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# A tipper full of skinned limbs: Fiction and the Northern Ireland Troubles

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*This article discusses the potential of a fictional story, a novel, to challenge political narratives in a divided society. I will analyse three novels set during the "Troubles" (1960s-1998) in Northern Ireland, looking at the ways in which each novel navigates the narrow space between Northern Irish unionism and nationalism, the two dominant narratives in Northern Ireland.*

*I will read the novels politically, interpreting them as rhetorical narratives holding the power to challenge commonplace assumptions. I will apply the ideas put forward by James Phelan concerning the inherent rhetorical nature of narrative in fiction. I will also present Ann Rigney's concept of cultural memory as an analytical tool for analysing the way in which memory and history have been politicised and how the material analysed offers a critique of that politicisation. I will contextualise the novels in the political, cultural and historiographic debates and political transformations in Northern Ireland.*

*The article concludes that the three novels all seek to challenge and question the political narratives of Northern Ireland profoundly. They engage in a rhetorical act through which commonplace assumptions about the political conflict in Northern Ireland, its premises and its solutions, are presented in a new and challenging way.*

**Keywords:** *Troubles, Northern Ireland, fiction, cultural memory, politics of memory*

## Introduction

How does a reader experience a fictional story? How should we analyse fiction that discusses difficult political questions in a context in which room to manoeuvre and the ability to act are limited? This article analyses three novels written during the time of the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland, and it discusses the ways in which the novels navigate between the two paramount narratives of Northern Ireland, unionism, and the

Northern strand of Irish nationalism. The novels that I will be analysing are *Cal* by Bernard Mac Laverty (1983), *Hidden Symptoms* (HS) by Deirdre Madden (1986) and *Eureka Street* (ES) by Robert McLiam Wilson (1996).

Although the Northern Irish conflict is multilayered and has deep socio-political foundations, the core of the political conflict is constitutional disagreement. The Northern Ireland Unionists consider it paramount that Northern Ireland should remain a part of the United Kingdom. Nationalists, on the other hand, dispute this and claim that only one legitimate state exists on the island of Ireland, and that is the Republic of Ireland. Since the Belfast Agreement (1998), this debate has taken place without any major threat of the political violence that was endemic during the period from the late 1960s to 1998, called “The Troubles”.

The antagonism between unionism and nationalism in Northern Ireland is strongest in times of political crisis; during calmer times voices from outside the two camps can be heard more easily. The polarisation was especially marked before the peace process of the 1990s, and it marginalised those who did not fit into the dichotomy.

The ideologies of unionism and nationalism are founded upon conflicting narratives and histories, forming two separate cultural memories for each community. For political purposes, these foundations are cultivated and used rhetorically. Those who emphasise the Protestant and British nature of the region repeat and recreate for instance the Battle of the Boyne (1690), in which the Protestant King William defeated the Catholic King James. The Battle is still celebrated in parades and in murals depicting King James on his white horse. Those who see Ireland as one cherish the memory of the IRA hunger strikes (1980-1981) or Derry’s Bloody Sunday (1972). This dynamic is typical of national histories everywhere, as they serve as contested symbols of nationhood. But what happens when we are dealing with a region which ought to form one political unit, as set up in the Belfast Agreement, but in which competing narratives continue to be heard? The history of Northern Ireland is anything but a unitary grand story, told by and for the people of a Northern Irish “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). Instead, politics, discussion and remembering still take place inside two antagonistic imagined communities, of Northern Ireland unionists and Irish nationalists.

Unionists and nationalists are not always the same people as Protestants and Catholics. This article will use the terms unionist and nationalist when speaking of the political conflict, and the terms Protestant and Catholic when referring to cultural communities and traditions. One must always remember that the division into unionists and nationalists is also a very rough one. For example, unionism can be divided into unionism and a more extreme loyalism, and there are multiple conflicting political traditions inside unionism (Todd 1987). On the other hand, nationalism can be interpreted as including republicanism, which historically has striven more straightforwardly towards a united Ireland. More moderate constitutional nationalism can therefore be said to form a parallel concept to constitutional unionism. There are other political forces in Northern Ireland too, but political life in the region and its institutions reflects almost solely this bipolarity.

The narratives of unionism and nationalism existed long before the Troubles. Irish exceptionalism in Britain was necessary to create the imagined community of the Irish Republic. Unionism was largely a response to Irish nationalism, adding to itself ideas from the British ideology of imperialism and portraying everything Irish as parochial and narrow-minded. Both of the narratives as well as the subsequent political ideologies have used and abused history, as the Irish writer and critic Colm Tóibín has said: “It was essential for our past to be glorious if our present was to have any meaning” (Tóibín 1993, 3). The history, interpreted gloriously, was then brought up to date as fuel for the political agenda, mimicking what William Faulkner said: “The past is never dead; it isn't even past” (Faulkner 1975, Act 1, sc. 3).

The novels that I am going to analyse have been selected on the grounds that *Cal* and *Hidden Symptoms* reflect the time before the paramilitary ceasefire (1994), whereas *Eureka Street* was written when there was a feeling of optimism in the air and the journey towards the Belfast Agreement had started. With this selection it is possible to see whether the changed political atmosphere plays a role in how the conflict is discussed in the novels. The authors of the novels are all culturally Catholic, but have not taken part in the party-political debate in Northern Ireland, nor can they be said to have been outspoken politically. I will analyse the novels by reading them politically and comparing their narratives to the narratives of unionism and nationalism, to see whether the novels challenge or reinforce those narratives. To do this, I will interpret the three novels as examples of rhetorical narratives using theories from the study of literature. In addition, I will contextualise the three novels to various debates in Northern Ireland, starting with the relationship of the novels to the political conflict, first from the ideological and then from the territorial perspective. I will then move on to consider how the novels discuss the divided history and separate cultural memories of Northern Ireland.

