

## **‘THE END OF THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT’: NEW NARRATIVE FORMS FOR A NEW ERA IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION FROM THE NORTH OF IRELAND?**

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In the middle of the second decade of the twenty-first century, an interesting yet still embryonic phenomenon can be observed in some recent fiction from the North of Ireland: a tendency towards dystopian allegories or quasi-apocalyptic narratives. If 1998 marked the end of the ‘Troubles’, to which the violent conflict is euphemistically and inadequately referred, it did not necessarily trigger resolution. As old wounds continue to fester in spite of (or perhaps because of) a political discourse which calls for a moving on from the tensions and divisions of the past, writers of fiction strive to reflect something of the uncertainties of the present time through experimentation with new narrative forms. Since the very beginning of the contemporary ‘Troubles’, artists and writers have attempted to make sense of them, to interrogate the multiplicity of identities and to come up with adequate modes of representation through which the various forms of violence which dominated the North for so long might be figured, configured and reconfigured. If poetry has long been the dominant means of literary expression in the North<sup>1</sup>, which boasts of more than a handful of world-renowned poets (not to mention the Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney), fiction has grappled with the same thorny questions, and drawn attention to the problems inherent to the representation of violence. Liam Harte and Michael Parker already pointed out over ten years ago the “critical revisioning” at play in the works of contemporary writers of fiction from the North, and the emergence of “tropes of transformation and translation” coupled with a continuing emphasis on place as “a critical, contested signifier [...] inextricably linked to questions of political identity and cultural allegiance” (249-250). Contemporary writers of fiction from the six counties continue to explore place as “a critical, contested signifier”, but by displacing the usual signposts and toying with strange and yet somehow familiar topographies: Anna Burns, Francis Hagan and Sean O’Reilly all upset traditional representations of the city besieged by violence and attempt to “construct different realities, different forms of common sense – that is to say, different spatiotemporal systems, different communities of words and things, forms and meanings” (Rancière 102).<sup>2</sup>

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1 Elmer Kennedy-Andrews, for instance, states that for “serious literary engagement with the Troubles we tend to think of poetry and even drama rather than fiction” (7).

2 Jacques Rancière is making this point in relation to the visual arts, but given the focus he also places on words and images as all contributing to the creation of fiction(s), his ideas are equally relevant here. All the more so as he underlines the fact that works of art (or literature) cannot in themselves “supply weapons for battles”. They can, how-

It could of course be argued that the very act of continuing to write ‘about’ the ‘Troubles’, peripherally or directly, is conservative in itself, honing in (not to say cashing in) on a turbulent recent past and thereby contributing to a stagnation both in artistic expression and in politics. It will be my contention, however, that the narratives produced by these three authors actually participate in the opening up of new perspectives through which the past, but also the future, can be questioned, (re)shaped and (re)written. In short, Anna Burns’s *Little Constructions* (2007), Francis Hagan’s *The Auditor* (2010), and Sean O’Reilly’s short stories “Curfew” and “The Good News” (2000), though obviously not apolitical, do move well beyond the all too frequent manichean lens through which the North is usually narrated in fiction and in so doing, pave the way for future narrative innovations in which “[w]ithout rejecting their past, [...] writers nevertheless strain against its sectarian, insularist and monologic claims, migrating beyond local and national boundaries, negotiating beyond the old and the new, tradition and modernity, the local and the international” (Kennedy-Andrews 275).

I do not want to suggest too stringently the generic codes which link the fictional works which I will be analysing, as to do so would involve a totalising approach which these texts work hard to reject. As the prominent theorists of dystopian narratives, Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini, point out, it is essential when dealing with the genre of dystopia to guard against the danger of investigations into critical utopias and dystopias “hardening into a fixed paradigm”. To do so would be to defeat the purpose of this generic choice (9). I do, however, want to suggest that the narratives I will be analysing offer a way out of the clichéd ‘either/or’ or ‘both’<sup>3</sup> which characterise much fiction from this part of Ireland, and that they offer a move towards ‘neither’.<sup>4</sup> In other words, the specific choice of dystopian or apocalyptic genres is fundamental to the project of narrating and thereby re-imagining, though not necessarily favourably, the world.

