

A TERRIBLE BEAUTY WAS BORN? MEMORY, HISTORY, AND FORGETTING IN COLM TÓIBÍN'S *THE HEATHER BLAZING* AND JOHN MCGAHERN'S *AMONGST WOMEN*

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As we approach the centenary of the 1916 Easter Rising, it appears apposite to attempt a critical reconsideration of the works of fiction that concentrate on that crucial chapter of Irish history and on its legacies on the later generations: the different perspectives that those narratives offer, in fact, allow and foster a reflection on the social and cultural outlook of contemporary Ireland, ultimately testing, as it were, the validity and the prophetic nature of W.B. Yeats's account that "a terrible beauty was born" in 1916.

Many Irish novels and short stories of the last few years are characterized by, and sometimes reproached for, their backward look. Yet, this interest in the past, "be it personal biography, national history or literary tradition" (Kenneally 4), should not be misunderstood as an exclusive preference for that dimension, and therefore a rejection of the present: quite the contrary, the compelling mixture of individual memories, historical references and fictional details that they provide is precisely what makes them worthy of critical attention, not just as works of art, but also for their value as sociological and anthropological documents. Fictions dealing with the War of Independence and its aftermath, for example, tackle issues of paramount relevance in the current cultural debate, such as the political manipulation of the past in public commemoration, the ideological structures underlying historiography, the commodification of historical events. Through a comparative reading of John McGahern's *Amongst Women* (1990) and Colm Tóibín's *The Heather Blazing* (1992),¹ this article will focus on the fictional rendering of the ways in which Ireland's struggle for freedom from Britain affected the lives of both the fighters and their children. The theories of French philosopher Paul Ricœur concerning the mechanisms, the uses and the abuses of memory and of forgetting, as well as their relationship with history and historiography, will be applied to the investigation of the two novels and of the old and new images of Ireland that their patriarchs and their children embody.

The early 1990s, when both *Amongst Women* and *The Heather Blazing* were published, were a challenging period for the Irish Republic. The avalanche of cases of sexual abuse of children by priests, as well as the Catholic hierarchies' apparent inability to apologise, were paralleled, in the lay sphere, by the government tribunals established to investigate political corruption. As a result, the authority of the two tra-

1 All following references to the two novels will be abbreviated as *AW* and *HB*, respectively.

ditional pillars of Irish society *par excellence*, the Church and the State, was radically questioned. The 1990s were also a period of important anniversaries for Ireland, including, for example, the bicentenary of the United Irishmen Rebellion of 1798, the 150th anniversary of the Great Famine, and the 75th anniversary of the Easter Rising (see Brewster 24). Looking back on that decade, and on the need to examine the legacy of the crucial occurrences in Irish history, Roy Foster has observed that “[m]uch of the 1990s were, in fact, [...] spent coming to terms with cultural memory” (Foster 63). The fictional works of those years similarly address the import and the relevance of collective and individual memory with respect to the rapidly changing belief systems and lifestyles of the nation.

In *Memory, History, Forgetting* (2004, originally published in French in 2000 as *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*),² Paul Ricœur explores the ways in which memory, in all its forms and functions, works and fails, is exercised or manipulated. The comparative analysis proposed by this article follows Ricœur's theorization because his approach, and this is my claim, proves particularly relevant and useful not only for a study of the two novels under scrutiny here and their authors, but more in general, for a deeper understanding of contemporary Irish fiction, which so frequently confronts us with a clever and subtle combination of invented plots and characters, autobiographical details, and historical events and figures. Both *Amongst Women* and *The Heather Blazing* draw extensively on their authors' experiences and focus on young children growing up in motherless families between the 1940s and 50s, as well as on their experiences as adults in more recent years. In both instances, the father is a veteran of the War of Independence and exerts a crucial influence on the life of his offspring. What distinguishes the two narratives in a substantial manner, however, is the alternative look that each of them casts on the recent history of the Irish Republic and, more generally, the complementary conceptions of the relationship between past and present and of the role of memory and commemoration embodied by their characters, a feature which, as we will see, emerges primarily from the characterisation of the two father-figures.

