epiphany that media witnessing is, in itself, a tool that can be used for progressive as well as harmful purposes. As Odran watches *The Late Late Show*, he hears a mother describe the way her son’s personality changed after he was sexually abused, and through this testimony, he realises that his nephew Aidan had been sexually assaulted by Tom on the night he had spent in their family home (437). He “thought of how [Aidan] had been as a little lad” (438), both before and after Tom’s overnight visit, finally recognising the significance of these moments and accepting his own role, however unwittingly, in orchestrating the encounter. Crucially, however, he does not stop here. Odran gets on a plane to see Aidan in his new home in Norway, not to ease his own conscience but to extend an invitation to Aidan: “[If] you tell me to go home to Dublin, then that’s what I’ll do” (432), he tells him, but “[m]aybe you’ll give me a call if you feel like talking” (432).

Odran illustrates in this example Boyne’s project of ethical media witnessing. First, Odran challenges his own passivity as witness through exercising his authorial agency, using the material presented on-screen to enact a productive revision of his own recollections. Moreover, as suggested in Ricoeur, the ethical media witness uses his authorial agency to imagine future trajectories to the narrative beginnings presented through the media; Odran extends his act of narrative revision into the future when he opens a dialogue with Aidan. Through negotiating the past - Aidan questions Odran’s insistence that he did not know the truth about Tom (438-9), and Odran asks Aidan to explain why he did not testify at Tom’s trial (440-1) - Odran and Aidan open new possibilities for the future, where Odran becomes an active member of the family (442). Thus, while media witnessing might always involve a critical distance where “action is not possible” (Ellis 76), this does not mean that the
exercise of narrative agency is impossible, nor is indirect, “remediated” action: these imagined trajectories provide avenues for embodied responses to a mediated witness. Through his productive media engagement, Odran at last makes good on his humble ambition “to help people somehow” (39).
CONCLUSION

We gaze back on [these memories] as though they had meaning, contained intimations of future things - the seeds of the very subsequence we are now in a position to see. It is tempting to persuade ourselves we suffered a kind of illiteracy - we could not read the runes because we were young, or green, or undiscerning, or blind to the consequences. But that is not the truth, or not the whole truth, unmediated...

Joseph O’Connor, Ghost Light

In the closing scene of Joseph O’Connor’s Ghost Light, Molly’s final acts of reminiscence depict the complexity of memory as an active, subjective, and interpersonal endeavour. Though she had expressed her fear in the novel’s opening chapter that her life story would make a “poor play” (20), her memory project in these final pages becomes an act of imaginative authorship: she constructs “a scene worth playing” (213) from the material of her life. In this imagined play, Molly questions her own creative revisions - “Did any of this happen, Molly? Aren’t the dates incorrect?” (215, emphasis in original) - even as she bristles against the way that others have misrepresented her legacy. She feels the curiously conflicting demands of the personal and the social: at one moment, she feels that “[t]his city with its hundreds and thousands of [inhabitants]... has nothing to say to your grief” (218), while a moment later she reflects, “I am turning into the city, my body a map, its capillaries laneways” (221). She contrasts the fragility of her memories, “the pictures... blurring like the spokes of a wheel” (217), with the strength of their affective force, feeling “adrift in a maelstrom of human feeling” (226).

In this thesis, I have argued that contemporary Irish fiction imagines memory as a creative and subjective narrative process. The very plurality of narratives which might be constructed to explain a past event suggests that memory is always a site of conflict, a complex network of competing political, social, and individual concerns. The contemporary Irish novels I have
addressed in this thesis also negotiate an ethics of memory, whereby memory projects necessitate critical attention to, and responsibility for, the strategies used to construct, communicate, and respond to narratives about the past. As Molly’s turbulent recollection illustrates, memory is an extraordinarily intricate narrative project— it is not so much a matter of “read[ing] the runes” (O’Connor 226), but of constructing narrative coherence out of the “maelstrom” (226) of the remembered past.

The “work of memory” entails the navigation of innumerable hurdles: “Blocked memory, manipulated memory, commanded memory – so many figures of difficult, if not impossible, recollection” (Ricoeur, Memory, History, Forgetting 495). I have suggested, in chapter one, that finding the “truth” about the past necessitates an ethical arbitration between conflicting memories, whether through the work of empathetic imagination or dialectic revision. The construction of self-narratives involves an interpersonal negotiation of power, and I argue in chapter two that an ethical autobiographical project makes productive use of the social construction of the self. Chapter three reveals the necessity of questioning and revising the narrative frameworks that structure a community in conflict. Finally, the challenges of ethical witnessing, as I explored in chapter four, call for an examination of the communicative structures available for the production and reception of testimony. As this thesis has thus demonstrated, a narrative ethics of memory provides the conceptual tools necessary for the successful fulfilment of the work of memory.