### **The novel as a place of resistance**

Wolfgang Iser (1978, 79–81) argued that fiction can offer an arena in which all ideas, prevailing systems and social norms can be put to the test and challenged. The novel communicates to a reader a reality that the novel has organised, thus creating for example a test bed for an alternative social reality. I will take Iser's idea as my starting point and combine it with other elements from the study of literature, namely discussing with scholars active in the field of narratology. I will also consider how the three novels reflect a collective cultural memory, especially how they describe the birth and effect of such a memory in society and how by means of various literary techniques they can also challenge such a creation.

I use the term narrative in this article in the way that it is used in literary theory, especially in the works of James Phelan, where narrative is understood as a rhetorical construction used by an author to affect the reader in a certain desired way (Phelan 2007, 3). My methodology is a rhetorical reading of the novels, interpreting the novels as functioning in a way typical of a rhetorical text, doing things with words.

Political narratives in Northern Ireland tend to portray the Northern Irish situation in a very polarised way. To get round this interpretive deadlock, I will use Phelan's idea of

the “sophisticated narrative”. A sophisticated narrative as a narrative technique challenges the black-and-whiteness of the story’s context, turning the labels of good and bad upside down (Phelan 2007, 2; Lehtimäki 2010, 43). A Sophisticated narrative as a technique means that the rhetorical (persuasive) force of the narrative comes from the text itself and not from standards exterior to the narrative, that is for example from history or sociopolitical questions (ibid.). This means that to challenge commonplace assumptions, the narrative structure of the novel does not rely on top-down judgment, or even criticism, but to open new perspectives to the reader, guiding her or him into seeing things differently (see Lehtimäki 2010, 40).

None of the three novels discussed give “a determinate solution to the determinate problems posed” (Iser 1975, 79–81); they are not pieces of agitprop, but instead, they are hermeneutical and open. In this article my aim is not to investigate the reception of these novels, but to see how the political in them can be read out, reading being understood not as a passive experience, but as an active and dynamic way of interacting with the world. In that context, a rhetorical narrative can stimulate and provoke action. The novels discussed place the events that they describe on a larger horizon of possibilities, thus stimulating the reader in an unexpected way, persuading and even provoking action.

In the rhetorical structure of a novel, the narrative is constructed by characters and their functions. These can be mimetic, thematic and synthetic (Phelan 1987, 282–299, 2005). In its mimetic function a character represents a possible real life person; in its thematic function a character is a representative of a larger group or theme; and in its synthetic function a character works as an artful construction within the larger construct of the work. A synthetic character is not separate from the mimetic or thematic character, but rather a combination of the two, a combination that allows the mimetic or thematic dimensions of the character to be concentrated into one function by the work itself. In the synthetic function, attention is paid to how the character is integrated into the interplay of motifs in the text. I will use this structure to fine-tune my analysis of the rhetorical nature of the narrative.

## **The storylines**

*Cal* by Bernard MacLaverty is the story of the doomed love of a young Catholic man, Cal, for a Catholic widow named Marcella. Cal is caught between the demands of Republican paramilitaries and his feelings for Marcella. The novel is set in the Northern Irish countryside and it was written and takes places in the grim early 1980s, when the Northern Irish conflict seemed to have stagnated into a continuous state of war.

Through flashbacks of Cal's past, the reader is told that Cal had previously taken part in the political murder of Marcella's Protestant spouse, who was an officer in the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), the police force in Northern Ireland. Throughout the novel Cal seeks atonement for his action, and is later able to reject the narrative that had compelled him (Cal, 93–99).

*Cal* is one of the paradigmatic works depicting the Troubles and there has been a considerable amount of previous research on the book. Among the best are J. Cameron Moore's (2012) analysis of the use of landscape in *Cal*, Peter Mahon's (2010) study of the religious metaphors and sacrifice in the novel, and David J. Piwinski's (2002) compact but insightful discussion of the names in *Cal*. Even a look at the way *Cal* has been studied gives us some interesting insights into how the Troubles have been discussed and framed and how easy it is, even in an academic text, to take a political stance – or perhaps, how difficult it is not to. Piwinski: “He [Cal] is certainly not a ruler since, as an Irish Catholic in Ulster, he is denied the right to rule his homeland by Protestant Unionists aligned with a colonial foreign power” (Piwinski 2002, 42). As we can see, it is easy to slip and use concepts that are politically charged; Piwinski's view of *Cal* is a clear criticism of the state of affairs in Northern Ireland.

*Hidden Symptoms* is a story about a group of university students living in Belfast. The novel deals with the problems of subjectivity, especially female subjectivity, and it also discusses the relationship between the arts and politics in Northern Ireland. The title “*Hidden Symptoms*” refers to an argument put forward by one of the characters, that already before the Troubles Northern Ireland was sick with hidden symptoms (HS, 13). The themes of the novel are mostly introduced through conversations between the main character, Theresa, who has lost her brother to sectarian violence, and Robert, a lapsed Catholic and an aspiring intellectual.

Unlike *Cal*, Madden's novel has not raised much academic interest, and such interest as there has been has ignored its political connotations. The political in *Hidden Symptoms* is presented less overtly than it is in the other two novels discussed here. Madden's alleged lack of political engagement has also been criticised. Patricia Craig accuses Madden of playing down the conflict instead of having a political motivation (Craig 1996, 26). However, in her analysis of the novel, Tamara Benito argues that to reduce the conflict to black and white would be an over-simplification. Instead, she argues, Madden is able to discuss the situation in a more nuanced and ultimately in a more interesting way (Benito 2002, 44).

