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A intersecção entre literatura, memória e história em *Reading in the Dark*,  
de Seamus Deane

São José do Rio Preto

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For my parents Euclides and Isildinha, who have always been unconditionally by my side in my darkest hours.

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I wish I knew what they  
Were saying. I'm never sure  
What it is I hear.  
(‘Rumours’ – Seamus Deane)

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A intersecção entre literatura, memória e história em *Reading in the Dark*,

de Seamus Deane

## RESUMO

Este estudo analisa a intersecção entre literatura, memória e história em *Reading in the Dark*, de Seamus Deane. Para tanto, ele utiliza as noções de memória, experiência e história de Walter Benjamin, e discute a hipótese de que há uma intersecção entre literatura e história no romance de Deane que é criada pelo uso que é feito da memória como procedimento narrativo central. A análise dos elementos estéticos desse romance em paralelo com o contexto histórico a partir do qual ele é escrito e com o qual ele dialoga revelará no fim que a história é um elemento intrínseco em *Reading in the Dark*, de modo que a ficção de Deane comporta uma dimensão ao mesmo tempo estética e ética.

**Palavras-chave:** Seamus Deane; Literatura e História; Ficção Irlandesa Contemporânea.

The Intersection between Literature, Memory and History in Seamus Deane's

*Reading in the Dark*

**ABSTRACT**

This study analyses the intersection between literature, memory and history in Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*. To do so, it uses Walter Benjamin's notions of memory, experience and history, and discusses the hypothesis that there is an intersection between literature and history in Deane's novel that is created by the use it makes of memory as its central narrative procedure. The analysis of the aesthetic elements of this novel in parallel with the historical context out of which it is written and with which it establishes a dialogue will reveal in the end that history is an intrinsic feature of *Reading in the Dark*, in a way that Deane's fiction has not only an aesthetic but also an ethical dimension to it.

**Keywords:** Seamus Deane; Literature and History; Irish Contemporary Fiction.

## INTRODUCTION

The relationship between private experience and wider social, economic and cultural change still remains a strikingly unanswered question in Ireland. This is at least partly due to the fact that “the last thirty years have undoubtedly been a time of rapid and concentrated transition within Irish society and culture” (HAND, 2012, p. 254), and partly due to the long history of political unrest, grinding poverty, and sectarian rivalry between Catholics and Protestants that were deeply intensified in Ireland in the twentieth century. Indeed, the last thirty years saw the escalation of paramilitary violence, mainly in Northern Ireland, the agreement to ceasefire in the 1990s, and along with it, the economic boom that seemed to have transformed Ireland into a promising country, but that only proved a huge economic fiasco when the bubble burst in 2007 with the credit crunch worldwide. The rapid and concentrated transitions that Hand mentions had a dramatic impact on the way the Irish people viewed themselves. This is so because suddenly all the categories by which the Irish defined themselves seemed to have been challenged, and the history of poverty and political unrest that had affected the island for centuries. Religion, always a major element in Irish life, lost its influence on people’s decisions, and even though the church was still there, it had no power over peoples’ lives any longer, which in turn suggested a deep change in the moral realm as well.

Besides, the impact of the process of decolonisation in the island has been dramatic, and the debilitating effects of the acts of violence perpetrated by unionists and nationalists are still deeply felt in both sides of the border. That such a small place has had to conciliate strongly dissenting opinions, as well as historical perspectives and interpretations only aggravates the social and political uncertainties which have arisen over the years. In addition, the country’s geographical proximity with England has sharply intensified the Irish people’s need and struggle for self-identification. Indeed, “so traumatic was the rearrangement of relations with Great Britain and so powerful the emotions and beliefs needed to negotiate those changes, that the revolutionary period maintained a hold on the Irish imagination long after 1922” (SMYTH, 1997, p. 3). The revolutionary period Smyth refers to is the Irish fight for independence, which gained full momentum with the Anglo-Irish War and that resulted in the partition of the country. As will be explained later on, with independence came partition, and with

partition a civil war that intensified the ideological divisions, fuelled by a past of colonial oppression on the one side, and the will to pursue liberation from this oppression at any cost on the other.

In that scenario, the novel as a literary genre has achieved a position of special prominence, given its capacity to embody the vicissitudes of the Irish circumstances, which is particularly evident in its potential to hold apparently irreconcilable contradictions and antagonisms. Indeed, “the novel is important in modern Irish culture because as a genre it evolved to formulate narratives in which social, political and historical change could be accommodated” (SMYTH, 1997, p. 6). In other words, the novel, given its capacity and flexibility to incorporate elements from different narrative genres and modes, provided the aesthetic conditions for these social, political, and historical narratives to be used as the raw material for fictional composition. Such narratives are then reshaped and reinvented within the fictional realm of the novel, to the point that the accommodation of these changes is dealt with in terms of literary representation. Far from sticking to the reproduction of this or that historical narrative, the novel and its potential to reconfigure the historical reality with which it has to come to terms, creates all the conditions of these conflicts to unfold in both formal and thematic terms. To put it differently, as a literary genre, the novel engenders the possibility for the social, political, and historical changes that Smyth mentions to be fictionalised and ultimately become an aesthetic reconfiguration of what has been conventionally termed reality. This installs a profound tension at the heart of the novel, one that forces the critic to consider the potential relationships that the conflicting discourses which shape the plot entertain with each other.

Hence, to say that the novel formulates narratives that can accommodate the dissenting discourses of social, political and historical change should not imply that this accommodation is free from problems or tensions. On the contrary, to affirm such a thing is only the beginning of an analytical process that should take into consideration the aesthetic characteristics of a given novel in its most immanent aspects of plot, characterization, narrative focus, setting, and suchlike, the role of the critic in the analytical process, and the way the novel relates to the context with which it establishes a dialogue. Indeed, rather than applying this critical method to the Irish novel, it seems that, to a great extent, this is the kind of reading the work of contemporary novelists in Ireland end up projecting. The formulation of narratives capable of capturing social,

historical, and political unrest and turmoil, and the discussions of the way the individual is forced to negotiate these tensions indicate that a full study of the Irish novel has to take into consideration the insertion of this or that work within a broader historical and literary context.

Because the novel makes room for the coexistence of such historical, social, and political narratives in its structural organisation, it encapsulates the antagonisms of Irish society, while it also features a marked focus on the individual consciousness and his/her relation to the outer world of culture and politics. This relation is not easily negotiable or free of tensions either, and it contains in itself the danger, on the critic's part, of establishing a quick and random association of the life of the individual with the direct representation of the torments of society in general. In other words, the plight of the protagonist risks being taken, in an essentially metonymic move, as the part that represents the whole of Ireland's past and present relations to Britain, as well as the numerous issues that arise from them. Of greater interest, though, is to study the ways this individual consciousness dictates the terms by means of which the relationship between the self and the world of culture, history, and politics will be eventually established. This relationship is fully mediated by the idea of perspective that comes into play as a direct result of the focus on individual consciousness that is given by the novel as a genre.