In his introduction to *Nation and Narration*, Homi Bhabha highlights that the “‘locality’ of national culture is neither unified nor unitary in relation to itself, nor must it be seen simply as ‘other’ in relation to what is outside or beyond it. The boundary is Janus-

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ever, “sketch new configurations of what can be seen, what can be said and what can be thought and, consequently, a new landscape of the possible” (103).

- 3 Even novels as acclaimed as Robert McLiam Wilson’s *Eureka Street* or, more recently, David Park’s *The Truth Commissioner* fall into the trap of carefully balancing the narrative between (at least) one representative of the Nationalist and Unionist communities, thereby perpetuating oppositions even as they attempt to break free of them.
- 4 Although I will not be exploring it here, the prose writing of Ciaran Carson also marks a very interesting departure from the forms of narrative which have dominated much fictional output from the North of Ireland. Even his most recent novels, *The Pen Friend* (2009) and *Exchange Place* (2012), which are “more streamlined and straightforward” than his other prose works, are sites in which an “ambitious meditation upon memory, art, comprehension and misunderstanding” can be developed (Gillis 255). Although non-dystopian, what Carson’s fiction has in common with that of the authors under study here is the manner in which it clearly “surpass[es] any simplistic scenario pitting one force against another” (268).

faced and the problem of outside/inside must always itself be a process of hybridity [...]” (4). This statement is particularly interesting in the troubled context of the North of Ireland, which is certainly anything but “unified or unitary in relation to itself” and constantly “Janus-faced”. Any narrative of the North of Ireland automatically stumbles against overlapping and contradictory points of view and fictional texts are a privileged space within which these collisions can, indeed must, provoke significant aesthetic innovations. This paper will explore works of fiction by three northern novelists who have privileged a move away from the naturalist prose which has been the dominant form of fiction in the north, along with the Thriller genre. By defining and interrogating their dystopian, allegorical or apocalyptic narratives of Belfast and Derry, I will consider to what extent and in what ways these authors contribute to emphasising or resolving latent tensions through the writing of space and whether these narratives proffer a vision of hope and resolution, however timid, or despair.

Published respectively in 2000, 2007 and 2010, Sean O'Reilly's *Curfew and Other Stories*, Anna Burns's *Little Constructions* and Francis Hagan's *The Auditor* are all situated in urban environments which are simultaneously strange and familiar. The settings of two stories from O'Reilly's collection, the eponymous “Curfew” and “The Good News” are a city that has, for reasons unknown, become a lawless, endemically violent society. Anna Burns's *Little Constructions* is set in a dysfunctional town named Tiptoe Floorboard in which one patriarchal family wreaks terror even as it violently implodes (an implosion which is inversely proportionate to the centrifugal narrative style). Francis Hagan's *The Auditor* is set in a city besieged by two warring factions and a body named “the Monitors” who are ostensibly engaged in conflict resolution, but who, it is revealed, have vested interests in the perpetuation of the conflict. These chaotic, dystopian or quasi-apocalyptic representations of the city correspond as an ensemble to the definition Gyan Prakash offers in the introduction to *Noir Urbanisms*, a collection of essays on imagining the modern city specifically within a dystopian paradigm: “In these portrayals, the city often appears as dark, insurgent [...], dysfunctional [...], engulfed in ecological and social crises, seduced by capitalist consumption, paralyzed by crime, wars, class, gender, and racial conflicts, and subjected to excessive technological and technocratic control” (1). As Prakash also reminds us, “the dystopic imagination places us directly in a terrifying world to alert us of the danger that the future holds if we do not recognise its symptoms in the present” (2). This is not to say that the novels by Burns and Hagan and the stories by O'Reilly are all strictly speaking dystopian narratives. In fact, if one takes as a frame of reference the definitions given by Moylan and Baccolini in *Dark Horizons: Science Fiction and the Dystopian Imagination*, Burns's novel and O'Reilly's stories are rather anti-utopian texts, and only Hagan's novel corresponds to the definition of a dystopian narrative. Quoting Lyman Tower Sargent, these authors define anti-utopian texts as “both fictional and expository” and “directed against Utopia and utopian thought”, in other words as refusing to engage in the creation of any kind of structure which might address the dangers or threats looming large within society. Dystopian texts on the other hand follow “specific