*Eureka Street* is set in mid-1990s Belfast at the time of the ceasefire declarations between the IRA and the loyalists. The protagonist of *Eureka Street* is Jake, a lapsed Catholic, like Robert in *Hidden Symptoms*. Jake is a former student of political science (ES, e.g., 93) who has lost his faith in politics on both the theoretical and the practical level. The central tension of the book is found between Jake and Aoirghe, a woman who supports the Republican movement. All the lead characters in these novels are Catholics by culture, but none of them is a straightforward believer in the republican or nationalist agenda. *Eureka Street* has, like *Cal*, also stirred a fair amount of academic interest, most likely because, of the three novels, it is the one that is most straightforwardly critical, not only of the political situation in Northern Ireland but also of many recognisable characters in public life there. *Eureka Street* raises the concept of narratives in the most direct way: “The men and women there [in Belfast and other cities] are narratives, endlessly complex and intriguing... The narratives meet. They clash, they converge or convert” (ES, 215–216). This excerpt can be taken as advice on how to read the whole novel.

## Navigating the political

In *Eureka Street* the political conflict in Northern Ireland is reflected most through the character of Aoirghe, whose thematic function is to present the traditional republican agenda. Tension is created between Jake and Aoirghe because Jake is portrayed as someone with true Catholic and nationalist credentials, but who refuses to follow the path indicated by them. Aoirghe's perception of Jake is of an ideal working class Catholic hero, someone whom Aoirghe, who is presented as a self-conscious middle class republican, can look up to. Jake: "and I knew she wouldn't be able to resist the lure of all those credentials of mine" (ES, 94). However, Jake does not respond to Aoirghe's needs, showing that first impressions are not always reliable. This creates a strong antagonistic relationship between the two throughout the book. As a prequel the two are drawn into a duel of words in which Aoirghe challenges Jake for betraying his class and kind, referring, among other things, to his going to study in London instead of to a university in Northern Ireland. Aoirghe: "What's wrong with Irish universities?" Jake: "Well, Irish universities remind me of God. A lot of people seem to believe in them. I respect their faith but there's no real proof" (ES, 93).

Aoirghe argues that Jake is automatically and inescapably locked into a particular partisan world view, as he was born in republican West Belfast; his struggles to deny this are the attempts of a false consciousness (ES, 93–100). The same inescapability is present in *Cal*, in which the local IRA leader says to Cal: "Not to act – you know – is to act...If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem" (Cal, 65–66).

Aoirghe's view is that in Northern Ireland, politics is something you cannot escape from, something that you are thrown into, and that this will not change until the premises constituting the political situation in Northern Ireland are changed. As a man is condemned to be free, so he is condemned to be political (Sartre 1993). The lead character in *Hidden Symptoms*, Theresa, makes a similar argument: "You can only ever see one side, the side you happen to be on." In contrast to Aoirghe's position, Theresa, however, seems to appreciate the contingent and relative nature of any understanding of the Troubles, "Nobody understands [the Troubles]" (HS, 106).

In the examples above, the subject of the narration is given only limited choices. The inescapable commitment to a particular narrative comes with the loss of subjectivity. In *Hidden Symptoms* none of the main characters have committed themselves to any political movement, but all find themselves in situations in which the decision seems to have been made for them. This is evident when Theresa remembers a story about the holocaust museum in Jerusalem, where on a pedestal there is a single child's shoe. "But what can we *do*?" she cries in her mind, answering: "often it was truly too late to do anything" (HS, 19). Another metaphor of helplessness, and a metaphor for the Troubles themselves, is the abattoir, used in both *Hidden Symptoms* and *Cal*. From *Cal*: "[the tipper] was full of skinned limbs: long, bloody jawbones; jointed, whip-like tails. It had been a horrendous sight, but he had not averted his eyes from the mobile shambles...He remembered the television news reports, where the casual camera showed bits of human flesh hanging from barbed wire after bombing". In this quotation, the character connects the scene from the abattoir to news reports showing sectarian violence, underlining the helpless separateness of the individual (HS, 30).

The political in the novels reflects the bipolarity of Northern Ireland, but in a reduced and focused way. This is the freedom of fiction, which does not document but imagines, thus holding a different kind of ability to challenge. In *Cal*, members of the IRA are portrayed as the true protagonists of the republican movement, whereas the party political republicans are described as people who only exploit the gains of the armed struggle (e.g., 24). The perspective is either of paramilitaries, or of “civilians”; the voices of republican politicians are not heard, leaving it to the reader to fill in, or not to fill in, the blanks.

A person’s political narrative, cultural memory and cultural and political identity all combine to form that person’s worldview. In the everyday categorisation between “us” and “them” identity is central. Identity politics, central in Northern Ireland, are ridiculed in *Eureka Street*: Aoirghe, after hearing about Jake’s West Belfast credentials, snaps at him, saying that she was sure he was a Protestant. Jake answers: “Why would you have thought that? The space between my eyes, the gapless front teeth, the fact that I’m wearing no green?” (ES, 95). Jake ridicules the markers of identity, but he also makes fun of the division of people into two groups, drawing a parallel between political division and the shallowness of physical marks of identity. This can also be read as an argument that the physical differences between the bearers of different political identities in Northern Ireland are coincidental, and that the differences are exaggerated to serve a political purpose.

