

NEIL JORDAN'S *THE PAST*: A JOURNEY IN TIME AND MEMORY

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... history [...] is not the arrangement of what happens, in sequence and in truth, but a fabulous arrangement of surmises and guesses ... (Barry 56)

This chapter will explore Neil Jordan's handling of history, memory, and time in his first novel *The Past*, published in 1980 and re-issued in December 2012. It will also investigate the role of the visual imagination in the unravelling of the narrative. This analysis provides the opportunity to shed light on Jordan's debut novel in retrospect, especially in view of his later development as a filmmaker, whose visual imagination as a maker of images is often intertwined with history. Indeed, history haunts and underlies many of Jordan's films, from the backdrop of the Troubles in *The Crying Game*, to the 1960s in *The Butcher Boy*, to the Easter Rising in *Michael Collins*, in which Jordan's concern with history becomes image-making eighty years after the 1916 Rising, thus highlighting the complementary continuity of historical memory and historical construction or reconstruction.

The Past highlights the process of reconstruction of the past: here personal history is intertwined with the history of the nation. In 1914 actress Una O'Shaughnessy leaves Ireland pregnant with her baby. She returns nine months later with her little girl, Rene, and with her husband, Michael, who will become a leading figure in the years after the Rising. *The Past* is the story of Rene as reconstructed and imagined by her own child, the nameless protagonist, as he looks for the truth about his parents' history and the circumstances of his own birth. The protagonist of the novel is in search of origins, of his own and his family's past, in the form of further knowledge about his parents, first of all about his mother – he is emotionally eager to glean information, news and images, fragments of his mother's life: "I would petition her for memories like these" (12). The narrative interweaves the protagonist's present quest with the past of his mother's conception, family, upbringing as well as the mystery of his father's identity and it ends with the protagonist's birth. The personal history he pieces together – by means of visual aids such as postcards or photographs, personal recollections of friends of his parents' and work of imagination – is intertwined with the past covering the early years of the twentieth century, with events set within the historical and cultural context that brought about the birth of the Irish nation. Both Marguerite Pernot-Deschamps and Christina Hunt Mahony have pointed out that this is one of the favoured historical periods in Neil Jordan's productions,¹ so much so that De Valera as well as "Michael Collins, [as] opposing figures in the founding of the

1 "Four periods in particular are used figuratively: the years of the Big House decline, the Great War, the Irish Civil War and Irish involvement in the Spanish Civil War, and finally the early years of the Free State and the Emergency" (Pernot-Deschamps 6).

Irish State, loom large in Jordan's imagination, as [...] in that of many living Irish writers" (Mahony 241).

Highlighting the novel's obsession with visual perception, *The Past* opens with two postcards showing the same image of an English seaside resort. They have survived the past and they bear the marks of time: "Both are yellow and with serrated edges, yellowest at the edges as if singed by a match. But the flame is time and the smell, far from the smell of burning, is the smell of years" (9). The first one is dated June 1914, the second some months later. They reveal elements relevant both to the unravelling of the story and to the portrayal of the characters: they announce the birth of Rene, the protagonist's mother, and the fact that Una, her mother, was a "compulsive liar" (10). They also disclose the "perhaps subsidiary" (11) information that in the interval "between the first card and the second the Archduke Ferdinand was shot in Sarajevo" (11), thus obliquely introducing the historical framework of the outbreak of the First World War which, as Roy Foster claims, was an "extraneous event" which "almost entirely" created "the scenario for 1916" (Foster 461). The details of historical contextualisation contrast with the uncertainty of the information to be filled in regarding the protagonist's past. As a matter of fact, these postcards are the first clues in the mystery concerning the protagonist which will not be completely solved. From the very beginning the narrating voice fills what is outside the postcards, it recreates what is not there, it builds the town around and behind the esplanade featured in the postcards, it imagines palms facing the sea. Starting from the postcard, it imagines objects, but also thoughts, desires, attitudes, alternatives, and by doing so it is engaged in a process of imaginative construction or reconstruction.