formal strategies” (Moylan and Baccolini 5) which, although quite distinct from narrative strategies employed in utopian and anti-utopian texts, nevertheless bear traces of the same type of social imagining found in utopian or eutopian narratives in which radically different societies are dreamt into being. Chaos is the defining aspect of both Burns’s and O’Reilly’s fictional texts, both in terms of the diegesis and the formal strategies to which it is buttressed: chronology is disrupted, onomastics are deliberately confusing and an episodic as opposed to linear dynamic all contribute to complicating the reading process. Neither text features a main character *per se*, and no back story of war, revolution or uprising is provided as is the case in Hagan’s *The Auditor* and most canonical dystopian fictions. The dystopian staple of misused control of advanced surveillance technology is also absent in Burns’s and O’Reilly’s fictions and present in Hagan’s. Notwithstanding these differences, however, all three authors investigate in exciting new ways and with some degree of generic convergence the consequences of violent conflict and thereby contribute to ongoing reflections into how best one may come to terms with the past and embark upon the uncertain future.

In both O’Reilly’s and Burns’s texts, the anchoring of the setting in a barely recognisable Derry and Belfast respectively is apparent not so much in terms of the representation of space, but in terms of linguistic idiosyncrasy. As I have pointed out elsewhere,<sup>5</sup> both authors use words and expressions which are associated with the vernaculars of Derry and Belfast (such as the locution ‘yousens’ or the placing of the coordinator ‘but’ at the end of a sentence in the case of Derry and expressions such as “hitting a reddener” [Burns 71], “a fit of the headstagers” [ 89], “dead on” [150] or “Hell, slap it into him” [159] in the case of Belfast). O’Reilly occasionally merges the strange and the familiar in *Curfew* by inserting the names of the odd well-known street in Derry (such as Fairman or Lone Moor Road), offsetting them against a backdrop of buildings “without a front” (160) or “ransacked [...], scratched up and strewn” graves (158). Hagan, on the other hand, renders it virtually impossible to situate his novel in a futuristic version of Belfast. Indeed, he is at pains to short-circuit any attempt to pin the setting down, as his use of names makes amply clear, a point I will return to. However, the obvious parallels between the omnipresent violence and its manifestations in these fictional works and recognisable aspects of the Troubles leave no room for doubt that these authors are all concerned to establish new modes of representation<sup>6</sup> as a means of interrogating the “post-past cit[ies]”<sup>7</sup> of Derry and Belfast.

5 See Fiona McCann, “Gender(ed) Trouble(s)” and “‘The post-past city’”.

6 By new modes of representation, I do not mean to suggest that these authors are particularly revolutionary in their approaches to and creation of narrative dystopias, a genre which is very well established and which has yielded a considerable number of fictional works, many of which have become modern classics. I merely wish to acknowledge that recourse to this particular genre is an interesting new departure in contemporary fiction from this part of Ireland.

7 A character in Sean O’Reilly’s *Love and Sleep: A Romance* jokingly refers to Derry as a “post-past city” (xvi) in a vague mockery of the frequent contemporary tendency to

Writing about Belfast as it is depicted in Eoin McNamee's *Resurrection Men*, Aaron Kelly has highlighted that the novel "recapitulates a [...] regressive notion of Belfast as a fallen city, as a malign architectural projection of the inner landscapes of loathing of its inhabitants" even as it also "functions in a utopian manner in gesturing by means of criminal pattern to the urban totality itself, its social relations, the dialectic of its inequalities and potentialities, its fragmentation and affiliation" (178). I take this remark as a starting point as I think that the fictional works of Burns, Hagan and O'Reilly operate in a similar way, particularly revealing the underbelly of "social relations" and exposing the "fragmentations and affiliation", notwithstanding some major differences, the most important of which is the very difficulty of situating any of these texts in either Derry or Belfast.

In *Little Constructions*, Anna Burns clearly plays with traditional representations of Belfast as outlined by Kelly to better undermine them: "So you see, you didn't, you couldn't – how could you? – know the minds you're dealing with in this dreadful abyss of brokenness, this dead valley of hopelessness, this nethermost pit of faithlessness" (74). The combination here of the narrator's conversational tone, the manner in which she directly addresses the reader, the preclusion of any possibility of understanding the minds of the people of this land and the hyperbolic and extremely clichéd metaphors used to depict this town, reinforced by the ternary rhythm, all contribute to debunking this negative and self-pitying image through overkill. The very name of the town in which the novel is set also calls attention, through ridicule, to the town as projection of the inhabitants' fears:

That's what everybody did in Tiptoe Floorboard. Tiptoe Floorboard, by the way, was the nickname for the town. Its real name was Tiptoe Under Greystone Cliff. People who could take the town or leave the town called it 'that auld shitehole' and those who really adored the place, and who liked their diminutives also, strung out their intimacy with 'Tippy-Toe-Under-Tippy-Toe-Ette'. They're deranged those last people, though. (40)

Apart from the association between this fictional town and Belfast through the allusion to Cave Hill, a basaltic hill (grey in colour) which is situated in North Belfast and overlooks the city, this intervention by the narrator humorously stresses both the notion of the city as an embodiment of the fear in which its inhabitants live and their (albeit absurd) whimsical renaming of the city to suit their opinions of the place. The diglossic dimension of the utterance further highlights the discrepancy between different perspectives of the town and the gap between official and vernacular discourses.

In O'Reilly's "Curfew" and Hagan's *The Auditor*, the city remains nameless. Contrary, however, to Burns's novel, which suggests that Tiptoe Floorboard has suffered from endemic violence for generations, there is a clear suggestion in the other two texts of an era preceding the present time of the narration and a contrast is thus established between a non-dystopian past and a dystopian present. Euphemisms such as "be-

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add the prefix 'post' to any noun or adjective, to the extent that all meaning is lost in the process.

fore all this started" (O'Reilly, *Curfew* 47) or "before all the trouble **STARTED**" (62) or reference to the past such as "there used to be ornaments in the glass cabinet under the window" (48) call attention to a relatively 'normal' past, without revealing anything about the present in "Curfew", except that it bears traces of some sort of dislocation: The focaliser, a young boy, "took aim and drew back his arm at an old cooker in the street, a lamppost, the window of an empty house, a car door in a tree, some shape at a corner, a beer keg, a coat lying over a gate and launched stones at the darkness itself" (61). The juxtaposition here of parts separated from the whole, and their incongruous positioning, point towards a rupture which does not just derange the present cityscape, but also marks a rupture between a recognisable past and a chaotic present. The violence of this present, the genesis of which is significantly absent from the text, is posited in the verbs used to describe his brother's actions as he joins the other men in a search party (although what they are searching for remains unsaid and perhaps even unknown to them): "Eamon was first out into the field, *slashing* the torch around like a sword [...] *slicing* and *stabbing* the dark with his torch" (67, emphasis added). The alliterative sibilance emphasises Eamon's incisive, trenchant gestures and links them to an overall atmosphere of violent confrontation in the presence of the narrative world.

In Hagan's *Auditor*, frequent recourse to the past perfect serves to bridge the gap between a bearable past and an unbearable present. Using internal focalisation, Hagan allows Kristof Mann, the main character whose name has been found on a death list, to reminisce about the past as he attempts to make sense of the present and his impending death. The situation has clearly evolved from one resembling the 'Troubles' (when two warring groups, named the Blacks and the Whites, names which clearly draw attention to the clichés of manichean representation of the conflict, waged war on themselves and on the community) to an autocratic society under high surveillance in which citizens who threaten the tenuous equilibrium are eliminated. The description of the city itself is sufficiently general so as to correspond to practically any European city: "It was a small city, as European cities went, yet it had its tower, its river and its hill; its Old Town and its New Town; its castle and its cathedral" (13). The generic elements established through the recurrent use of the possessive adjective confer a nondescript essence to the town, while the name of the river which runs through it, the Termin, clearly points towards a deadline or appointment if one takes into account the German translation, or an ending if one considers the Latin *terminalis*. In both cases, the implication is clearly that this city is founded upon its own end, thereby foreclosing any possibility of hope or regeneration in the future, as the end of the novel indicates.

In Burns's novel and O'Reilly's stories, the family (and, more generally, the private sphere) functions as a reflection of external dysfunction, danger and violence. The town of Tiptoe Floorboard contains one Town Hall, one pharmacy, and all the remaining commercial outlets are gun shops. The Town Hall is mentioned only in passing as a place one must go to before getting married to check that the future spouses are

not, in fact, members of the same family, suggesting that consanguinity is prevalent in this town. The numerous gun shops, in which one can buy “tea and buns and guns” (Burns 38), the incongruous association of which is reinforced through rhyme, are revealing of the central place which violence occupies in Tiptoe Floorboard: domesticity and brutality are intertwined. This is further highlighted by a rhetorical question posed by the narrator as she muses over male-female relationships:

I know you're thinking, oh, if only we could get our erections and total sexual, emotional, spiritual and intellectual satisfactions from guns, bullets, postage stamps and such-like controllable essences. Wouldn't that be easy? Why can't we? After all, some men do. Why can't women be gunshops? [...] How much safer, how much simpler, how much more predictable going into them then, might be. (52)

Overtly playing here with the association of masculinity and violence,<sup>8</sup> Burns also acknowledges the potentially explosive and unpredictable nature of heterosexual relations, on both a physical and psychological plane.