The hegemony of the two discourses in Northern Ireland and their supporters’ desire to keep up the *status quo* are explained in *Eureka Street* through a flashback in which Max, Aoirghe’s American friend, is remembering the fate of her father. Max’s father worked as a peace negotiator and was shot at Belfast international airport when he arrived in Northern Ireland to negotiate peace. The reader is told that Max’s father was shot twenty minutes after he arrived, in a coordinated assassination carried out by republican and loyalist paramilitaries (ES, 121–122). This underlines the difficulty of breaking through and challenging the two narratives. An outsider was able to create so much fear that the two hegemonic factions decided it was better to eliminate the threat. The novel shows that conflict always serves someone’s interests, and when those interests are threatened, those people are willing to make paradoxical alliances to sustain the conflict.

The assassination plot in the narrative underlines the rigid discursive space in Northern Ireland, as everything coming from outside “the two traditions” must be rejected. This is the problem of the novel itself: how to say something worth thinking about and escape the label of Partisan. The assassination is also one of the many scenes in the novel where political violence is presented to back what Dahine Farquharson (2005, 78) calls McLiam Wilson’s “philosophy of empathy”, which he rhetorically applies to guide the reader in a “narrative game” (Ibid.).

### **Divided territories, divided identities**

In *Cal* the political conflict is introduced by means of a description of painted curb stones and fluttering Union Jacks, which Cal comes across at the start of the novel. Painting curb stones, following the colours of either the Union Jack or the Irish

tricolour, is one of the most common manifestations of political loyalty, as well as an action of marking territory in Northern Ireland. As Cal approaches the red, white and blue curb stones, signs of loyalist territory, he is described as approaching a violent foreign land: “It was a dangerous sign that the Loyalists were getting angry” (Cal, 9).

Cal’s family is living in a loyalist neighbourhood, refusing to follow other Catholics who have moved out. Cal is from the start of the novel a “mental exile”, cut off from any real relationships and with a feeling of being displaced, living an urbanized life of unemployment and the dole, despite living in the countryside (see Fahmy 1992, 24, 67). The opening of the novel serves both mimetic and thematic character functions, as Cal can be seen as a representative of a larger group that is being intimidated by displays of hostility. Cal’s particular group is not only Catholics, but also all those who share his feelings towards the painted curb stones and what they represent. In this opening scene nothing hints at the possibility that only loyalist curb stones are intimidating; rather, the scene is a thematic description of someone who is forced to enter foreign, unknown and hostile territory. This is a feeling familiar to anyone who runs up against the antagonisms in Northern Ireland. But here it is Cal and his family who are described as being under siege, a situation culminating, later on, in Cal getting beaten up by Protestant thugs and his family’s house being burnt down (Cal, 83–85). In a politically committed work these events could have been used to legitimise for the reader Cal’s antagonism – or hatred – towards loyalists or Protestants. Instead, Cal’s struggle creates the picture of a Gandhi-like figure who, after enduring every possible hardship, still refuses to answer violence with violence. Cal’s answer is not to engage with, but to disengage from the conflict, and to feel remorse for the political violence he has earlier committed.

Whereas *Cal* mixes rural landscapes and urban mindsets, Eureka Street is urban, and this urban territory and the political use of urban territory are important themes in the novel. One example is the graffiti “OTG”, which in the novel is found on walls all over the city. As Jake the narrator describes it in the novel, Belfast is a golden place for abbreviations, as the numerous paramilitary groups claim their own areas with different abbreviations painted on the walls, to mark the boundaries of the different political territories.

The mysterious abbreviation OTG appears along with familiar symbols and starts to puzzle ordinary people and officials so much that finally the Northern Ireland Secretary of State has to make an official statement about the OTG graffiti (ES, 147). The appearance of something inexplicable like this worries people more than the paramilitary tags they have grown to know. The OTG mystery is not revealed in the book and is left to linger as a puzzle in the reader’s mind. Eric Reimer (2010, 100) notes in his analysis of *Eureka Street* that OTG is not merely a symbolic critique of known abbreviations, but works as a liberating moniker for those standing outside the political division, emphasising the author’s high-wire act of not succumbing to either hegemonic narrative. The symbol also works as a symbol of Jake himself, as the character Jake and the symbol OTG both hold the same ambiguity and both suggest the same desire to break free from the antagonisms running through Northern Ireland. (Brouillette 2006, 349.)

Literary theorist Lisa Zunshine has suggested (2006) that the interest people have in interpreting and explaining the motives and actions of fictional representations of minds, that is the characters in a novel, is partly due to the nature of human cognition, which leads people to constantly try to figure out other people's motives and actions. In fiction it is safe to stimulate this feature of the human psyche (Bruner 1990). When reading a novel in which, for instance, political questions are the motivating factor behind the actions of the characters, the reader is "forced" to interpret the political action from what may be an unfamiliar perspective. This stimulates the mind of the reader and can lead to a response and action beyond the reading experience. The OTG graffiti can be seen as such a stimulating motif.

## Politics and culture

The construction of cultural memory is essential for political narratives to have an effect, especially in Northern Ireland (Thomson 2002). This opens the possibility of seeing the purpose of art as primarily political and of seeing an artist as someone who guides the public towards a proper understanding of political reality. In this framework, Irish nationalist art in Northern Ireland should discuss the colonial experience (Dean 1990) and unionist art should celebrate everything British. Throughout the Troubles, the former, nationalist art, was more prominent, with the best example of this being the *Field Day Theatre Company*, a project which produces art that discusses Northern Ireland in the colonial framework, celebrating non-colonial, genuine Irish art (Brouillette 2006, 334). Especially Northern Irish poetry is known to have leant towards a nationalist reading of the conflict. In this context the novel has often worked as a "foil" (Brouillette 2007, 253), building on liberal humanism instead of political bipolarity.