Contemporary Irish novelists have constantly incorporated history into their fictional work, in such a way that "the previously accepted past and present are undone by the interruption of what has been hitherto silenced or marginalized, [and] in turn complicated by the levels of secrecy in which it was located" (PEACH, 2004, p. 17-18). This should not imply that non-contemporary novelists had any kind of tendency towards leaving history out of the reach of their fictional work altogether, though. Nor should it imply that the work of contemporary novelists has engendered a drastic rupture with tradition in the sense of radical subversion of the realist modes of representation. Peach's statement, it seems, would be best understood in the context of an aesthetic and ethical debate in which the ontological status of both the past and the present are thrown into question, and that which had been taken for granted is no longer so easily acceptable. This is further aggravated when these levels of secrecy associated with the silencing and marginalisation are read against a historical background of

sectarian violence fuelled by political and religious disputes, and colonial and postcolonial turbulent relations such as is the case with Ireland.

In addition, contemporary Irish fiction, especially the novel in the Celtic Tiger period, has had to accommodate the changing or reversal of all the categories by which the Irish people understood themselves, and in doing that it “has also provided radical insights into the diversity and complexity of Ireland, as well as Northern Ireland” (PEACH, 2004, p. 7). Indeed, the necessary distance in time to measure the extent to which novelists have actually coined any kind of aesthetics of the Celtic Tiger in their works might have just started being established. It is only now that critics can start inquiring into whether there can be such a thing as the quintessential Celtic Tiger novel, with a typical plotline, characterisation, or specific set of themes that would constitute new ways of writing fiction. In other words, this period seems to be still relatively recent for critics to have studied the novels produced in it and gauge with great precision how the Celtic Tiger has made itself felt in Irish writing as far as literary representation is concerned. Or, to put it differently, if the marked changes in economy in the country forced authors to somehow explore innovative narrative techniques in their work to accommodate all the social, historical, and political fluctuations of this historical period. Nevertheless, novelists were not entirely oblivious to the instability and uncertainties of this recent past. Authors like Roddy Doyle, Colum McCann, Hugo Hamilton, and Paul Murray are some of those who have registered in some of their novels the new dynamics of desire commonly associated with the period.

In their attempt to formulate narratives to register the fleet and impermanent changes Irish society has been through in the last decades, Irish novelists have shown a “willingness to confront the formal and conceptual legacies of a received literary (and wider social) tradition alongside a self-awareness of the role played by cultural narratives in mediating (...) Ireland’s changing circumstances” (SMYTH, 1997, p. 7). Indeed, the confrontation of these legacies signalled the absence of a linkage between the generations, which hinted at the elimination of any sense of commonality between them. What is more, Irish novels have displayed great self-awareness of their status as fiction, and also of the critical discourses surrounding them. Besides, together with a certain tendency to look back to the past from a present perspective with a view to telling the story of people’s history, thus stressing that generation split, novelists have constantly addressed in their work questions such as what versions of Irish history have

been told, what versions of Irish history are being represented, and what has been suppressed in the process. The *ethos* governing some of these novels seems to be that to tell one's story is to forget about those told by others, and also that the language which allows people to express themselves is the same as that which creates the conditions for potential misunderstandings.

Bearing that in mind, this study looks into the intersection between literature, memory and history in Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996). To do so, it essentially uses Walter Benjamin's thoughts on memory, experience (*Erfahrung*) and history, and investigates the hypothesis that there is an intersection between literature and history in Deane's novel that is created by its use of memory as a central narrative procedure. The close reading of the aesthetic elements of Deane's novel in parallel with the historical context out of which it is written and with which it establishes a dialogue should reveal then that the Irish history is an intrinsic feature of Deane's fictional work. As a result, Deane's fiction has not only an aesthetic but also an ethical edge to it, which the critical method adopted in this study will expose in detail at the end. This aesthetic and ethical dimension is manifest in the way that history emerges as an epic force in the gaps opened by the protagonist's fictional account of his and his family's life.

Deane's novel lays strong emphasis on the relationship between narrative and remembrance, and derives poignant effects from the openness that this narrative technique produces. In it, the experience passed down to the protagonist in the stories he is told throughout is mediated by remembrance, and is only accessible to the reader in the fragments of memory the narrator can put together to tell his story. Deane's narrator, therefore, is not retelling his life the way it has been. Instead, he tells what he remembers having heard as well as what he remembers having lived.<sup>1</sup> This slight nuance affects directly the aesthetic effects that *Reading in the Dark* engenders, since the narrator's account is from the beginning subordinated to the caprices and inconsistencies of personal memory and its potential for omissions and invention. Indeed, these caprices and inconsistencies are ultimately problems of language, but for now it suffices to say that the way Deane structures the narration on the remembered life of the protagonist sets up a profound questioning of the implications and limits of interpretation as well.

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin says something similar about Proust's *À La Recherche Du Temps Perdu* in "The Image of Proust" (1929).

This idea of interpretation, however, should be extended beyond the hermeneutical or phenomenological senses. This is so because *Reading in the Dark* embodies an investigation of the experience that is transmitted, the nature of the *Medium* that makes it possible, and the historical, social and ideological aspects inherent to it. In other words, at a stroke Deane's novel shows the reader that the past is full of potential narratives to be told, and that it is the task of the reader to dig into these texts and examine them critically. *Reading in the Dark* contains a strong awareness of the exclusion and inclusion, as well as of the manipulation of language in the telling, and by stating its self-awareness of the potential of narratives Deane's novel creates the conditions for a critical examination of the stories of those left behind by the great narrative of history as progress.

It is for this reason that Benjamin's notions of memory, experience, and history are relevant for a critical commentary of *Reading in the Dark*. However, given the anti-systematic nature of Benjamin's thought, a theoretical mediation is necessary in order to organise the ideas that Benjamin himself left scattered around in different essays and literary reviews. To put it differently, Benjamin's reflections on memory, experience, and history, as well as his idea of language and narrative, which permeates all these notions, are not readily available as concepts in his philosophical works. Therefore, this theoretical mediation must take into consideration the different aspects of Benjamin's thought as well as the particularities of the literary works he has reviewed and translated throughout his career. It is only by doing so that one can have a comprehensive grasp of key aspects of Benjamin's philosophy and then formulate operative concepts which can be used to back up the analysis of a given work of literature.

Indeed, Benjamin was not a literary theoretician in the specialised sense of the word. To put it differently, there are no theoretical propositions in Benjamin's writings about the properties that make a text literary, nor are there any conjectures about the nature of beauty and the sublime in art, as can be found in other thinkers. Benjamin was, first and foremost, a philosopher of language who gradually became interested in aspects of the culture and politics of his time. Besides, Benjamin was a literary critic and *homme de lettres*, an occupation he embraced after having his *Habilitationschrift* on German tragic drama rejected, which kept him from pursuing an academic career as a university professor. Apart from that, Benjamin also worked as a translator, and translated from French into German the works of leading authors in French and world

literature such as Charles Baudelaire and Marcel Proust, the latter being hugely influential on Benjamin's reflections on memory.

As a working critic, then, Benjamin never systematised his critical thinking in conceptual terms, nor has he seemed to care about situating them into a broader theoretical reflection that extrapolated the novels and poems he set out to comment upon. Hence, whenever Benjamin goes over memory, experience, and history, he does so in the context of his literary criticism. Indeed, these notions are recurrent in his work, but they always appear inscribed within a specific critical framework, and are never developed into a full theoretical conceptualisation. Rare are the essays in which Benjamin uses these notions more methodically. In many respects, his philosophy demands that its reader carries out a reflexive and reconstructive work by means of which he can derive not only concepts, but a whole critical method – like Benjamin did himself in his literary criticism – to read the literary work both in its immanence and in its connections with the historical context in which it was produced.