For Ricœur, memory, the imagination and history all function in similar ways and through similar strategies: they work through images and confront us with “the enigma of [...] the presence of an absent thing” (*MHF* xvi).³ Because of this entanglement and of the consequent, “constant danger of confusing remembering and imagining” (*MHF* 7), memory is unreliable. Forgetting, that “shadowy underside of the bright region of memory” (*MHF* 21) is another reason of the unreliability of memory; yet, Ricœur concludes, “we have nothing better than memory to guarantee that some-

2 All following references to Ricœur's text will be abbreviated as *MHF*.

3 For the McGahern reader and critic, these observations cannot but call the artistic manifesto, “The Image,” in which, as early as 1968, McGahern outlined the principles he would be faithful to throughout his whole career, in particular, the crucial importance of the image as the starting point of all artistic creation (see McGahern, “The Image”).

thing has taken place” (*MHF* 7). Memory, therefore, is the primary and decisive tool through which we connect to the past, appreciate the present and construct our individual and collective identity. Moving a step further, Ricœur then points out that what each individual does through memory in the private sphere corresponds to what the historian does in the collective and public domain: “[t]he historian undertakes to ‘do history’ [...] just as each of us attempts to ‘remember’” (*MHF* 57). In both cases, a selection and a combination of materials occurs in the search for truth, and “two, inseparably cognitive and practical operations” intertwine (*MHF* 57). As a matter of fact, ‘to remember’ means both ‘to have a memory, to keep something in mind’ (cognitive operation, memory as an object), and also ‘to set off in search of memories, to make the effort to recall’ (pragmatic operation, memory as an activity).

The different perspectives provided by the two novels are already evident in their titles: *The Heather Blazing* is a phrase borrowed from a rebel song called “Boolevogue,” whose first stanza features in the narrative body:

‘Come on, Tom, your song,’ his grandmother said.
 ‘I’ll do Boolevogue,’ he said.
 ‘Oh, that’s lovely, that’s lovely, now,’ his grandmother said.
 He started gently in a quavering tenor voice, looking down at the floor, but after the first two lines he sang with feeling.
 ‘At Boolevogue as the sun was setting
 O’er the bright May meadows of Shelmalier,
 A rebel hand set the heather blazing
 And brought the neighbours from far and near.’
 By the last verses he was singing with great passion, the voice no longer quivered. They all watched him, listening intently to the story of the song as though they had never heard it before. (*HB* 72-73; original emphasis)

Far from such a politically dense atmosphere, the title of McGahern’s novel, for its part, alludes to the Hail Mary: ‘*Hail Mary, full of grace. [...] Blessed art Thou amongst women.*’ If it is a fact that Moran is surrounded and ‘blessed’ by women – his second wife and his daughters – who attend to his needs with care and devotion, and who constantly confirm his supremacy and charisma, at the same time, it is also significant and somewhat ironic that McGahern should have placed Moran in the position of the Virgin Mary, not of God the Father. Critics have interpreted such a positioning as a demonstration of Moran’s loss of power (Smyth 172) or as an act of emasculation (Quinn 86). Similarly, it appears that the very name of his farm, Great Meadow, reinforces the ironic deconstruction of Moran’s supposed grandeur implicit in the novel’s title, symbolically pointing to his diminished role, from skilled and respected military leader to head of a modest farm surrounded by women and children.

As far as the setting of the two novels is concerned, again, a substantial difference is indirectly but powerfully signified: while the patriarch’s farmhouse in *Amongst Women* is situated in an unspecified spot of north-eastern, rural Ireland – with numerous references to small towns and rivers between counties Leitrim and Roscommon identifying the area as unmistakably McGahern-land – his counterpart in *The Heather Blaz-*

ing lives in Enniscorthy, one of the very few other places outside Dublin which participated in the Easter Rising of 1916 as well as the theatre of the 1798 rebellion. The topography of the two novels, then, mirrors Moran's peripheral, as opposed to Redmond's central, place in the political life of the nation.