It is easy to find politically committed Northern Irish literature, as it is to find "Troubles trash", a form of pop literature which rides on the shock value of political violence (Brouillette 2007, 253–254). The more ambitious, higher quality literature in Northern Ireland has remained largely noncommittal. Brouillette (ibid) goes on to say that the younger writers including Madden and McLiam Wilson analysed here have been more willing to enter the sphere of politics, not in a committed way, but in tandem with academic historic revisionism, which has challenged the traditional nationalist writing of Irish history.

The theme of the relationship between the artistic and the political is widely discussed in *Hidden Symptoms*. At the beginning of the novel its protagonist, Theresa, argues that artistic value should be the only motive behind a writer's work: "If writers get too obsessed with other things, like politics or the state of the world, their art becomes less important to them" (HS, 27).

However, Theresa's view seems to be reversed with the pain of losing her brother to a sectarian killing. Later in the novel she is puzzled about why her friend Robert does not equate the Orange Order, a Protestant organisation dedicated to maintaining the British connection to Northern Ireland, with the National Front or the Ku Klux Klan (HS, 45). Theresa argues that, as a Catholic, Robert should not tolerate that kind of communal hatred. Robert answers that he is not a religious Catholic, but for Theresa

this does not matter. Theresa's idea of Catholicism is not limited to religion or cultural identity, but extends to political identity, reflecting the pact between the political and the cultural. This invites the reader to consider the changed opinion of the protagonist and the context that has forced such a change. Is it possible to be non-committed in Northern Ireland?

Theresa is demanding that Robert, who is a writer, should be more political in his work: "Why don't you write about the Troubles here, Robert" (HS, 104–106). Robert refuses, arguing that he does not believe that art should be political or moral. To Theresa this is the talk of spineless liberals, who "haven't the guts to be partial". "What does understanding matter? Nobody understands. Some people say that they can see both sides, but they can't. You can only ever see one side, the side you happen to be on". For Theresa, to be culturally a Catholic in Northern Ireland presupposes a certain inescapable political commitment. This is a view that is echoed by Aoirghe in *Eureka Street*.

The need to understand where one belongs emphasises the parochial nature of culture and its potential to separate, as extracts above show. The same idea emerges in *Cal* in a scene in which Cal is secretly reading the diaries of his lover Marcella, discovering a paragraph in which Marcella is remembering a holiday trip into the country with her late, Protestant husband.

Marcella describes her personal sense of displacement through the striking contrast between on the one hand the beauty of the countryside and on the other the atmosphere of drunkenness and loneliness in a Protestant club which they visit, in which "no conversation takes place. People sit isolated in the din, filling themselves with drink" (Cal, 139–140). The author tells the reader that Marcella is a Catholic and her husband a Protestant. This trip gives Marcella a glimpse of the "other side", the Protestant way of life, and Marcella is able to reflect on what she sees from her own perspective, against her own background. Her viewing the scene negatively hints at the difficulties of overcoming their different cultural identities.

The politicisation of culture in Northern Ireland has been criticised especially by unionist commentators like Conor Cruise O'Brien (1988) and Arthur Aughey (1995), the latter going so far as to label the actions of Irish cultural nationalists as "Irish Kulturkampf". These thinkers have tried to show unionism as a political idea separate from culture, and have tried to create a prototype of a Northern Irish person who can see him or herself as culturally Irish, but politically British (Aughey 1989; Longley 1994). However, some have insisted that unionism is also a cultural identity (Foster, J.W., 1995).

The most cited example of Protestant culture in Northern Ireland is the marching tradition of the Orange Order and similar organisations. These celebrations are good examples of the emphasis that Protestant political culture puts on past political events. Another familiar example is the murals that one sees on the walls of many towns and cities in Northern Ireland depicting ancient battles or present political conditions. Both of these are obvious examples of how cultural memory is created and reproduced.

Parades and murals can be understood positively as acts of collective self-expression of cultural and religious freedom. In a territorial conflict, however, they manifest superiority (Dominic 2000). Not surprisingly, the nationalist analysis of Protestant culture emphasises the negative aspects of the examples above, categorising them as signs of sectarianism (Bennett 1998, 210). This theme is raised in a discussion between Theresa and Robert in *Hidden Symptoms*. Robert: “The Twelfth processions [anniversary of the Battle of the Boyne] are not that bad. They’re just a bit of folk culture.” Theresa: “Harmless?..the Orange Order is, first and foremost, an anti-Catholic organization. They hate Catholics” (HS, 45–46). This dialogue also touches on the question of how difficult it is to draw a boundary between political and cultural identity, especially in a divided society like Northern Ireland.

In *Hidden Symptoms* parades are used as a metaphor for the Protestant psyche: those parading are showing their hatred in public, while the rest keep their hatred “hidden in their hearts” (HS, 47). In *Cal* the intimidating Protestant celebrations are described at the beginning of the novel (Cal, 9), thus framing the political situation as well as its relationship to the past.

In *Eureka Street* the problems of culture and politics are epitomized in the character of Shague Ghintoss, “a vaguely anti-English Catholic from Tyrone” (ES, 173), who is McLiam Wilson's caricature of the poet Seamus Heaney, one of the founders of the *Field Day Company* (Brouillette 2006, 339). Ghintoss is a synthetic character combining the mimetic aspect, as a representation of Heaney, and a thematic aspect, as a representative of an opportunistic person reaping personal benefit from the Troubles. McLiam Wilson himself confirms that it is meant to be Heaney, and shares with the public his distaste for Heaney's alleged opportunism in an interview in the Belfast *Fortnight* magazine (McLiam Wilson 1995, 6)

Ghintoss bends in all directions to please both his anti-English, republican audiences and the English, who offer him fame and financial benefits, which the Irish republicans cannot give him. He is portrayed as someone who reaps the benefits of the cultural and political strife without taking any responsibility for his actions. This is illustrated when Ghintoss performs his own work, a fierce, violent republican poem, “Poem to a British Soldier About to Die” (ES, 175–176). The lead character Jake makes fun of the literary style of Ghintoss, describing his naturalistic poems as follows: “It was clear, in addition, that these were all nationalist hedges, republican berries, unProtestant flowers and extremely Irish spades” (Ibid.). This can be taken as a comment on the absurdity of politically committed art.