Benjamin's philosophy is therefore important here, mainly because his way of thinking about the relationship of the literary work with history, and his reflections on the writing of history are both permeated with the idea of interpretation of the *Erfahrung*, that is, the mediated form of the lived experience (*Erlebnis*). This is then transformed into a narratable experience that can be transmitted and then passed on to the next generation as some kind of wisdom, not by teaching or giving this lived experience a finished form, but, rather, by bringing it to notice, that is, requiring that the interlocutor interpret this experience and make it his or hers. The *Erfahrung* therefore contains a profoundly aesthetic dimension to it, which arises from the essentially narrative status of the experience it transmits. In other words, the *Erfahrung* is the mediated expression of the immediate living of the lived experience (*Erlebnis*), which is then transfigured into an aesthetic experience that is transmittable in the form of a narrative.

Considering this, it is worth undertaking this reflexive work and trying to establish more closely the meanings and uses that Benjamin gives to these notions in his philosophy and literary criticism. As a methodological path, the first thing to do is to find the main essays and literary reviews in which these notions appear and, from the uses and ways in which Benjamin evokes them critically, trying to build a broader

theoretical web which can create the connections between these notions of memory, experience, and history. The next step then should consist of a commentary on these Benjaminian notions, based on the works of scholars who have written extensively on Benjamin's *oeuvre*, focusing on the way he conceives of these notions of memory, experience, and history in his writings. Such a reflexive path will help establish a methodical way to derive concepts from Benjamin's work that can then be used to examine the intersection between literature, memory, and history in Deane's novel. This should establish the critical and theoretical framework that can allow both for the consideration of the intrinsic or immanent aspects of Deane's novel and also their relationship with the historical context out of which his novel is produced.

That said, Chapter One offers a general overview of the main historical events in Ireland in the twentieth century so as to situate the discussion of the ways literature and history intersect in Deane's novel within the larger issues involving the construction of historiographical narratives and literary representation in the work of Irish novelists, playwrights, and poets. It briefly examines the origins and peculiarities of Irish nationalism, the organisation and launching of the Easter Rising in 1916, as well as the symbolic meaning this first attempt to proclaim a republic in Ireland acquired in the aftermath of the conflicts. In addition, it also addresses the political and ideological scenario that led to outbreak of the Anglo-Irish War or Irish Independence War (1919-1921), discusses the instrumental role this conflict played in the establishment of the Irish Free State, and goes over the controversies and speculations that the conflict has fuelled among historians and commentators.

In addition, this first chapter also tackles the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty in 1921, which cemented the partition of the island into the Free State and Northern Ireland, and discusses how this ideological rift plunged the country into practically instantaneous Civil War from 1922 to 1923. Besides, it investigates the roots of the paramilitary conflicts in Northern Ireland between 1968 and 1998, and argues the case that the origins of the sectarianism that fomented the violence in the period can be traced back to unresolved issues arising from disagreements over Home Rule and the partition of Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century. Finally, it looks into the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger in the last decades of the twentieth century and beginning of the twentieth-first century, and discusses the process of secularisation that was accentuated as the country opened its economy up to globalisation, as well as how the

sudden economic affluence that the country experienced has fostered a dramatic generation split of unprecedented reach and impact.

Chapter Two discusses the role of the novel as a genre in the Irish culture, laying special emphasis on the way it has addressed historical tensions and conflicts in different guises. This chapter looks into the conflation of private and public stories and histories in the Irish novel, and argues the case that the mediation of the past into the present through an essentially individual perspective is evidence of the fact that history is still a fierce bone of contention in contemporary Ireland. In addition to that, this chapter introduces and briefly discusses the importance of the work of Seamus Deane as a literary and cultural critic, poet, and novelist in this context. It also offers a brief account of *Reading in the Dark* (1996), and at the same time makes detailed comments on the initial critical reception of Deane's novel.

Chapter Three lays down the reading method and the supporting theoretical ideas that will guide the analysis and interpretation of *Reading in the Dark*. The commentary in this chapter devotes special attention to the differentiation between the notions of immediate lived experience (*Erlebnis*) and the notion of "narratable or communicable" experience (*Erfahrung*), and discusses the ideas of memory, and history (*Geschichte*) found in essays by Walter Benjamin such as "The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov" (1936), "Experience and Poverty" (1933), "The Image of Proust" (1929), "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), and in "Theses on the Concept of History" (1940). The idea in this chapter is to critically reconstruct the broad theoretical connections between Benjamin's notions of memory, experience, and history in order to elicit the interdependence between these notions in the essays analysed so as to theoretically back up the analysis of the intersection between literature, memory, and history in Deane's novel that is proposed in this study.

Chapter Four examines closely Deane's use of memory and remembrance as a central literary procedure in *Reading in the Dark*. It investigates how the tension between remembering and forgetting constitutes a major element in Deane's novel, and the extent to which this tension reinforces the hesitancy and irresolution that permeate the book. The investigation of these tensions results primarily from the close reading of Deane's narrative technique, as well as the inquiry into the ways that reality is subordinated to the essentially intimate perspective engendered by the use of a first-

person narrator. In addition to that, this chapter also discusses how silence and secrecy are important motifs in the novel to hint at the traumatic nature of the past that the characters cannot exorcise. The analysis gives special emphasis to the ghostly images that haunt the novel, as well as to the way they bring together episodes that seem at first read random and disconnected. In the end, the discussion in this chapter suggests that there is a sophisticated bond between form and content in *Reading in the Dark* that forces the critical reader to look at its textual intricacies in close connection with the historical matters that Deane's novel incorporates aesthetically.

Chapter Five focuses on how *Reading in the Dark* uses rumour and different forms of storytelling as ways of passing on experience and undermining the possibilities of definite interpretations about the past that is re-membered. It also looks into how Deane's novel incorporates the conventions of different narrative genres in its structure as part of a fictional strategy which ultimately reinforces the idea that a single view of events cannot be embraced in the end. It is in this chapter that the intersection between literature, memory, and history of the title is discussed more profoundly, and in it also the parallels between Deane's fiction and Benjamin's philosophy should become more evident. This is so because, as the narrator digs into his memories and sets out to retell his and his family's life as he can remember it to have been, his narration becomes simultaneously a redemptive effort to unearth the memory of those who bore witness to the barbarity produced by the turbulent history of ideological dispute and sectarian violence at the beginning of the twentieth century in Ireland.

It is also in this chapter that Deane's incorporation of history as his fictional material is explained in greater detail and shown to be at work in the novel more clearly. Irish history is deeply imbricated in the memories of the protagonist, who in many ways becomes the historian of his own family as he probes into their past. His narration of the history of his family, as well as the references to the various fragmented discourses that surround it eventually reveal that theirs is the history of the repeated accumulation of individual and collective catastrophes. This way of portraying history in Deane's novel is actually very much akin to the idea of history as an incessant piling up of ruins that Benjamin developed in "Theses on the Concept of History", notably in thesis IX.