As anticipated, however, it is primarily in the characterisation of the patriarchs and their relationship with private memories and collective history that McGahern's novel diverges most conspicuously from Tóibín's. Old Moran, in *Amongst Women*, uses his army gratuity after the end of the war to buy a farm; disillusioned and embittered by the political outlook of the newborn Republic, he retires to a very private existence and consigns his glorious past as the head of a flying column to the secluded chambers of his own memory.

As if he suddenly wanted to return the girls' favour on this Monaghan Day, he spoke to them openly about the war for the first time in their lives. [...]

'Don't let anybody fool you. It was a bad business. We didn't shoot at women and children like the Tans but we were a bunch of killers. [...] Of the twenty-two men in the original column only seven were alive at the Truce. We were never sure we'd be alive from one day to the next. Don't let them pull wool over your eyes. The war was the cold, the wet, standing to your neck in a drain for a whole night with bloodhounds on your trail, not knowing how you could manage the next step toward the end of a long march. That was the war: not when the band played and a bloody politician stepped forward to put flowers on the ground.

'What did we get for it? A country, if you'd believe them. Some of our own johnnies in the top jobs instead of a few Englishmen. More than half of my own family work in England. What was it all for? The whole thing was a cod.' (AW 5)

[...] 'Many of them who had pensions and medals and jobs later couldn't tell one end of a gun from the other. Many of the men who had actually fought got nothing. An early grave or the emigrant ship. Sometimes I get sick when I see what I fought for,' Moran said. (AW 15)

Far from such bitterness, Old Redmond, in *The Heather Blazing*, devotes all his energies to the proud commemoration of the fight for freedom of his nation, in which he and most of his family members took part as young men, and his active commitment in the transmission of the nationalist ideals that underpinned that fight is passionate and lifelong. As a grown-up man, his son Eamon is so familiar with the war stories heard in his father's family that:

At times he felt that he had been there, close by, when his grandfather was evicted, and that he had known his father's Uncle Michael, the old Fenian, who was too sick to be interned after 1916. Or that he had been in that bedroom, the room above where they were now, when his grandfather came back to the house on Easter Monday 1916 and had sat watching him as he pulled up the floorboards under which he had hidden a number of rifles. Or that he had witnessed his grandfather being taken from the house at the end of the Easter Rising. These were the things which lived with him, but he could only imagine them. [...] Some of these events were so close, they had been recounted and gone over so much. (HB 61)

A crucial section of Ricœur's *Memory, History, Forgetting* is devoted to the analysis of what he calls the "uses" and the "abuses" of memory. As he sets out to examine

the various manifestations and implications of that evocation of facts and events that is the exercise of memory (its uses) and, more importantly, its exploitation, instrumental employment, or ideological manipulation (the abuses of memory), Ricœur follows “a path [...] from *blocked* memory to *forced* memory, passing through *manipulated* memory” (*MHF* 69; original emphasis). In doing so, he identifies three types or levels of abuse, which he calls “pathological,” “practical,” and “ethico-political.” The first two types of abused memory are the most relevant for the purposes of this study, inasmuch as the approach to the past of the two father figures in *Amongst Women* and *The Heather Blazing*, as will be illustrated, appears to correspond precisely to these categories. For the first type of abused memory, Ricœur draws extensively on Freud’s essays “Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through” (1914) and “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917) to explain that “blocked memory” results from the “compulsion to repeat” a traumatic event that occurred in the past: the patient believes he or she is remembering that event, but in fact they are imprisoned in that dimension, unable to work through the trauma or to move on in the present and in a relationship with other people. The second type of abused memory identified by Ricœur is the “manipulated memory” that derives from the ideological instrumentalisation of memory operated, typically, by those who hold power (*MHF* 69-82).