In highlighting ways that contemporary Irish novelists have utilised and complicated genre conventions in thinking through questions of contested memory, I hope to have demonstrated the rhetorical richness of so-called ‘genre fiction.’ While popular genres such as science fiction, romance, and political thrillers are not entirely overlooked by literary critics, they generally receive less attention than their ‘literary’ counterparts. This critical neglect is especially lamentable given that such genres are particularly suited to both social critique and narrative innovation. As Davies argues, “To study a popular genre is to study lived social relations, not because popular fictions transparently ‘reflect’ those relations but because the meanings and structures of their narratives are ‘actively attributed’ by their readers” (131).
Margaret Kelleher notes that, despite “the often bland reception of romance fiction” (“From Abortion to Infidelity”), critics are beginning to recognise the social significance and narrative playfulness of Maeve Binchy’s novels, which address “economic problems (not unrelated to marital conflict); the difficulties of ageing and society’s attitudes to the old; addiction and mental illness; tensions between generations caused by different opportunities and differing expectations” (“From Abortion to Infidelity”). The surfeit of thrillers written about political violence in Northern Ireland are sometimes dismissively referred to as “Troubles trash,” although Stephanie Schwerter observes in these novels important “thematic and formal developments in the literary discourse of the Troubles” as “writers of a younger generation… [search] for new narrative modes… to reflect social and political changes in Northern Irish society” (19). And Jack Fennell, in his monograph Irish Science Fiction, counters charges of the genre’s “escapism” by arguing that science fiction allows readers “to experience history in an altered context” (19):

The estrangements on offer are always presented as being historically possible or inevitable: futuristic settings obviously come with histories that have not yet happened, ‘alternative worlds’ posit histories that supposedly could have happened, and time-travel stories allow for all kinds of reinterpretations or re-contextualisations of history. (18, emphasis in original)

It is my hope that a narrative ethics of memory, which also emphasises narrative plasticity and socio-political problems, might prove useful in expanding the critical analysis of this important work being done in Irish popular fiction.

Of course, this type of analysis is by no means limited to Irish fiction - or, indeed, to fiction in general. In James Phelan’s work on narrative ethics in literature, he argues that “narrative itself can be fruitfully understood as a rhetorical act: somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened” (Living to Tell about It 18). This definition not only underscores the communicative dynamics of narrative - that “texts are designed by authors in order to affect readers in particular ways, [and] that those designs are conveyed through the language, techniques, structures, forms, and dialogic relations of texts as well as the
genres and conventions readers use to understand them” (18) - but also identifies the usefulness of narrative ethics to the analysis of any type of language, artefact, or practice with a communicative purpose. To this end, anything from political speeches to social media interactions, from commodified kitsch objects to participation in Gaelic games⁴⁹, might be analysed in terms of the causal connections they trace, the social schemata by which they are shaped and limited, and the levels of engagement they make possible.

Finally, I would like to emphasise the relevance of the narrative ethics of memory to the world we live in. The types of debates and social movements that currently occupy international public attention are overwhelmingly concerned with conflicts about how the past is narrated, the power dynamics governing whose narratives are accepted as truth, and the exclusion of minority voices in narratives of national identity. In the United States, a white nationalist rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, instigated a national debate about the status of Confederate monuments which offer a celebratory reading of Civil War leaders and, some would argue by extension, the racist underpinnings of Confederate ideology (see Bidgood et al., “Confederate Monuments are Coming Down”). The #MeToo movement on social media sparked awareness of sexual harassment and assault, as well as the variety of impediments survivors face when attempting, or contemplating, testifying to their abuse (see Zacharek et al., “The Silence Breakers”). And in Britain, the fallout of the Brexit referendum has prompted much discussion about immigration, race, and the narrative schemata of national identity: “In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, the strongest and most inflexible opposition to migration has come from voters who see it as a source or symbol of rapid social change that threatens traditional identities and values” (Ford and Goodwin 21, emphasis mine). Contemporary fiction also engages with these social issues - from George Saunders’s Lincoln in the Bardo, a startlingly innovative work of historical fiction about Civil War era President Abraham Lincoln; to Imran Mahmood’s You Don’t Know Me, in which a young black

⁴⁹ See, in particular, two articles in Oona Frawley’s edited collection Memory Ireland vol. 2: Diaspora and Memory Practices, detailing respectively the social function of souvenir objects and Gaelic games in the performance of Irish cultural memory: Maggie Williams’s “Private Memories, Public Display: Jewelry, Souvenirs, and Tattoos as Icons of Irishness,” and Sara Brady’s “Gaelic Games and the Construction of Memory and Identity.”
British narrator struggles to construct his court testimony in a way that the white, middle class jury will understand - and, along with Edward Said, I believe that it is also the critic’s duty to assess and respond to these ethical-political problems:

It is necessary to discuss the agnostic moral universe embodied in a drama or novel and see in that aesthetic experience a searing incarnation of conflict and choice. But it is, I think, an abrogation of that reading to blind oneself to the similar drama in the battle all around us for justice, emancipation, and the diminishment of human suffering. (78)

As this thesis has demonstrated, the interconnecting narrative projects of individual and social memory, of ideological and socio-political frameworks, and of literary genres necessitate a narrative ethics of memory. We might be “entangled in stories,” but a narrative sensibility orients our way at the “crossroads between memories” (Ricoeur, “Reflections” 6).
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