It must be said at this point that there have already been two Luso-Brazilian Masters Dissertations that take Deane's novel as the object of their research. One of

them is Andrea Ferrás Wolwacz's "History as Fiction in *Reading in the Dark*, by Seamus Deane", defended in 2009 at the Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul. In her dissertation, Wolwacz focuses on what she calls the redefinition of the concept of Northern Irish identity in Deane's novel, and seeks to investigate in the subplot of the novel the presence of historical episodes that portray the clash between British Unionists and Irish Nationalists in the years preceding "The Troubles" in 1922. Wolwacz deals with these events in terms of a historical background to an autobiographical novel in her analysis, and discusses the way these historical episodes, and mainly their aftermath, extend through the time-span of the novel, and how the passage of time makes itself felt in the alteration of the boy's perception of the events as he grows older.

Finally, Wolwacz's study examines the hypothesis that there is at the heart of *Reading in the Dark* a need to redefine issues of national identity that are imparted to the reader through the eyes of a narrator that she defines as a growing perceptive, well-meaning intelligent young man. She also argues that, in the discussion of national identity that she addresses in her text, Deane's novel tackles the contradictions between two cultures that are forced to co-exist despite their fundamentally different political and religious affiliations. For Wolwacz, *Reading in the Dark* exposes the ideological mechanisms that have sustained the unionist and nationalist struggle in the sectarian conflicts between these two groups, and in doing so, triggers a re-examination of what she calls old discourses that culminated in a violent communication breakdown between two distinct communities obliged to share the same territory in Northern Ireland.

Another academic study that deals with Deane's novel as part of its corpus is a Masters Dissertation by Maria de Fátima Neves Fernandes called "Os 'Troubles' no Romance Contemporâneo Irlandês *Fat Lad* e *Reading in the Dark* ou a Memória na Articulação da Identidade", defended in 2010, at the Universidade do Minho, in Portugal. In her excellent study, Fernandes investigates how the Troubles are represented in modern Irish novel, and focuses on two novels to develop her research: Glenn Patterson's *Fat Lad*, and Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark*. Fernandes's work offers a comprehensive general account of the history of Ireland, from the beginning of the English presence in the island to more modern times so as to map the historical, political, and social context that led to the Troubles in the early 1920s.

Besides, she briefly examines the origins and developments of the novel as a genre associated with the necessity of a rising middle class to forge its artistic expression and representation, and then quickly discusses characteristics that she considers hallmarks of the Irish novel, such as the marked influence of oral tradition and the presence of distinctive narrators. By doing so she creates the context to argue her case that there has been a change in the way the Troubles have been portrayed in the Irish novel, and then tests the hypothesis that the stereotypical treatment of these conflicts has been recently substituted by a more creative and innovative approach. To support her arguments she then examines Patterson's *Fat Lad* and Deane's *Reading in the Dark* to show how these novels share a concern with memory and language in the construction of identity, as well as how Irish history is revisited in these books as a way of reflecting on the past to get over traumatic experiences in search of reconciliation and forgiveness. Fernandes ultimately argues that, in these two novels, the past, the present, and the future are naturally and inescapably related, which facilitates the establishment of the meanings of memory, and enables identity to be articulated.

A few terminological definitions may be helpful at this point. Given that in *Reading in the Dark* there are two distinct temporal settings – the past that is narrated, and the present when the narration takes place –, and taking into consideration that the narrator remains unnamed throughout the novel, it is perhaps a good idea to establish some kind of distinction between the protagonist in his infancy and adolescence, and his adult self who casts an eye back on his past and is in charge of the narration itself. Therefore, the protagonist will be referred to as “the boy” whenever the analysis centres on whatever happens to him as a child. On the other hand, the protagonist will be referred to as “the narrator” whenever the emphasis is laid on the adult perspective with which he recalls his past, as well as when the analysis revolves around the narrative strategies that Deane uses to reinforce the distance between the lived experience and that rescued by remembrance. It is hoped that this terminological distinction will therefore avoid confusions between the status of past events being narrated and the present narrative act itself, a differentiation that seems to be fundamental for a careful and methodological scrutiny of the aesthetic and historical content of *Reading in the Dark*.

## 1. HISTORY AS INQUIRY, OR AN EXERCISE IN READING IN THE DARK

History is personal; the age, our age

(‘Send War in Our Time, O Lord’ – Seamus Deane)

If history is personal, as Deane’s poem suggests, then to tell a story or to tell history is to embark on an enquiry into one’s past in order to investigate its origins and the origins of one’s present. To do so is ultimately to look for the sources and foundations of one’s identity. Therefore, history’s primary importance is as a source of knowledge about one’s self, and then about how this self relates to the other individuals who together constitute different communities. To put it differently, history can allow for the individual to answer the question of who he or she is, and therefore makes it possible that connections be established between his or her self as an individual and the sort of relations that they can create with the reality surrounding them. This creation of relations between the individual and the community gradually reveals, then, that in many respects there are more shared elements between the private and the public spheres than one is sometimes ready or willing to admit. In that sense, history inscribes the individual within a broader social, political, and ideological context, who then becomes a member of a human community. As such, the individual is then made aware of his or her relation with that past shared by the community. And this past is, in turn, a permanent dimension of human consciousness, and an inevitable element of the institutions and patterns in human society.<sup>2</sup>

To carry out this enquiry into one’s past is therefore to pose an ultimate challenge to the premises that sustain the foundational narratives of identity which forge a sense of commonality between different groups of individuals. This enquiry also contains in itself a profound suspicion of any historiography that imparts traces of casuistry in its method or that clings adamantly to an unsubstantiated belief in progress as being scientifically predictable, inevitable, and unstoppable. What is more, to launch such an enquiry into one’s past is to push the notion and constraints of chronological time to their limits, thus allowing for the past to be rescued and reinscribed into the present, in a way that the former can illuminate aspects of the latter.

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<sup>2</sup> Eric Hobsbawm develops these ideas more thoroughly and eloquently in *On History* (1998).

According to historian John Burrow, “history is contiguous with many other genres and lines of inquiry, from epic and myths of origin to various social sciences” (2007, p. xiii). By saying so, Burrow reaffirms the narrative nature of history as a line of inquiry, and places the act of telling at the heart of historical investigation. Irrespective of the source or the arguments that are mobilised to explain a given historical event – epic, mythical, or scientific – this inquiry cannot prescind some sort of narrative construction. For him, this contiguity also incorporates apparently non-historical types of texts like “biography, drama, political and moral polemic, ethnography, novels, inquests and judicial investigations” (BURROW, 2007, p. xiii). Judging by the examples that Burrow gives in this excerpt, one can say that what he deems non-historical types of texts are the forms and kinds of narrative which by virtue of their nature and scope could not be allocated in the category of historiography as a scientific method or field of study.

Indeed, a quick history of the concept of history will not only reveal then that “it was, so far as we know, Herodotus who first used the term *historia* (inquiry) for what we call history (BURROW, 2007, p. xiii), but will also show that “a *histor* in Homer was someone who passed judgement based on the facts as a result of investigation, so the link between history and inquest is a very old one” (BURROW, 2007, p. xiii). Once again, Burrow restates the central role of telling for the historical enquiry. He cites Herodotus, whose narrative method consists in telling what results from his inquiry and at the same time withholding a definitive explanation of which is told. By doing that, Herodotus then leaves the historical account open to different interpretations, which in turn allows for that history to be renewed by future readings.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Burrow’s comments on Herodotus imply that history itself and the activity of the historian depend predominantly on the act of telling. In a similar way, Benjamin argues that Herodotus’ account is powerful because it is dry and offers no explanations or interpretative frameworks, thus retaining its capacity to astound and provoke thinking.<sup>4</sup>

The investigation of one’s origins that history enables more often than not reveals then that the past, when looked back on from a present perspective, is not carved in stone. A careful investigation of the Irish history in the past centuries will quickly

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<sup>3</sup> Jeanne Marie Gagnebin discusses these ideas in the preface to Walter Benjamin’s *Magia e Técnica, Arte e Política* (1996), and also in *História e Narração em Walter Benjamin* (2007).