At the end of *Eureka Street* Ghintoss receives decorations from both the political wing of the IRA, the “Just Us” party –another mimetic character – in the novel, and from the British government as a gesture of ecumenical good will (ES, 378–379).

## **The use and abuse of history**

Cultural memory is the idea that memories are intentionally created rather than that they spontaneously and innocently resurrect the past (Rigney 2005, 13–14). Invented memories can then be put to use to legitimise a narrative or a desired action. Not

surprisingly, memories are also extremely important for narratives in Northern Ireland. These memories have a long time ago been separated from the events that created them and have been transformed into collective vehicles used to transport, recreate and enforce ideas and agendas. Rigney's thesis offers us a way of studying how these novels navigate the resurrection and politicisation of memories.

Even though the Northern Ireland conflict is complex, the differences do tend to gravitate towards differences of culture, identity and history. In the so-called Opsahl Commission hearings, held in the early 1990s, the Troubles were viewed from the perspective of its victims. Later, a historian Marianne Elliott (Elliott 2002, 170) observed that in these hearings "Core differences between Protestants and Catholics emerged time and time again: The centrality of religion to one, of Irish history, language and culture to the other". Marcella, a character in *Cal*, presents the same idea: "Ireland. It's like a child. It's only concerned with the past and the present. The future has ceased to exist for it" (*Cal*, 131). Marcella's utterance reflects the bleak 1980s, when the political process in Northern Ireland was in a state of deadlock, but even Elliott's observation, made during a much more optimistic time, reaffirms the depth of the communal division.

History has been central in the creation and persistence of Irish nationalism (See e.g. Foster, R. 1995; English 2006) as well as of unionism in Northern Ireland. Both Ireland and Northern Ireland offer typical examples of history being used as a legitimator of action, cementing group cohesion with stories of heroes and martyrs building an ethnic nation (Hobsbawn 1983, 12–13; Habermas 1998, 132).

When the imagined Irish nation started to take shape in the nineteenth century, it was, as is typical of nationalism, constructed to exclude everything that was not Irish. Irishness was anchored to the Roman Catholic religion and to the, largely invented, Gaelic heritage, which together served as the main building blocks of a typical ethnic nation, in the sense described by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1998, 132). Irish nationalism as a political idea and a political alliance of church, peasants and the landed aristocracy was so successful that it prevented other political ideas and movements, such as socialism, from taking hold in Ireland (English 2006). The fact that social class did not play a role in Ireland was due to the fact that the island was divided into the industrialized north and the mainly agrarian south. Class-based tension could not arise because the classes were too far apart. (Kearney 2007, 110.)

Irish Unionism became specifically Northern Irish and more exclusive and isolationist in the early twentieth century, after it became evident that Ireland would separate from the rest of the United Kingdom (Walker, G., 2004, 110). Since that time the unionist narrative has emphasized the separateness of the Ulster Protestants and their different attitudes to religion, the state and politics, and put up a unified stand against the perceived threat of political Irishness (Todd 1987). Still, especially in times of less political tension, the eclectic and fragile nature of unionist ideology is evident.

The traditional way of writing about Irish history, which emphasized the colonial relationship between England and Ireland and explained the past in these terms, was challenged from the 1930s onwards, but was revitalized by Marxist writers who

started to reemphasize the colonial nature of British-Irish relations in the 1960s (See e.g. Farrell 1976). However, revisionism started to gain ground again in Irish historiography from the 1970s on. Revisionists challenged the framework in which England was portrayed as an oppressor and Ireland as pure and innocent. Not surprisingly, this also caused ripples outside the academic world, especially in Northern Ireland. However, revisionist historians such as Roy Foster, Paul Bew, Henry Patterson and Peter Gibbon, Graham Walker and Alvin Jackson, many of whom originally belonged to the Marxist tradition, have succeeded in their assault on the old nationalist way of writing history, leading Roy Foster to declare “We are all revisionists now” (Foster, R. 1986). The modern historiography of Ireland does not exempt England from guilt, or the unionists in the case of Northern Ireland, nor does it portray Northern Ireland as a liberal haven, but it rather adds nuances and liberates the past from the polarisation of earlier writing (Farrington 2003).

In *Eureka Street* the contested history is a constant theme, reflecting the changed political climate in which the novel was written. The struggle with the collapsing narratives of the old, as well as with the politicisation of history are epitomized in an angry exchange of words in a pub, in which Aoirghe presents her view of the Troubles: “This kind of thing [police brutality] will just go on and on until this whole country is united and we are one Ireland”. The scene continues with Aoirghe's lecture to those present about the history of the conflict. Aoirghe's monologue is interrupted by the voice of the narrator, Jake, who explains to the reader that there are three different versions of Irish history: the Republican, the Loyalist and the British. Jake does not in fact react to Aoirghe and her lecture, as the additional commentary is for the reader only (ES, 93–98). This is what Geoffrey Hartman has called hermeneutic perplexity (Hartman et al. 1979). The narration disables the argument made by Aoirghe and the reader loses the possibility of simply accepting her evidence. This opens up multiple horizons of interpretation, contrary to the way in which a closed narration would work, but at the same time we can see that the rhetorical aim of the author is to ridicule Aoirghe's reading of the history of Northern Ireland. At the same time the satirical way in which Jake explains to the reader the three versions of history suggests the implausibility of what Aoirghe has said.