In her critical study of Neil Jordan's fiction, Marguerite Pernot-Deschamps argues that in *The Past*, "the country's history [...] provides a very tangible time framework" (Pernot-Deschamps 3), in that "history is well and truly there but very much as a *background* to individual stories and, furthermore, as a source of imagery reflecting the smaller events [...] History, the 'big picture'," she continues, "is *accidental* to his fiction. [...] It is a *repository of images* against which, and through which, to explore the 'minute details' that appear 'behind the scenes'" (Pernot-Deschamps 5, emphasis added). I would rather claim, however, that the role of Irish history in the novel contributes to the making of the plot, which involves both individual and national narratives. Interestingly, Keith Hopper has defined *The Past* not only as a "retelling of the Irish national narrative" (Hopper 76), but also as "'historiographic metafiction'," borrowing the definition from Linda Hutcheon,² who "coined the term [...] to describe novels possessing a 'theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs'" (Hopper 76). In fact, *The Past* revolves around the awareness of history and of fiction; as in his historiographic metafiction, according to Hopper, Jordan is "less concerned with history *per se*, and more with the way that the past is remembered and

2 As Linda Hutcheon writes, "historiographic metafiction [...] represents a challenging of the (related) conventional forms of fiction and history through its acknowledgment of their inescapable textuality" (11).

represented in a variety of cultural and narrative forms" (Hopper 83). Almost a decade before Hopper this perspective was anticipated by Neil Murphy, who claimed that "with *The Past*, Jordan [...] embraces the formal metafictional properties of the Postmodern novel and attempts to construct a stylised artificial universe composed via the narrator's imagined reconstruction of his parents' past" (Murphy 194).

Indeed, throughout the novel the textuality of narratives and of historical narratives is metafictionally insisted upon with a resulting emphasis on the fictive nature of writing History – a "culturally produced version of the past" (Pine 5), often "reflecting the needs of the present" (Pine 5) – and a related emphasis on the role of imagination in the (re)construction of characters and events. The narrator often intersperses his narrative with remarks which either reveal the imaginative nature of his reconstruction, or metafictionally question the picture he is creating, so that the abundance of phrases containing the verb 'imagine' or 'picture' is a stylistic strategy and a structuring principle, and therefore it is charged with meaning. It is the narrator who imagines throughout the novel, thus creatively constructing the setting³ and the characters⁴ and has them, in turn, imagine fragments of landscape or physical details, and hypotheses about the past or the future.⁵ The act of imagining, both lexically – there are forty-three occurrences of the verb 'imagine' – and conceptually, constitutes the texture of the novel and is highly insisted upon; toward the end of the novel this insistence grows stronger: Chapter xxxviii opens with the words "Can you imagine," anaphorically repeated five times and in three cases introduced by "But" – "But can you imagine" (183-184). Even if to a much lesser extent, also the verb 'picture' takes part in this imaginative construction,⁶ implicitly emphasising the visual perspective privileged

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- 3 "These shrubs will grow, of course, into the palms I imagine them to be" (15); "if the town is as I imagine it" (16); "an idyllic scene as I imagine it" (104); "Stations in the small resorts on the western seaboard, so poignant to imagine, don't, regrettably, exist" (193); "and the grey blocks there, I imagine, must be weeping with the salt and water in the winds" (193).
 - 4 "How Michael became implicated is uncertain. [...] I would like to imagine it was in remembrance of that promenade" (46); "I imagine him taking a hidden pride" (77); "He had aged, of course, from when I had imagined him" (139); "if James was jealous, and jealousy I imagine is a faded, parched colour" (155); "But instead he sits there with, I imagine, a growing sense of relief" (202).
 - 5 "I can't imagine him not loving anyone" (12-13); "And you could see how marriage to Una [...] would have been natural to him, an extension of that undifferentiated love with which I imagine he first made her pregnant" (13); "He grips his overcoat tightly around him and imagines that he feels neither wind nor cold but that just what he sees is real" (25); "He imagines her slim, starved body blooming, he moves his hand over imaginary curves" (35); "Yes, although I've never seen her I've imagined her just like that" (142); "that body of water that seems to Luke to form one long wave that he imagines must surge north and south" (194).
 - 6 "if you can picture it" (17); "She would picture the landscape towards which the train always goes" (122); "For not even the best of us can picture the outside from in" (156); "I picture her wearing a bulky, shapeless fawn-coloured coat" (219); "Lisdoonvarna I pictured as a town of gazebos, white metal bandstands" (220).

in the novel. The continuous stress on the imaginative nature of the narrator's reconstruction is accompanied by an awareness of its problematic nature: the extensive use of conditional forms contributes to the narrator's questioning of the picture he is creating, which in turn he also questions frequently and directly: "paddle-boats (they had them then?)," "Was it the age of canvas?" (10), or, much later: "Did everyone feel more then?" (139).

The process of recreation of both past and characters through memory and imagination is self-consciously problematic. "Throughout the novel," Hopper claims, "the characters autocritically acknowledge the unreliability of memory and the subjectivity of interpretation" (Hopper 80). Furthermore, in Murphy's view, "the representation of reality is subservient to the analysis of the epistemological mechanisms employed in the construction of the account" (Murphy 205). Thus the novel implicitly debates the authority of historical reconstruction and of historical writing, or of writing itself at large.