<sup>4</sup> “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” (1936).

demonstrate that. The British colonisation of the island, the myriad attempts to resist it on the part of the Irish people, and the cultural, social, and political implications this process has produced are still deeply felt both in the Republic and in Northern Ireland. Indeed, the local obsession with the country's history opens a gap between what was and what is said to have been that is quite hard to bridge. "History for the British means how they have always done things; for some of the Irish it means how they have always been done" (EAGLETON, 1999, p. 98-99), as well as what and how they have been told. Eagleton's quip implies that, to a great extent, perspective in the telling history takes on a particularly intrinsic relevance in the Irish context, and suggests that some of the versions of Irish history are more conflicting than others, depending on the side that one chooses to take. To put it differently, Irish history is a bone of great contention, and the nature and the way that stories and history are told in Ireland is a source of equally great dissension, for it directly affects the way the past is mediated into the present. That the past is fraught with potential stories to be retold only fuels the tension between imaginative and 'real' history in Ireland, and also between what is told and what is omitted or silenced in the telling.

Indeed, the past is never really past in Ireland, and telling history is to a great extent all about controlling the narrative. As a consequence, questions about what is remembered, and by whom, as well as queries about how the past and the present are linked and retrieved by individual and collective memory arise, and they seriously contest the nature of the facts and their claim to truth as they are narrated. This shows that "a historical narrative is (...) necessarily a mixture of adequately and inadequately explained events, a congeries of established and inferred facts" (WHITE, 1985, p. 51). White's statement brings into focus the role of interpretation once again, only that this time it is looked at from the perspective of the historian, or in a broader sense, of the one who takes over the narrative. The historian can only gather together events and facts to try and infer the connections between them before grouping all this information into a form of narrative that can at best be partially explanatory. Interpretation, in the sense that White assigns to it, is an inherent part of the composition of historical narrative, in that it implies a decision – either conscious or unconscious – on the historian's part, of what will be narrated and what will not.

As an aggregation of established and inferred facts, then, historical narrative is "at once a representation that is an interpretation and an interpretation that passes for an

explanation of the whole process mirrored in the narrative” (WHITE, 1985, p. 51). White suggests here that interpretation is subordinated to explanation, which casts serious doubts on the objectivity or scientific rigour of the historian’s account of the past. In other words, if interpretation, in historical writing, is essentially a matter of filling in the gaps in the historical information on an inferential basis, then one can only suspect the validity of an account that purports to explain a given set of constructed facts objectively. Indeed, White’s analysis of the rhetorical process involved in historical writing may ultimately imply that there are no facts in the end, so that answers to questions about what really happened are at best tentative and inconclusive.

Such tentativeness and inconclusiveness is drastically aggravated when the limits between historical and fictional writing are blurred in novels that take history as a compositional element but at the same time exhibit a marked self-consciousness of their status as fiction. The question becomes even more complex when memory constitutes a central aspect of the fictional narrative, as happens in Sebastian Barry’s novels, for example. Indeed, Barry’s fictive strategy basically consists of deliberately using the different narratives of Irish history as the foundation to his novels. As a result, history becomes an intrinsic and fundamental aspect of his fiction, which in turn draws attention to “figures whose lives do not fit into the accepted grand narrative of Irish history” (ROCHE, 2006, p. 147). Due to that, Barry’s prose is profoundly revisionist in ethos, and tries to rescue from oblivion characters that Irish historiography tends to overlook. Novels like *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, in which the protagonist flees from Sligo after witnessing the death of an RIC officer to live a lonely, wandering and irresolute life, and *Annie Dunne*, which tells the story of loss and reconciliation of its main character, illustrate this idea well.

Barry’s most recent novels lay stronger emphasis on the tensions between remembrance and forgetting. Indeed, the sense of irresolution that arises from Barry’s aesthetic choices progressively strengthens the links between death and scripture in his fiction. In many respects, the national history in Barry’s novels is first of all a national story which “is so entwined with the personal that one implies the other” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 145). In *The Secret Scripture* (2007), *On Canaan’s Side* (2011), and *The Temporary Gentleman* (2014), for instance, fiction and history are linked by the aesthetic mediation that is made possible by memory. In other words, in these novels, it is an intricate relationship between memory, remembrance and writing that allows for

history to be inscribed within the realm of the fictional narrative, so that the latter is dialectically incorporated into the former.

This is so because if, on the one hand, memory and remembrance can retrieve history and rescue it from oblivion, the novel, on the other hand, essentially fictionalises history. In fact, this kind of reflection has fuelled a wave of historical revisionism in Ireland which has acquired considerable prominence in the public debate on the country's recent past. As Patten explains,

the fictional emphasis on historical revision has clear affinities, too, with Ireland's ongoing political process of enquiry, manifest in the government tribunals established in the period to investigate the corruptions of previous administrations" (2006, p. 264).

Indeed, any revisionism lays emphasis on the self-consciousness and awareness of history as a narrative, which explains the affinities that Patten highlights. This resonates quite strongly with the work of leading Irish contemporary novelists, and at a stroke fosters a sustained reflection on the nature of Irish history and Irish fiction as well. Hence, to look into the nature of the facts of history is necessarily to mull over the way some histories are made and others brushed aside. It is to read in the silencing of the text, in the gaps that it leaves open, the history of those who have been forgotten by the official historiography. This reading is of interest because it can rescue from oblivion the ruins of a past that still demands full negotiation.

Therefore, the struggle of Irish people to overcome the burden of their history contains in itself the germ of an on-going debate on who can claim the right to recount the past in Ireland, how, and under which circumstances. Indeed, in their struggle to overcome their traumatic history of colonisation, abject poverty, and sectarian conflicts, the Irish people inevitably come full circle to that which has haunted them for centuries. Besides, if memory links the past and the present, it is also true that it opens up a whole new dilemma as far as the creation of potential different versions for a historical fact is concerned. In other words, matters of memory are important in this discussion mainly because the past is viewed from an essentially present perspective, thus creating the necessary temporal distance for the inspection of what has been. In fact, the question as to what really happened always lingers in the debate about the past in Ireland, which in turn suggests that there is always another reality behind the one that is revealed in a given way to tell and write history.

## 1.1. A Brief Overview of Irish history in the Twentieth Century

Part of this bitter plot  
Is the English-Irish scene,  
Police and army on the spot,  
And something in-between

(‘The Art of Dying’ – Seamus Deane)

Deane’s poem captures with great poignancy the troubled relations between Ireland and England in the past centuries, and the image of armed conflict that it creates is particularly fitting to describe the escalating violence that afflicted the island in different moments throughout the twentieth century. However, to understand the origins of these conflicts, one needs to look back onto the nineteenth century and the rise of the nationalist movement in Ireland, and how these nationalist ideas have evolved to become the ideological basis upon which the Irish people would claim the country’s independence from English rule.