As we have seen, while Old Moran reacts to the loss of prestige that follows the end of the war by retreating from a position of command in the army to the private sphere of his modest farm and dismembered family, Old Redmond dedicates himself for his entire life to the preservation and transmission of a nationalist interpretation of the past. For Moran, his dangerous but glorious youth days as a guerrilla fighter were “the best part of [his] [life]” (*AW* 6), and he desperately clings to the memory of those days to counterbalance a disappointing present. Yet, he is also a prisoner of that past, and like a typical trauma victim (Garratt 31), he is unable to work through the past and unwilling to accept change and the inexorable flow of time. Moran’s way of remembering can be classified, in Ricœur’s terms, as an abused memory, more precisely as a blocked memory resulting from traumatic events. His reticence to talk about the past with his family members reinforces this view, and in fact on only one occasion does he break “his embargo on the past” (*AW* 177), namely, in the opening scene of the novel quoted earlier. As if confirming, after his death, the reasons for Moran’s bitter disillusionment with his country, the faded character of the tricolour that covers his coffin, as well as the subdued military honours offered to him at the end of the novel, tellingly indicate that his sacrifice in youth for the nation has largely been forgotten:

All through High Mass and the slow funeral a faded tricolour covered the coffin; and as the casket stood on the edge of the grave a little man in a brown felt hat, old and stiff enough to have fought with Fionn and Oisín came out of the crowd. With deep respect he removed his hat before folding the worn flag and with it he stepped back into the crowd. There was no firing party. (*AW* 182-183)

Far from the *impasse* of Moran's crystallisation of an idealised past and thorough rejection of change, the Redmond men in *The Heather Blazing* took part in Fenian activities, served time in the Welsh prison of Frongoch as political prisoners, hid rifles in their house during the Easter Rising and burnt Protestant big houses during the Civil War (*HB* 61, 69, 70, 75, 165, 169, 170, 178). After the end of the war, Old Redmond is involved in manifold ways in the commemoration of the revolutionary history of the nation: he teaches History and Irish, he writes articles for the local newspaper, he is an active member of Fianna Fáil, he opens and curates a museum of local history in Enniscorthy Castle.⁴ Following Ricœur's theorization of memory, his relationship to the private and collective past can also be read as an abuse of memory; but while Old Moran is the victim of such an abuse, imprisoned in the cul-de-sac of a solipsistic recollection of the past and unable to accept the present, Old Redmond is actually an active agent or a perpetrator of that abuse, manipulating as he does the past so as to make it fit to the nationalist celebration of the rebels' fight for independence. Liam Harte has convincingly read this character's active and multifaceted involvement in the life of his community as "a strategic attempt to memorialize the past by fixing its meaning to accord with a triumphalist contemporary nationalist agenda and, by implication, to elide those interpretations which do not fit with this agenda" (Harte, "History, Text" 58).

Ricœur's analysis of forgetting – and of the related problematics of forgiving, guilt and reconciliation with the past – can also be fruitfully employed for a reading of McGahern's and Tóibín's novels. Forgetting, Ricœur warns, should be seen and welcomed as a necessary ingredient of recollection: "forgetting is experienced as an attack on the reliability of memory [...], a weakness, a lacuna. In this regard memory defines itself, at least in the first instance, as a struggle against forgetting. [...] But at the same time [...], we shun the spectre of a memory that would never forget anything. We even consider it to be monstrous" (*MHF* 413). So therefore forgetting is not an enemy of memory but, rather, an important counterpart and an indispensable ally to balance and to negotiate memory's right measure. Like memory, forgetting is also subjected to abuses. Historiography, for example, can sometimes be characterised by distortions or manipulations, namely, by the omission of certain details, so as to serve an ideological agenda; the work of memory, then, is essential to avoid this forced forgetting or silencing and to preserve the integrity of the past in its narration (see *MHF* 456). Unable, or unwilling, to remember openly and constructively, the protagonist of McGahern's novel is also, and more importantly, incapable of forgetting and moving on. Yeats's allegory of the "terrible beauty" that was born out of Ireland's fight for freedom is strikingly poignant here to convey this incongruous balance between dream and reality, between the war and the expectations that accompanied it,