When the protagonist first enters the villa in Bray where his father lived – whoever he was, either James Vance, the Protestant photographer who "exchanged his horse for a conscience" (77), or his son Luke –, he has the opportunity to verify his imaginative constructs: "knowing *each detail was right whether it happened or not*, each fact was part of him, *whether real or not*" (137, emphasis added). So strong is this experience that the size of the house increases, and time expands: "It took me years to cross from bay window to door, so huge had the room become" (139). When he gets to the villa – which he juxtaposes and overlaps with "the only home there is, that of imagination verified" – he realises that he has left out some things from his imaginative reconstruction of the place, such as the existence of the kitchen, totally removed – "But you can't put in everything, I thought" (138) – and, conversely, that he has put in things which are not there, such as the "green felt table." Notably, this table has been repeatedly evoked since the beginning of the novel and is a familiar presence for the reader by the time its absence is acknowledged: "There was no green felt-topped table" (138). Fluidity envelops memories, the narrator acknowledges that "the past can be recreated at will" (Murphy 199). Thinking of his mother, he reveals: "I meditate on her in a way and *invent her in parts* as you must know by now, for the secret must be out. And if it's out, I'm not sure whether I've failed, and if it's not out, I'm not sure whether I've succeeded" (155, emphasis added). Also the characters, in turn, express doubts in relation to their memory and their interpretation of the past: as Lily – Rene's childhood friend – claims, "But then I could be wrong, we could all be wrong" (13), thus raising uncertainty on the supposed authority of witnesses or participants in historical or personal past.

Likewise, the conscious metafictional reflection both emphasizes and queries the effort of finding a meaning: "The meaning we demand," James wonders, "is never forthcoming; or if it is, not in any form that comforts. If it comes, it comes too late" (83). Doubts surround memory and truth and the creation of meaning appears oc-

asionally marked by fragility: "The one event occurred that made a pattern of all the other events and without that event [...] all the events before it would have been random. But the event occurred and took the others, like stringless beads, pulling a sudden thread through them. So afterwards he can muse in retrospect [...] how each must have held the germ of the significance with which it was later blessed" (130).

As his mother's name had "some connection with those whose names gave names to streets" (113), her environment is not simply private, but it interweaves and at times overlaps with events and people that led to the making of modern Ireland. As so often in Irish prose, both in autobiographical writing and in fiction, the writing of the individual and/or of the fictional self, crosses and partly coincides with the writing of the nation.⁷ The protagonist's seeming loss of his mother's past sets him on his quest for eye-witnesses, whose words may give him the fabric for his imaginative piecing together of the past: "But what do I know of all those years, of Dev and the Clare election and the Custom House fire? The ashes rose over the city, she told me, of the burnt files of each birth, marriage and death. Then they fell like summer snow, for three days. Lili walked through them, maybe held out her palms, caught the down of her birth-cert on the rim of her schoolgirl bonnet" (12). The Custom House fire and the lyrical image of the snow fall of the records of the General Register Office represents, according to Hopper, "a striking image of the fragility of written history" (Hopper 80), but also of the fragility of the attempt itself to put facts, or assumed facts, into words.

In addition to that, the novel displays an array of plausible, of 'factually fictional' characters representative of the historical period and of the cultural context, by means of references to times, people and episodes or anecdotes. When trying to bring to life the character of Una, Lily reminds the protagonist that "those were the early days of the Gaelic League" (17) and Una "had the luck to be an Irish speaker" (16).⁸ The political dynamics of the time are openly referred to, such as the debate about enlisting in the Great War and the hatred of the years after the War leading to the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War. Michael, the protagonist's maternal grandfather, is "from a Redmondite family" (13) and later on becomes an officer of the Free State: "He was the best of them, by far the best of them, he was marked out for what would happen to him later" (13), that is, one could say, characteristically, being shot in the street, and turned into a national hero. Rene's mother, a bad actress whose "'Gaelic splendour' [...] was 'representative of what is best in Irish womanhood'" (42), evokes the Celtic Revival and the theatrical fervour of the early twentieth century, as "she had the luck [...] to meet Messrs Yeats and Fay and then gradually to be thought of as the Irish woman resplendent" (16). She is also involved in riots at plays: "when *The Plough* came on she shouted her guts out from the pits with the rest of them, even though Mr Yeats shouted his apotheosis from his private box" (18). After the Easter

7 For an analysis of this relationship, see Lynch and Cotta Ramusino.

8 Although this is later redefined: "'Irish [...] Una could half speak it, a ridiculous *blas* she had when I remember her, but by then maybe she had forgotten most of it'" (28).