As Charles Townshend explains, “the *leitmotiv* of nineteenth-century Irish public life was resistance to the Union” (2010, p. 19), that is, the maintenance of the political union between Ireland and England. Townshend also explains that the four distinct dimensions that sustained such a resistance were the demands for change in “political status; in land law, ownership and distribution; (...) demands for institutional structures, incorporating the outlook of the overwhelming Catholic majority; [and] calls for cultural authenticity” (2010, p. 19). In other words, these dimensions were profoundly political in the end. After all, their instauration would effect a significant change as far as access to property and political representation in Ireland were concerned. Besides, the demand for cultural authenticity was largely based on the belief that the true cultural heritage of the Irish people was that which preceded colonisation, and that whatever cultural manifestation associated with the presence of the English coloniser in the island should be extirpated sooner or later.

This trenchant opposition to the Union was largely championed by the growth of political and cultural nationalism. Broadly speaking, nationalism in Ireland was strongly influenced by Catholic ideology, and saw “the formal political demand for separation – ‘freedom’ – as the most fundamental issue” (TOWNSHEND, 2010, p. 20) in Ireland. Indeed, in the increasingly complicated colonial relationship between Ireland and

England, separation meant an ultimate rooting out of English political and cultural influence on the island, in such a way that political separation not only became synonymous with ‘freedom’, but ended up being considered a precondition to it. However, there was no consensus as to how this ‘freedom’ was to be obtained. On the one hand, there were the nationalists who took a moderate, non-violent stand and believed that they could obtain concessions from the British government that would create the conditions for a political reformation to be carried out on diplomatic grounds. On the other, there was Irish Republicanism, a radical movement that saw no way of establishing an Irish Republic other than by force and the use of violence.

Indeed, as a mass movement, Irish nationalism “can be traced to the 1790s” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 397). For Connolly, this period saw the escalation of a deep-rooted sense of “lost ancestral rights inherited from Gaelic tradition by the Defenders fused with the broader vocabulary of popular and national rights derived from the American Revolution and French Revolution by the United Irishmen” (2004, p. 397). Founded in County Armagh in the eighteenth-century, the Defenders were a Roman Catholic agrarian society that was initially created to oppose the Peep o’ Day Boys – a Protestant agrarian association. Their political opposition culminated in the Battle of Diamond, in 1795, won by the Protestant organisation. After being defeated in this direct confrontation, the Defenders went on to become allies with the United Irishmen, and took part in the 1798 rebellion. This was a five-month republican uprising against British rule in Ireland, which is thought to have been the most concentrated outbreak of violence in Irish history. The Defenders gradually adhered to Ribbonism in the nineteenth century and evolved into the Ribbonmen, a secret society composed of rural Irish Catholics that ideologically and at times violently stood up against the British unionist ideology and conservatism espoused by the Orange Order.

Townshend argues that, even though “the demand for a sovereign republic was modelled directly on the example of the American and French revolutions” (TOWNSHEND, 2010, p. 20), the basis of the claim to independence remained largely unclarified. He explains that, on the one hand, the ‘republican’ demand for independence was at first justified on the grounds of eighteenth-century Enlightened rationalism, while on the other, the United Irishmen sponsored the idea that Ireland needed its own government because the island was a natural entity. To try and deal with these divisions, American and French democratic ideas and rhetoric were adopted by

the ‘republicans’ and “the ‘nation’ was invoked on the basis of common citizenship: being born in Ireland made people Irish” (TOWNSHEND, 2010, p. 20). However, this shared commonality would prove insufficient and in the final analysis fallacious because it privileged an essentially geographical paradigm that overlooked the complexity of Irish identity, as well as the tensions and divisions that had resulted from the countless battles over arguably irreconcilable ideas on how the country could obtain sovereignty. In other words, this view of nation, inclusive though it might seem or purport to have been, did not take into consideration the political and ideological nuances in the Ireland of that period, which imposed the necessity for nationalists to try and forge a collectivity that transcended the territorial paradigm.

If Irish nationalism on the one side “muffled class differences, it exacerbated religious ones” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 397) on the other. These divergences in religious persuasion cannot be considered in isolation, though. Instead, they must be inscribed into the larger context of political and ideological dispute between nationalists and unionists about whether or not Ireland should sever its ties with Britain and the extent to which this could guarantee that the island became sovereign. The aggravation in these religious/ideological divisions triggered by Irish nationalism would eventually create a highly complicated recipe for political disaster that would extend well into the first decades of the twentieth first century and beyond.

Indeed, a “growing identification of nationalism with religion is characteristic of the Irish movement” (HOBBSAWM, 1991, p. 68). This is hardly surprising, mainly because the nationalist movement was sponsored by a majority of Catholics who demanded more political representation, which they would certainly not obtain while Ireland remained under British rule. Besides, Hobsbawm argues that this relationship between nationalism and religion in Ireland is particularly prominent especially because “religion is an ancient and well-tried method of establishing communion through common practice and a sort of brotherhood between people who otherwise have nothing much in common” (1991, p. 68). To put it differently, through a series of shared practices and rituals people can symbolically construct a sense of community that would perhaps be hard to obtain otherwise. Nevertheless, when the fundamental premises of two distinct symbolically constructed ideas of communion collide, as in the Irish case, the differences and tensions are hard to negotiate and appease. In many respects then, religion in Ireland provided the basis for the nationalist collectivity to be forged at the

same time that it paradoxically intensified the political and ideological discrepancies between Catholics and Protestants.

Besides that, Irish nationalism “differed from most continental European nationalisms in not having a strong basis in language or culture” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 397), since the Irish language had long ceased to be widely spoken in the island. As a consequence, the work of movements such as the Gaelic Athletic Association and the Gaelic League became all the more important in their attempts to ensure “that a commitment to cultural revival became a central element in nationalist ideology” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 397). Indeed, the Gaelic League was founded by Eugene O'Growney and Douglas Hyde, and not only campaigned to include the Irish language in the school curriculum – which eventually happened –, but also promoted the use of Irish in everyday life as a way of opposing the Anglicisation of Ireland. In addition, it sought to foment the revival of spoken Irish by organising conversation evenings and holding meetings, and encouraged cultural commentary and literary production in Irish and English with the publication of *An Claidheamh Soluis*, its weekly newspaper, first edited by Eoin MacNeill and then by Pádraig Pearse. The Gaelic Athletic Association also encouraged the use of the Irish language, but its scope was broader than that of the Gaelic League, and included support to and diffusion of traditional Irish music and dancing, and most notably, the dissemination of traditional Irish and Gaelic games.

As Townshend explains, “around the turn of the century, the trajectory of Irish nationalism shifted in a decisive way. A new focus on cultural identity radically altered the meaning of Irishness itself” (2010, p. 38). The geographical or territorial paradigm that served as the fundamental premise to define Irish identity had ceased to be valid or determinant, and the attempts made by groups like the Gaelic League and the Gaelic Athletic Association to revive a long-lost tradition that could oppose the British cultural influence on Ireland had played an important role in such a momentous changeover. To be Irish then was no longer a matter of having been born in Ireland or being an Irish citizen; it was much more a matter of sharing a linguistic and cultural heritage that inscribed the Irish people within a set of traditions that separated them from the English people above all.