In *Hidden Symptoms* Theresa gets angry with her friends Robert and Kathy for not taking the political divisions in Northern Ireland seriously. Theresa: “Do you feel like a second-class citizen, Robert? Do you feel that people hate you because you're a Catholic? Well, you ought to, because they do” (HS, 46). Overall the antagonisms in Northern Ireland are not questioned in *Hidden Symptoms* in the same way that they are in *Cal* or in *Eureka Street*. Theresa does not propose herself as a social engineer or a doctor. In contrast, *Eureka Street*, which was written in a changed political context, is much more outspoken.

Like Jake in *Eureka Street*, Cal seeks to distance himself from the conflict. Instead of depending on irony, as in *Eureka Street*, the depiction of the loyalists and the republicans in *Cal* compares them to forces of nature which it is beyond human ability to resist (Cal, e.g. 64). This gives the novel its bleak mood. However, signs of resistance do arise later in the novel, when Cal refuses to take part in the paramilitary activities of the local IRA. Cal also begins to question the sacrifices that the

commitment to political republicanism is demanding: "To suffer for something which didn't exist, that was like Ireland. People were dying every day, men and women were being crippled and turned into vegetables in the name of Ireland. An Ireland, which never was and never would be" (Cal, 83). Cal, a working class Catholic nationalist, is arguing for a total withdrawal from the grand narrative of Irish nationalism and republicanism. Especially the last sentence of the quotation, abolishing the myth of the united Gaelic Ireland, as well as the myth of a united Ireland to come, is in stark contrast to the republican ideology of the time. Cal's utterance can also be said to be in tune with the revisionism in the writing of history, as Cal's idea of Ireland "which never was and never would be" (Ibid) not only points to the absence of legitimacy of the republican paramilitaries, but is also a critique of the invented past.

Of the three novels, *Cal* discusses the use of memory most directly. Cal's discussions with the leader of the local IRA cell, a man called Skeffington, are particularly interesting, as they are comments on the politics of the past in Ireland from the perspective of the republican movement.

Skeffington continually calls Cal Cathal, to underline Cal's Irishness and to point out the impossibility of Cal not being politically committed. This is also revealed by the ironic play on Cal's name, which in its longer Irish version means "War god" and which also makes him share his first name with an Irish republican martyr, Cathal Brugha (Piwinski 2002, 42). However, Cal of the novel does everything in his limited power not to engage in violence, be it against people or animals, culminating in his refusal to follow his father to work in the abattoir.

When Cal tries to break away from the activities of the IRA, Skeffington tries to convince Cal otherwise. Skeffington does this by reciting a republican poem about the 1916 Easter Rising. The poem, "Mother", by Pádraig Pearse, includes the lines, "They shall be spoken among their people / The generations shall remember them". When the poem ends, Cal comments by saying "But it is not like 1916", to which Skeffington answers, "It wasn't like 1916 in 1916". Skeffington therefore argues that it is not important what happened in 1916, but how 1916 is remembered. The lived memory of 1916 is long gone and it has been replaced by a cultural memory, which has been constructed in acts similar to those in which Skeffington is now engaging with Cal (Rigney 2005, 14). (Cal, 73)

The Easter Rising offers a clear example of history as contested symbols of nationhood. The rising of 1916 definitely polarised North and South, but the actual rhetoric of the leaders of the rising as well as the text of the Declaration of Independence are examples of civic nationalism. Padraig Pearse among others only saw one Ireland, a country without divisions. However, after the birth of the Irish Republic the more ethno-religious notion of nationalism triumphed, culminating in the 1937 constitution, and the civic nature of the Easter Rising was forgotten, its memory being transformed into the idea that Skeffington is now propagating. The fact that Skeffington uses Pearse as an example creates a dynamic of contestation. This is an excellent example of how a cultural memory is formed on the foundations of a living memory, but adjusting the content to suit a particular project, which in this case was in unifying Ireland by stressing the differences between its two nations.

The scene in *Cal* continues, as Skeffington connects the Easter Rising to Derry's Bloody Sunday (1972), an event which he claims to have personally witnessed. Bloody Sunday is a major event in the republican narrative, an act of violence in which British paratroopers opened fire on civil rights demonstrators in Derry (Sulkunen 2007). Interestingly, the only thing that Skeffington describes as a personal memory from the event is an image of a Catholic priest waving a handkerchief and coming to give the last rites to one of the victims of the shooting. This is by far the best known and the most reproduced image of the event, visible in several different murals especially in Derry, and is an example of how cultural memory is constructed by repeating the same stories and images, streamlining them, and making them part of the shared frame of reference, at the same time deliberately forgetting other aspects of the actual archival memory (Rigney 2005, 20–21). Instead of relating a personal recollection of the event, Skeffington chooses to reproduce an icon of shared cultural memory. This choice by the author is not without irony. The priest in the case, Edward Daly, who later became the Bishop of Londonderry, has been an outspoken critic of the IRA and the republican agenda (Sulkunen 2007, 48).

The fact that Skeffington chooses this image to legitimise his position, as well as to make an argument using a past political event, rhetorically forces the reader to another moment of hermeneutic perplexity, to doubt the reliability of Skeffington, and to think about his motives. In the scene the rhetorical narrative overlaps with the problematisation of the cultural memory. Skeffington's memory serves a symbolic function in building, repeating and upholding the required republican narrative. This theme is explicit and important in Northern Ireland, and the historian Brian Walker is one of those who have written about it extensively (Walker, B. 2000).