4 Enniscorthy Castle still hosts a museum of local history, and Tóibín's father, Micheál, on whom the character of Old Redmond in *The Heather Blazing* is largely based, founded the museum in 1962 (Tóibín referred to these details in several interviews; see also Harte, "Uncertain Terms").

on the one hand, and the high cost of the battle and the anti-climax that followed it, on the other. As for Old Redmond, the selection he operates in recollection leaves out all that does not serve his purposes: private events that are not related to the political fight for freedom, for instance, are major casualties in his selective operation or, to put it differently, they are strategically 'forgotten.' In this respect, it is particularly telling that his son, Eamon, would learn from him all the names, dates and events of local and national history, but almost nothing about his mother, who died in childbirth, and thus remains emotionally maimed, eager and unable to find out more, for the rest of his life (*HB* 39-40). Tóibín's interest in silence and silencing, both as a private experience and as a collective phenomenon, is something that his novels and short stories have in common with his non-fictional writings – as a journalist, a historian, a literary critic, and a travel writer. With respect to historiography, for example, his concern for episodes and details that are intentionally erased from the narration of history, because they do not serve or fit the ideology underpinning that narration, emerges clearly in a famous 1993 article titled "New Ways of Killing Your Father," in which he observes how the cruel killing of Protestant families by Catholic rebels was omitted in the narration of the 1798 rebellion because "[i]t was a complication in our glorious past" (Tóibín, "New Ways" 3).

One last aspect of *Amongst Women* and *The Heather Blazing* that is worthy of critical attention is their different representation of the descendants of the freedom fighters and, through them, of the long-term legacies of Ireland's struggle for independence on the contemporary Irish social and cultural texture. The lives and patterns of behaviour of Moran's children are indelibly and inescapably marked by their bitter, moody, violent, and only occasionally charming father; in fact they never fully manage to overcome his influence, even after leaving Great Meadow. Yet, Moran embodies the type of masculinity which was once dominant and which was made official by the patriarchal assumptions of the 1937 Constitution (see Hughes 124). In other words, McGahern's characterisation does not aim at presenting him as a unique or a pathological case, but, in fact, it gives his behavior, if not a justification, at the very least a historical contextualization. Moran's behaviour is explained as the result of his "intimacy with violent death during the guerrilla war" (Sampson 225-226) and he is depicted as, ultimately, "no better or worse than other Irish fathers of the time" (Maher 114). *Amongst Women*, thus, traces the genealogy, or the roots, of the younger generation's insecurities and stubbornness back to their fathers' authoritarianism and disillusion and to the historical and cultural conditions that produced those features. While Old Moran appears imprisoned in an idealised version of the past, frozen, as it were, in his own cherished memories, and unable to confront change, in *The Heather Blazing* it is, on the contrary, the veteran's son, Eamon, who, following in his father's footsteps of conservative political beliefs and active commitment, is forced to come to terms with the rapid and radical changes of culture and society and finds himself at a loss facing the clash between the old and the new. As a Supreme Court Judge, he is unsettled by the "divergence of contemporary Irish culture from its foundational

ethos" (Patten 262), and by the "realization that [...] his duty is not simply to uphold the constitution and its laws, but to *interpret* them for a 'changing world' (HB 89)" (Harte, "History, Text" 63; original emphasis). Within his family, his children's opinions and lifestyles similarly diverge from his own, and the references to the erosion of the Wexford coast, which insistently punctuate the narrative, provide a powerful metaphor of the rapid wearing of ideals and beliefs (see Corcoran 98) that he, thus, witnesses both in the private and in the public spheres of his life. So, in this case, it is the younger generation, that is, the descendants of the freedom fighters, who are depicted as having great difficulties at accepting and dealing with the changing world around them. The fact that in *Amongst Women* the offspring of the freedom fighters are observed as children and adolescents, whereas *The Heather Blazing* looks at an elderly representative of this younger generation, can be interpreted, I propose, as a sign of the diverging diagnoses of the repercussions of the fathers' experiences on the children's lives offered by McGahern and Tóibín.