Rising she would fast become “the *grande dame* of Irish Republicanism” (45). All the characters therefore contribute to reconstruct in some ways the political ambience of Ireland at the beginning of the twentieth century with its struggles, divisions, and political strengths. The presence of fictional characters alternates with historical ones, and “Jordan’s use of historic personalities, like the Archduke Ferdinand and de Valera, has an anchoring, resonant effect on the mass of imaginings with which we are confronted” (Murphy 209), which also validates the authenticity, truth, and consistency of memories and reconstruction.

The figure of De Valera is present throughout *The Past*: he is a “Gaelic League colleague of [Una’s]” (45) and one of her admirers – “de Valera attending her opening nights” (67) – but after Michael’s murder he will increasingly ignore her, “until in the end Dev himself didn’t turn up at the opening night of *The Moon on the Yellow River*” (71). The ‘father of the nation’ is a presiding figure in this novel, which pivots on a quest for origins and uncertain fathers: the uncertain parentage of the protagonist echoes De Valera’s, which is unmentioned in the novel, though. De Valera’s presence is always there, hovering over the narrative and crossing it: at the beginning of *The Past* he is reported to have gone to see Una perform when she was at the height of her success, and towards the end he goes to see Rene when she is touring the provinces and he is on the “election trail” (Hopper 78). At the end, his election trail and her tour run parallel and intersect, until “the mysterious, open-ended denouement at a crossroads” (Hopper 84) near St Brigid’s Well in Liscannor.⁹ Moreover, “the birth of the narrator coincides with De Valera’s impending rise to power in 1934” (Hopper 78). The routes of the ‘father of the Nation’ and of the protagonist’s mother cross at the very moment when she gives birth to him, at a crossroads, symbolical, and evocative, as Keith Hopper points out, of one of De Valera’s most renowned speeches, in which he set the terms for the new nation’s moral picture. The ensuing strict moral course might also explain the erasure of the narrator’s mother from history.

As the first chapter closes on “the birth of her child” (11) – that is, Rene, the protagonist’s mother – the novel ends with the protagonist’s birth: “and now I in that standing train the steam of which was hissing towards silence through those waters and that musk of generation came” (232). In the closing paragraph, the urgency, expectation, and effort of childbirth is conveyed syntactically by an unusual distance between subject (“I”) and verb (“came”) which is the very last word of the novel. The space between subject and verb is occupied by an accumulation of embedded phrases without any punctuation. Both elements – embedding and lack of pauses – contribute to an increasing tension which reaches its climax in the verb and is finally released by it. The release brought about by the long-postponed utterance of the verb is analogous to the release following childbirth.

9 Appropriately, Rene had been born on 1 February, St Brigid’s Day, but could not be named after the Saint, as this would have given away Una’s secret, that is, that “this wonder of hers had been conceived out of wedlock” (41).

The Past is a novel which may raise interpretive doubts¹⁰ due to a number of reasons: the mix of unreliable memory, events remembered and partially removed; the shift between first, third and occasionally second-person narration, for example when the narrator mentally addresses his mother;¹¹ the polyphony of voices; the recurring shifts in verbal tenses as the narration hovers between past and present; and the narrator's ideas about the story which keep interrupting the "narrative flow" (Hopper 80). Another important factor contributing to indeterminacy is the difficulty of establishing the gender of the protagonist, who is unnamed, and whose gender is undefined almost to the end of the novel,¹² but also the identity of his father, which remains unknown.

Time – its expansion as well as its compression – is also a recurring object of reflection in the narration: from the "the death of time" (37) on which Michael muses at the beginning of the story, to James's desire to control it through his photographs, "as he tries to suppress the windmills of time, change and chaos into an ordered progression of prints, a march of moments pencilled in days, months and years" (76), to the annihilation of time in relation to Rene's pregnancy; in both cases, pregnancy is thus related to a defeat of time. This leads to a necessary observation on the epigraph to the novel, which reads: "Eternity is passion." Although the word 'eternity' does not appear in the novel, the treatment of time – its frequent expansion, as well as the repetition of moments, in order to prolong them – is consistent with the concept of eternity, as is the word 'passion,' and the insistence on love in relation to Rene: "Love is the word Michael thinks of all the time, that unique syllable that takes in tongue, lips and teeth" (33).