The event itself is not as important as its memory and the way in which that memory is constructed into a narrative to maximise its political effect. This is illustrated when Skeffington wishes, "If only they would let the Paras loose in Derry again" (*Cal*, 74), as this would help the IRA to recruit new members. Skeffington's remark stands for the hope to re-enact the past in order to create another collective memory that could be used to serve a particular political interest. In this case the reading experience puts forward an interpretation that is different from the one that the reader might already have, restructuring the mindset of the reader (Iser 1978) and working as a sophisticated narrative (Phelan 2007, 2).

Skeffington does not put forward a single argument to legitimise the republican struggle that builds on the hardship facing the local Catholics or *Cal*. Instead, the material he uses when he tries to involve *Cal* comes entirely from the republican narrative of the Irish and Northern Irish past. The way Skeffington rhetorically links the Easter Rising of 1916 and Bloody Sunday of 1972, adding the wish that the British invader would do something like that again, implies and creates a continuity with the past which is central in both the invention of traditions and in the politics of the past (Hobsbawn 1993). Skeffington is not only applying, but also creating, a cultural memory from which to construct a rhetoric that will influence *Cal*.

*Cal* makes evident the limited options which characters in its world have, but escapes being reductionist in the sense that the actions of the characters are simply reflexes

towards their social reality. Instead, the novel presents a nonpartisan evaluation, emphasising the loss of autonomy represented by Cal.

The republican cause is by no means idealised in *Cal*, but neither are the Loyalists presented uncritically. Rather, they are presented as thugs who want to burn out the Catholics. This mutual contempt is similar to what we find in *Eureka Street*, although neither of the novels could be argued to be thematic in the sense that the reader can only make one particular judgment and there is only one interpretive option.

All three novels have a similar dynamic, in which a traditional political position is imposed on a character that in the end is able to resist and break free. They all have a sophisticated narrative in which the viewpoints and arguments of the protagonists evolve during the narration and the reader is challenged to actively think about the choices they make. The leading characters in *Eureka Street*, Jake and Aoirghe, begin to move away from their previously held antagonistic positions and to move towards the middle ground. In *Cal* the local IRA gang, as well as Cal himself, share a very traditional nationalist understanding of the history of Ireland. Cal: “It [Ireland] will only have a future when the British leave” (Cal, 131). Towards the end of the novel Cal is seen to lose his faith, but the same cannot be said for the members of the IRA.

Jake is doubtful of the possibilities of politics at first, but he repositions himself later. In *Hidden Symptoms* and in *Cal*, the grand narratives of Northern Ireland are not questioned as directly as they are in *Eureka Street*. Nevertheless, in *Cal* and in *Hidden Symptoms* following the paths of the narratives of unionism or nationalism becomes unbearable to the characters. In both, the characters have to abandon their original beliefs, whereas in *Eureka Street* all political narratives in Northern Ireland are made equally ridiculous.

## Conclusions

The problem of strictly limited space for discussion is clear in all of the novels that I have discussed here. To break free from hegemonic narratives is not easy, and the challenges to one’s subjectivity from the polarisation of Northern Ireland are an overarching theme in these novels.

The strategies used by the authors to present and comment on the narratives of Northern Ireland and their relations to the politics of the past differ. In *Cal* and in *Hidden Symptoms* the socio-political reality of Northern Ireland, in which the narratives of unionism and nationalism are paramount, is portrayed from the perspective of an individual at the mercy of the forces of nature. In *Eureka Street* the individual already has more means to fight back. This idea is crystallised in the OTG symbol, which shows that there is a way and scope for resistance. The most obvious explanation for this is the more relaxed political atmosphere of the mid-1990s. In the early and mid-1980s, when *Cal* and *Hidden Symptoms* were written, it would have been more difficult to attack the leading political forces in Northern Ireland with such intensity. This was not easy in 1996 either, as one critic hinted, saying that *Eureka Street* is “not art but propaganda” (Bennett 1998, 203).

None of the three novels has as its purpose to reinforce or to retell a republican, nationalist, unionist or loyalist version of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, or indeed to verify the historical reasons for those troubles. In all the novels here discussed the political ideologies of Northern Ireland get a thorough presentation, but through narrative structures and the character functions of the novels these narratives are viewed very critically. For example, the members of the local IRA in *Cal* or the various supporters of different political movements in *Eureka Street* serve as critical thematic presentations of the political narratives, whereas the leading characters in all the novels are more complex.

In *Hidden Symptoms* and in *Cal* the main character is described as evolving from a reluctant, even forced, supporter of a particular hegemonic political ideology to a sceptic. In *Hidden Symptoms* this is underlined by the simultaneous rejection of the main character, Theresa, of her Roman Catholic faith. At the beginning of *Eureka Street* the main character, Jake, has withdrawn from the social and political questions of Northern Ireland. At the end Jake regains his hope and his ability to commit, repositioning himself outside the political division of Northern Ireland, but not outside politics.

Cultural memory and its relationship to political reality are of the utmost importance when discussing the framing of culture and politics in Northern Ireland. To deal at all profoundly with the histories that form the foundation of the unionist and nationalist narratives of Northern Ireland, a piece of fiction has to go to their sources. Especially key images such as the Easter Rising or Bloody Sunday were discussed in a way that revealed critically how the cultural memory of these events had been politicized and forced to serve a particular interest. Against a background of bipolar identity politics and the abuse of history, the novels represent a liberal humanist critique in support of the individual against the tyranny of dogma.

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