One of the most disturbing and striking features of *Little Constructions* is the fact that all of the female characters are victims of rape and other forms of physical and psychological abuse at the hands of male family members. This is to be understood in the context of a town dominated by gunshops, the best of which is replaced by a “bra shop” at the end of the novel, a sign of changing times and potential new beginnings where damaged women “deep in the wearing of trauma” are gently “persuade[d] [...] into the changing room to take that trauma off” (252). The metaphor of trauma as clothing significantly underlines then manner in which the psychological impact of violation, although intrinsically linked to the victim, can be shed, divested, just like a piece of clothing. The “ultra-feminine bras” Jotty Doe sells in her shop replace the “super-ultra-masculine bras” (252) victims usually wear and encourage a rethinking of their attitudes to their bodies and their sexuality. As the novel ends with the inhabitants of Tiptoe Floorboard “knock[ing] down walls” and “some shops slip[ping] into other shops” (296), it becomes apparent that the “little constructions” (both physical and mental) these characters have built for themselves must be broken down for some form of reconciliation to take place.

In a very different register, Sean O'Reilly's stories “Curfew” and “The Good News” also focus on the family and close community as a reflection of a more widespread violence and a general acceptance of this status quo. Similar to Burns, O'Reilly too focuses on specifically male brutality, although this time it is not women, but the younger generation which undergoes intense psychological and physical violence. The young focaliser of the story “Curfew”, Fergal, refuses to stay indoors after dark and ventures out to observe the men in the community chase after someone who has

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8 One thinks for instance of feminist artist Margaret Harrison's *Son of Rob Roy* (1971), in which the male figure's penis and testicles have been replaced by a gun, while the barrels of the guns he wields in both hands have been transformed into erect penises.

done something.<sup>9</sup> When they find Fergal, he is badly beaten and reality and imagination become intertwined when he hallucinates the following: “He saw his Da looking up into the morning sky and a **bird flying past** with a clump of his youngest son’s hair in its **bloody beak**. He saw Eamon chasing **burning dogs** around the streets with **bites** of his **brother** tied to their tails. Harkin and Nuala hid his tongue in a **box** under the **bed** [...]” (70; emphasis added). The triple dismemberment he hallucinates, the violence of which is reinforced by the plosive alliteration, reflects not only the physical assault he is being subjected to but also the endemic violence of this community. The circularity of the story mirrors the stasis in time and in space that dominates it. The story ends as it begins in the focaliser’s dark living room, the men (between whom it is at all times difficult to distinguish) talking and he listening. Fergal’s movement once he disobeys the curfew is also circular. This circularity echoes the cycle of violence in which this community of men is caught up: the fact that no indication is given as to why a curfew has been imposed and by whom, the repetitive use of euphemism or indefinite pronoun to refer to the implied enemy and the repeated references to an all-engulfing darkness and emptiness are all suggestive of a meaningless and brutal existence from which there is no exit. The same circularity is also present in “The Good News”, a grotesque parody of the resurrection of Christ<sup>10</sup> in which not only is there no good news, there is “no news” at all from Hanley, the Christ figure, leaving his followers no other option but to continue their violent existence in which death and torture are forms of entertainment. These issues are strongly reminiscent of Beckett’s dramatic and fictional preoccupations and O’Reilly is clearly situating himself in a distinct literary tradition in which dominant modes of narrative representation must be dismantled and re-thought.

Although there are no warring opposites in these stories, they are nevertheless clearly a reflection on the perpetration and perpetuation of violence in the absence of any political or ideological framework. While the title of “The Good News” is highly ironic, that of “Curfew”, while it acknowledges the necessity of quenching the fire of violence, also highlights the possibilities of reigniting conflict through the imagination. After all, this story could also be read as the young focaliser Fergal’s imagination running away with him. The first part of the story ends with a break in the text just after his older brother’s words: “Once upon a time there was this wee shithead who didn’t listen to what his big brother told him. You can make the rest up yourself” (60). Given the elliptic and somewhat larger-than-life narrative that follows, all of which is narrated from the very narrow point of view of the young boy, it is at least possible that Fergal literally does “make the rest up”. This would suggest that no curfew can be imposed on the power of the imagination.