A consideration of the characters of these two novels proves Ricœur's analysis to be pertinent and instrumental because, for both the patriarchs and their offspring, memory as well as that collective or public counterpart of memory which is history play a decisive role in their perception of reality and in the construction of their identity. Ricœur conceives of memory precisely as an essential tool in our perception of reality and in the construction of our fragile identity:

The heart of the problem is the mobilisation of memory in the service of the quest, the appeal, the demand for identity. [...] As the primary cause of the fragility of identity we must cite its difficult relation to time, [...] [which] justifies the recourse to memory as the temporal component of identity, in conjunction with the evaluation of the present and the projection of the future. [...] The second cause of fragility lies in the confrontation with others, felt to be a threat. [...] Third cause of fragility: the heritage of founding violence. It is a fact that there is no historical community that has not arisen out of what can be termed an original relation to war. What we celebrate under the heading of founding events are, essentially, violent acts legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right [...]. (MHF 81-82).

McGahern's and Tóibín's fictions are heavily autobiographical and rely consistently on memory as an overarching and structuring component. For the characters that populate their narratives – and Moran and Redmond are no exceptions – the search for a balance and a harmony between past and present, the troubled relationships with other human beings, and the heavy legacies of history, are frequent 'causes of fragility' and discomfort, and memory is the fundamental instrument through which they perceive and construct their identity and the reality around them.

In conclusion, this comparative analysis of *Amongst Women* and *The Heather Blazing* has shown how recent Irish fiction provides various perspectives on that crucial watershed of Ireland's history that was its fight for independence, ranging from the enthusiastic celebration of the Easter Rising to a disillusioned critique of the society that emerged from the Civil War, and from the political manipulation of the past in public commemoration to the deconstruction of its ideological structures in private recol-

lection or in revisionist historiography. Overall, the nation's complicated path is portrayed from the protectionist, isolated and provincial character of its early postcolonial period to the gradual incorporation of European and global lifestyles and belief systems of more recent years. Introducing the *Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*, Colm Tóibín observed that "[t]he treatment of nationalism in Irish fiction is not celebratory [...]: violence may have led to what seemed for one illusory moment like political liberation, but the legacy of what happened in the struggle has maimed those who took part and those around them" (xxvi). Both *Amongst Women* and *The Heather Blazing* can be read in this light and as metaphorical representations of post-independence Ireland: by focusing on one of the many "independent republics" that the country was made up of in the 1940s and 50s (see McGahern's 1990 interview with Fintan O'Toole), *Amongst Women* provides a metaphor of the young Irish state and of its prevailing ideology, and in particular of the cult of the family sanctioned by Article 41 of the 1937 Constitution as the ideal cornerstone of society and a bedrock of morality. At the same time, McGahern's novel offers a critique of the ills implicit in the Irish state's complex mixture of patriarchy, nationalism and Catholicism. *The Heather Blazing*, for its part, composes an affectionate picture of Tóibín's forefathers' lifelong commitment to the rebel cause, but also unmasks pathological aspects of the late-twentieth-century Southern state, such as its imprisonment in an idealized past, its silences, the inability of its laws to keep pace with cultural change. In his poetic account of the Easter Rising, Yeats employed the image of the birth of "a terrible beauty" to assess the sacrifice of brave and idealist individuals who fought for the independence of their nation and the uncertainty that followed. The portraits of the freedom fighters and of the younger generations offered by Irish fiction in more recent times suggest that Yeats's powerful oxymoron is still a valid one to express and to gauge the simultaneously empowering and paralyzing effects of that fundamental chapter of Irish history and the contradictions and complexities of the society that it produced.

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