The epigraph is taken from Yeats's "Supernatural Songs."¹³ A. Norman Jeffares's comment on this poem could be a revealing comment on the novel as well: "This poem asks what imponderables lie behind personal love or general history" (Jeffares 431), and it is a comment which Jordan might have read, as Jeffares's, published in 1968, has been the standard annotated edition of Yeats's poems for some decades. This connection is not a mere intellectual *divertissement*, as Genette's study of the re-

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- 10 As proof of the difficulties of reading and interpreting this novel, Hopper lists some discrepancies in a note: "the blurb for the 1993 Vintage edition gets the basic plot details wrong, confusing Rene with Una. Several reviewers shared this confusion: James Simmons conflates Lili and Una, and Rüdiger Imhof calls the nameless narrator 'Michael'" (Hopper 80).
- 11 According to Elke D'hoker, Jordan has "made first-person narration almost exclusively the hallmark of [his] writing" (D'hoker 41).
- 12 The blurring of gender and/or the change of identity is a recurring feature in Neil Jordan – notable examples are *The Dream of a Beast* (1983) or *The Crying Game* (1992). As Keith Hopper writes, "Jordan has turned ontological uncertainty and epistemological doubt into something of an artistic credo" (76).
- 13 It is taken from the eighth poem of the sequence, "VIII Whence Had They Come?," probably written in 1934 (the temporal closeness to the protagonist's birth in *The Past* must be a coincidence) and added later to the sequence. It was included in *Parnell's Funeral and Other Poems* (1935), a section of the volume *A Full Moon in March*.

lation of epigraphs to texts has made clear. As a matter of fact, this is part of the author's careful orchestration of all the elements of the text: nothing is put in carelessly.

The past, as Dominick La Capra observes, "arrives in the form of texts and textualized remainders – memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments, and so forth" (La Capra 128). In Jordan's novel, the past and the narrator's quest for origins pivot on images, conversations, and imagination: the strong relevance given to the visual imagination is a hallmark of this text. "The narrator's reliance on postcards and photographs allows Jordan to overtly discuss the nature of the visual media and in turn any medium which attempts to frieze moments of a life [...] the narrator immediately moves beyond the world of represented experience" (Murphy 205). Thus emphasis is given to images and the way they are seen or even imagined, constructed by their author – whether he is a photographer, like James, or a painter, like James's father, both makers of images – or experienced by the narrator. "The overwhelming use of images through his fiction," Marguerite Pernot-Deschamps remarks, "and the recurrent emphasis placed on what some of the characters look at, see or watch, both point to a strong interaction between [Jordan's] two means of expression or the two facets of his art": writing and film-making (Pernot-Deschamps 115), that is image-making. Images prompt the narration and the vocabulary stresses both the imaginative and the visual aspect. The novel abounds in photographs, because, the narrator reveals, "it is the spirit of that photographer that impels this book" (75). Images are also a means to give order to experience, an attempt to control it: "and so it took months and years of prints for him to even know what he was asking; that he could never hope for arrival, at the most for a judicious departure" (84). In this the narrator acknowledges a genealogy: "I see both of us trying to snatch from the chaos of this world the order of the next, which is why even now, so long from the end, I am tempted to call him 'father'" (76).

Through the narrator's imaginative recreations, Jordan manages to delve into the intellectual, cultural, and political texture of the early twentieth-century as the narrator's personal quest enlarges into a collective quest in the founding years of the nation and in the issues raised at the time, thus testifying to the "centrality of memory to contemporary views of self and nation in Ireland" (Klein 6). The outbreak of the First World War and the debates and events related to it in Ireland are central to the development of the novel: enlistment, Home Rule, independence, the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War and the Civil War, De Valera and the Free Staters, all are crucial issues here. Bernhard Klein argues that very often "Irish writers engage with the past only as a troublesome 'burden'," and consider history "under the exclusive rubric of a 'traumatic' memory" (Klein 1). This view is reflected, in his opinion, in the high number of quotations of Stephen Dedalus's passage in *A Portrait* in which history is seen as a nightmare from which to awake in order to free both the individual and the nation. Yet, this is not the case in *The Past*, where the recurring fading of realistic data into imaginative constructs, as well as the deferral of meaning and blurring of identity – stylistic hallmarks of Neil Jordan's work as a whole, both in fiction and in film – con-

fer a lyrical halo to the narration. In Jordan's first novel the cruxes of early twentieth-century Irish history are never seen as a burden, but are imaginatively and lyrically reconstructed, while simultaneously weighed and queried in the reconstruction itself.

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