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9 My double use here of the indefinite pronoun is indicative of the number of the silences and elisions in this story and of the climate of uncertainty which reigns.

10 For a more detailed discussion of this short story, see McCann, “‘The post-past city’: Apocalyptic Cityscapes and Cultural Stagnation in the Fiction of Sean O’Reilly”.



Hagan's *The Auditor* is the most easily recognisable allegory of the situation in the North both during the Troubles and since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement. The death toll in the novel stands at around 3000 (in and around the same number of victims during the Troubles) and territorial boundaries are clearly depicted through the flags hoisted above the various depots (any casual stroll around the streets of Belfast and most other towns, particularly in July, will reveal a host of flags). The situation at first appears highly reductive in the choice of Whites and Blacks as opposing factions who resemble each other so much so that they become indistinguishable. It seems that we are in the presence of traditional representations of Belfast and/or Derry as urban spaces which are plotted along the lines of "sanctuary/barricades – interface/adversary community" which morphed into "militarized configuration" (Feldman 35) as a result of paramilitary involvement. Hagan manages however to sidestep a potentially problematic apolitical position (that would be, in any case, impossible to achieve) situated on a moral high ground by taking care to highlight the class and political issues that resulted in and are the consequences of the current climate of fear, corruption and violence. It quickly becomes clear that the target of Hagan's criticism is neither the ideologies which subtended the Troubles nor the rhetoric of the different paramilitary groups involved, but rather more surprisingly the discourse of resolution which has emerged in the wake of the conflict. As Kristof makes his application for a weapons permit in the prosperous Monitor building which dominates "an otherwise dilapidated city" (95), he listens to the oral recording of the history of the Monitors which fills the room, while simultaneously perusing the many photographs papering the walls. These photographs, which appear colourful and attractive from afar, transpire to be of victims of the most heinously violent deaths. The juxtaposition of the oral recording which extols the virtues of the contribution made by the Monitors to resolving the conflict, rendered in italics, and the detailed description of the photographs through internal focalisation significantly calls attention to the exponential growth of this so-called apolitical group in relation to the escalation of violent murders. The juxtaposition of the end of one paragraph describing the mutilated body of a woman: "One of the bullets had gouged its way up the length of her left cheek" and the beginning of the next which takes up the oral recording: "*Moreover, the Monitors are a non-interventionist force. Their job is to observe and record*" (103; emphasis in original) is eloquent in its revealing of self-justificatory rhetoric on behalf of those in power and the inadequacy of this as a response to the violent conflict. The recording goes on to explain how civil liberties and foreign intervention have been curtailed all in the name of conflict resolution put in place by the Monitors. It is in this sense that Hagan's novel owes its biggest debt to dystopian narratives in that it reveals what has gone wrong with a utopian ideal to produce such a repressive society: set up to reconcile the warring factions and create a climate of peace, the Monitors actually morph into a powerful force in themselves, to such an extent that they deliberately and violently prevent any conflict resolution and actually stoke the fires of hatred so as to maintain their privileged position in society.

The death of the central character, Kristof Mann, at the end of the novel, just before the signing of the peace deal which propels the city into “its false future” (193) is already present to some degree in his name. The novel abounds with names which have a central or Eastern European sonority, but the significance of Kristof is particularly striking. The allusion to Saint Christopher (Kristof is the Hungarian form of the name which signifies ‘Christ bearer’) is all the more interesting when one considers the flooding of the River Termin which coincides with the end of Kristof’s life and the new peace deal. Inscribed in his very name is the act for which Saint Christopher is best known: that of unwittingly carrying Christ across a dangerous river. Kristof, in a parody of Saint Christopher, by not having the courage to trust anyone with the evidence he possesses of Monitor collusion with the warring factions, helps the city to a new peace deal which will not allow for resolution. In a rather nihilistic rewriting of the biblical intertext, this Christopher is unable to live up to his name and instead becomes a figure who allows himself to be eliminated and in so doing, condemns Man(n) to a future based on lies and falsehood. Similarly, the choice of the name Moloch for the leader of the White faction reveals the grimness of the end of the novel. Moloch in Milton’s *Paradise Lost* is one of Satan’s greatest warriors who argues in favour of warfare against God. At the end of *The Auditor*, Moloch Gibbons is one of those involved in the signing of the peace deal, “the choreographed event ousting the birth of Jesus as the day’s good news story” (193). The implication here is clearly that this post-diluvian phase is no new beginning, but rather more of the same, and that, just as in O’Reilly’s story, there is no “good news”. As the voice of an unknown narrator emerges in the epilogue, he muses over the loss of bearings the city has undergone as a result of the flood: land and river have become indistinguishable and the medieval clock tower no longer tells the time. Time and space are suspended, in between violent past and uncertain future.