Before this cultural turn, nationality had been conceived politically, and the central issue for nationalists was to break the political connection with England. The

island of Ireland was assumed to be a natural political unit, and its inhabitants formed the Irish people, and their problems were caused by English political control. Under these circumstances, the nationalists believed that the ultimate solution to the Irish problem would come with legislative autonomy and political sovereignty. And the shift in the meaning of Irishness resulting from a stronger emphasis on a shared cultural background brought a symbolic edge to these discussions that the merely territorial paradigm could not provide. Besides, the call for ‘de-Anglicisation’ at the heart of this cultural turn added even more fuel to the fire of the nationalist demands for independence and proclamation of a republic . As Townshend explains,

Now a much more strenuous and far-reaching aim emerged, under the slogan ‘de-Anglicization’ – the rooting-out of all English influence, mental as well as economic and political. Both linguistic and moral issues came to mark out a more strenuously defined cultural nation. Irishness was to become a subjective rather than an objective quality, and the Irish people became something more – and something less – than simply the inhabitants of Ireland. (2010, p. 38)

Indeed, the focus on cultural identity made Irishness into a more subjective quality, and this was the most fundamental change that it could have provoked. Besides, the stress on the necessity for Ireland to obtain political sovereignty and eschew the British influence both politically and culturally fuelled, at least partially, the discontent which would culminate in violent military conflicts such as the Easter Rising, the Anglo-Irish War of Independence, the Civil War, and later on The Troubles in Northern Ireland.

### 1.1.1. The Easter Rising 1916

Was it needless death after all?  
 For England may keep faith  
 For all that is done and said.  
 We know their dream; enough  
 To know they dreamed and are dead.  
 And what if excess of love  
 Bewildered them till they died?  
 I write it out in a verse --  
 MacDonagh and MacBride  
 And Connolly and Pearse  
 Now and in time to be,  
 Wherever green is worn,  
 Are changed, changed utterly:  
 A terrible beauty is born.

(‘Easter, 1916’ – W. B. Yeats)

Yeats’ ‘Easter, 1916’ captures in its use of symbolism and poetic image the main aspects of the Easter rebellion in 1916, and creates a profoundly personal and poignant response to this major event in the history of Ireland in the twentieth century. Broadly speaking, the logical composition of this poem is guided by the establishment of an austere contrast between the mundane portrayal of Dublin in the first stanza and a deep meditation in the rest of the poem on the perplexity and sympathy arising from the individual’s apprehension of the events of the Rising. Indeed, the poem’s shifting tone reinforces this premise, and along with the tension between change and permanence that its poetic images engender, insinuates that transition and transformation are central themes to it.

Townshend argues that “the Easter rebellion in 1916 has been commonly acknowledged as the turning-point in the evolution of modern Ireland” (2010, p. 68). Indeed, when seen in retrospect, the outcome and effects of the Rising were of paramount importance to pave the way for Irish independence in 1921. The rebellion marked a fundamental change in Ireland not only because it represented the first concrete attempt to proclaim a republic in the country, but also because its aftermath triggered popular hostility towards Britain, mainly because of the quick and violent suppression of the Rising by the British army, which was far superior in terms of

number of troopers and artillery. Moreover, the Rising attracted sympathy for the use of violence as a means to gain independence and establish an independent republican state.

The rising began on Easter Monday, 24 April, when about 1,000 Volunteers and just over 200 Citizen Army seized the General Post Office and other sites in Dublin. A proclamation was read in the name of the provisional government of the Irish Republic. Fighting continued until the insurgents surrendered on 29 April. There were supporting actions in Wexford, Galway, and Co. Dublin, and an attempted mobilization in Cork. In Dublin 64 insurgents were killed, along with 132 crown forces and about 230 civilians, and extensive use of artillery devastated much of the city centre. (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 514)

The proclamation that was read stated that the people of Ireland should have the right to own Ireland and be sovereign to control Irish destinies, which had long been usurped by the presence of a foreign people and government. Based on that fundamental right to be sovereign the rebels tried to proclaim the republic. Besides, the new government should also guarantee, as the text of the proclamation declared, religious and civil liberty, purported to secure equality of rights and opportunities to all its citizens, and to leave behind the divisions and differences fostered by a long history of foreign rule.

After the rebellion had been quashed, its leaders, including Thomas J. Clarke, Sean Mac Diarmada, Thomas MacDonagh, Patrick H. Pearse, Eamonn Ceannt, James Connolly, and Joseph Plunkett, the signatories of the proclamation, were executed. The news of the executions triggered inflamed reactions, and in a letter published in *The Daily News*, 10 May 1916, George Bernard Shaw defended the legitimacy of the Rising by arguing that “an Irishman resorting to arms to achieve the independence of his country is doing only what Englishmen will do if it be their misfortune to be invaded and conquered by the Germans in the course of the present war” (2000, p. 239). In the same letter Shaw registered his utter disagreement with the circumstances in which the rebels were sentenced to death:

Sir – You say that ‘so far as the leaders are concerned no voice has been raised in this country against the infliction of the punishment which has so speedily overtaken them’. As the Government shot the prisoners first and told the public about it afterwards, there was no opportunity for effective protest. But it must not be assumed that those who merely shrugged their shoulders when it was useless to remonstrate accept for one moment the view that what happened was the execution of a gang of criminals. (SHAW, 2000, p. 239)

Shaw's irony here is bitter, and in many ways epitomises the tone of the disputes as far as the Rising is concerned.

As Townshend wonders, “was the 1916 rebellion conceived as a heroic gesture (...) or did its planners have a real expectation of success – that is, the actual establishment of an independent Irish republic?” (2010, p. 74). When examined in retrospect, the improvised nature of the Rising offers little evidence that the insurgents could really proclaim the Irish Republic a sovereign independent state as they had set out to do. In fact, on that same question, Eagleton comments, with a tinge of irony, that “the rebels themselves were mostly poets and intellectuals, rarely the most promising material for a military scrap” (1999, p. 62) and adds that,

In some respects, the Easter Rising remains a puzzling affair. Did the nationalists really think that they could take on the might of the British army, or was their action intended as a symbolic ‘blood sacrifice’ which might stir their compatriots to revolt? Were they militants or martyrs? Might they have stood some chance of victory if their original plan had not collapsed? Was the Rising completely unnecessary? Britain had in fact already promised Home Rule to the Irish, but had shelved the measure for the duration of the First World War. Was it an act of heroism or one of treachery – a stab in the back for those Irishmen who were fighting alongside Britain in the First World War? (EAGLETON, 1999, p. 66).

For all that, “evidence remains ambiguous” (TOWNSHEND, 2010, p. 74) about the real chances for the Easter Rising to have been a successful insurrection, and like other events of Irish history, this rebellion still raises fierce controversy. Little wonder then that it has been used as fictional raw material by different writers from different generations. Apart from Yeats, quoted at the beginning of this section, playwrights like Sean O’Casey and Tom Murphy, and novelists like Sebastian Barry and Roddy Doyle are amongst the writers who have addressed the rebellion in their work.

O’Casey’s *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), for instance, takes place in Dublin between November 1915 and April 1916, and encompasses the tense historical atmosphere before and during the Easter Rising. The play is titled after the Starry Plough banner, used by the Irish Citizen Army as a symbol of their struggle for political and cultural sovereignty, meaning that as a free country, Ireland should be able to take full charge of its destiny, from the plough to the stars. Instead of drawing direct attention to the leaders of the rising, *The Plough and the Stars* (1926) focuses on the

ways ordinary Dubliners responded to the conflict, and paints a naturalistic and witty picture of the impacts of the rebellion in the mind of the average Irish citizen.