This suspension of time and space is a common feature of all of these texts. O’Reilly’s two short stories are suspended in a permanent darkness, and both suggest that the diurnal has completely vanished. The circularity of both narratives and the resurrection of Hanley in “The Good News” also reveal a suspension of time and the fact that the characters are doomed to live repetitive, dark, empty lives. Burns, on the other hand, establishes a more complex chronotope in her novel, the narrator stating from the beginning that “[p]eople here have their own version of time and it’s called the Jumbled Time Syndrome and it is contagious and everybody who suffers from Jumbled Time can’t help but suffer from Imprecision and Indiscretion too” (39). The diglossic convergence here of scientific and common discourses creates humour, as does the use of polysyndeton, but this statement also calls attention to what one might call the Jumbled Narrative Time Syndrome which characterises the novel, the various diegetic strands of which are extremely difficult to put into chronological order. Furthermore, this temporal syndrome is directly related to the “Combined Spatial Fragmentation Hallucination Syndrome” (146), from which most of the male characters suffer, thus highlighting the unusual chronotope of this novel, in which both

time and space are constantly shifting, ceaselessly fluctuating, thereby reinforcing the topsy-turvydom of this fictional world.

Lest one should rush to hasty conclusions about these novels and stories as being postmodern reflections on the breakdown of Grand Narratives and “the search for unity (narrative, historical, subjective) [as] constantly frustrated” (Hutcheon 162), which they are to some degree, Hagan offers a note of caution in the final pages of *The Auditor*. The narrator, who we presume is a Monitor, makes the following prediction for the future: “we will soon grow tired of the past and make grand statements about needing to put it behind us in order to move on. Our history will be picked over and rehashed by partisan revisionists until the truth comes to seem laughably gauche. Only then will we have become truly postmodern” (194). This bitter reflection on a discourse of reconciliation which dismisses the past as impossible to make sense of and on the rejection of any monolithic truth is indeed a (somewhat reductive) vision of what may be seen to constitute one tenet of postmodern narrative(s), but it is also undermined by the novel itself which offers an edifying depiction of the dangers of glossing over the past without acknowledging its shortcomings.

The novels and short stories on which I have been focusing are not historical accounts of the Troubles in the North. As fictional narratives, they are not concerned with “the notion of a truth of past experience”, but rather with a “rhetorical performance” (White 147) which aims at exposing a troubled past through different forms and paradigms than those traditionally used by writers of fiction from the North. The fact that there are no strong causal links between past events and the violent present in these narratives does not necessarily mean that these authors are positing violence as inherently senseless, a position which would be in any case extremely problematic if any association with the Troubles is to be established, since it would elide any acknowledgement of material and ideological motivations. What these authors are actually doing is reflecting on the means by which an atmosphere of pervasive violence comes to infiltrate every aspect of life, spilling over from the political sphere to contaminate the domestic sphere. This is why the traditional ordering function of narrative is sidelined in these texts in favour of a more disruptive approach: it is a means of conveying this shift and of emphasising the very real dangers of forgetting why conflicts exist and of mishandling their resolution. The absence of “good news”, not to mention the imposition of “curfews” and the creation of “little constructions” which fence in the self and block out the other do not appear as especially optimistic. They do, however, provide an “audit” of the current status quo that has recently extended south of the border with the publication of Kevin Barry’s *City of Bohane*, another dystopian novel, published in 2011. This migration may well mark the beginning of a new sub-genre in contemporary Irish fiction which expands the contours of the possibilities for narrative depictions of a political and societal violence which in some ways defies representation. Time will tell.

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