In Murphy's *The Patriot Game*, a group of actors perform their own rendition of the Easter Rising 1916. Murphy's play draws from different sources, like excerpts from Pearse's speech, poems, and songs to create a scenario in which the Rising is reassessed and has its historical and political importance reaffirmed. Ryschka explains that *The Patriot Game* "is divided into two parts: the first part (...) giving insight into the events happening immediately before the insurrection; the second part [covering] the six days of the event together with the rebels' last days before their execution" (2008, p. 113). *The Patriot Game* is highly self-conscious of its theatrical nature, which is particularly evident in its meta-theatrical edge and the use of a female narrator who comments on the actions and events as they occur. Indeed, the narrator in Murphy's play, Ryschka argues, comments on the events without "getting directly involved [for] she does this from a temporal distance, from today's perspective" (2008, p. 119), thus emphasizing the temporal distance between the narration and the events being narrated.

Indeed, narrative distance and perspective are central aspects in *The Patriot Game*, and in the words of Ryschka, the initial role of the narrator in Murphy's play is "to deconstruct nationalism and to question national identity" (2008, p. 119). This deconstructive ethos serves as a powerful aesthetic mechanism that evinces not only the different layers of historical readings evoked by the play but also the historical events that it dramatises. Even though the narrator in *The Patriot Game* "dislikes the emotions nationalism evokes, she sometimes finds it hard to restrain herself. Her intention is to remain objective in her remarks is frustrated several times" (RYSCHKA, 2008, p. 119). If anything then, Murphy's play shows in the end that no definite interpretation of Irish history is possible, as it casts doubts on what historical commemoration would otherwise take for granted. Indeed, *The Patriot Game* reaffirms the close relationship between drama and history in Ireland and eschews unambiguous readings of the Rising as it restates the importance of this event in the Irish collective memory.

Roddy Doyle's novel *A Star Called Henry* (1999) presents the political unrest between the Easter Rising and the Anglo-Irish War of Independence as seen through the eyes of Henry Smart. The novel follows Henry from his childhood into his early twenties, when, as a member of the Irish Citizen Army himself, he strikes up an

acquaintance with historical characters of pivotal importance for the Rising such as Patrick Pearse, James Connolly, and Michael Collins. A clear exercise in revisionism, Doyle's novel ends with Henry's conclusion that massive killing of innocent people has scarcely any connection with the idea of a free, sovereign country. As a result, the novel reveals a social concern beneath the narrative surface with the emergence of tensions and conflicts between Henry as an individual and the public sphere that the world of institutions eventually represents. *A Star Called Henry* is the first novel in Doyle's celebrated The Last Roundup Trilogy, the other two being *Oh, Play that Thing!* (2004) and *The Dead Republic* (2010).

The Easter Rising is also revisited by Sebastian Barry in *A Long Long Way* (2005). The novel tells the story of Willie Dunne, who joins the Royal Dublin Fusiliers and leaves Ireland, his family, and Gretta, whom he intended to marry, in order to fight for the Allies in World War I. On the battlefield, Willie is vaguely aware that political tensions have escalated in Ireland, and when he comes back home on leave he faces the smouldering atmosphere that culminated in the outbreak of the Easter Rising. For O'Brien, in *A Long Long Way*, "what Ireland signifies is clearly changing in ways that Willie hardly dares imagine" (2012, p. 163), and the protagonist's personal and moral dilemmas are given greater prominence as he is shown to be caught between two different armed conflicts. Indeed, Harte explains that *A Long Long Way* not only tries to "advance [Barry's] project of enlarging the terms upon which Irishness is constituted but also to elevate the Great War to a tragic status it has never attained within postcolonial Irish culture" (2014, p. 201). The novel opens with the statement that Willie "was born in dying days" (BARRY, 2005, p. 3), which in turn suggests that his life will be permeated by grief and horror, tragedy and barbarity, until he is eventually killed near St-Court in 1918.

All in all, "the sketchy nature of [the insurgent's] planning suggests that most were driven less by a real hope of victory than by the idea of reviving nationalist militancy through a bold gesture" (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 514), which they managed to do. Indeed, irrespective of potential real hopes for victory on the rebels' part, the Easter Rising's power and influence is mostly felt in the symbolic connotations that it acquired in the following years, as the Irish dissatisfaction with British rule escalated to the point at which independence became inevitable.

### 1.1.2. The Anglo-Irish War (1919-1921)

It's the civilians that suffer; when there's an  
ambush they don't know where to run. Shot in the back to  
save the British Empire, an' shot in the breast to save the  
soul of Ireland. I'm a Nationalist meself, right enough – a  
Nationalist right enough, but all the same – I'm a  
Nationalist right enough; I believe in the freedom of  
Ireland, an' that England has no right to be here, but I  
draw the line when I hear the gunmen blowin' about dyin'  
for the people, when it's the people that are dyin' for the  
gunmen! With all due respect to the gunmen, I don't want  
them to die for me.

*(The Shadow of a Gunman – Sean O'Casey)*

In 1918, *Sinn Féin*, the Irish Republican Party, defeated the moderate Irish Parliamentary Party by a landslide. The seventy three *Sinn Féiners* who were elected broke away from Westminster rule in January 1919 and set up the *Dáil Éireann* (Irish for “Assembly of Ireland”) in Dublin. In practical terms, the creation of the Irish assembly represented a formal declaration of independence from Great Britain, in that it installed an independent legislature in Ireland. The British government eventually declared both the *Dáil* and *Sinn Féin* illegal later on that same year, which in turn intensified the already existing armed conflicts between the IRA and British soldiers.

As Connolly explains, the Anglo-Irish War, or War of Independence, is “conventionally dated from 21 January 1919 to 11 July 1921 [and] opened the way for the negotiation of the Anglo-Irish treaty” (2004, p. 17), and consequent partition of Ireland. The war was launched by a group of Irish Volunteers gathered under the leadership of Michael Collins, a veteran from the Easter Rising in 1916 who would have a potent influence not only on the Irish Volunteers, but also the *Sinn Féin*. The Irish Volunteers understood that the use of force was the only way to establish a republic in Ireland, and from August 1919, became known as the Irish Republican Army (IRA), of which Collins was the director of intelligence and organisation. Connolly explains that Collins’ “success and determination to get things done brought him into conflict with some other leaders such as de Valera and Cathal Brugha” (2004, p. 108), and these disputes would become more evident in the negotiation and signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty.

The IRA's insufficient number of men, poor training and scarcity of arms, led them to adopt a guerrilla campaign in that any victory against the British military forces in a conventional open-conflict would be impossible to obtain. Connolly explains that "IRA activity during 1919 consisted mainly of arms seizures and attacks on individual policemen" (2004, p. 17), and from January 1920 on the ambushes and raids became increasingly more ambitious. Indeed, the IRA developed and implemented a "highly effective form of guerrilla warfare, wholly different from the tactics of the rising of 1916 or earlier insurrections" (CONNOLLY 2004, p. 17). The main difference was that the IRA did not count on a general rising in Ireland that would support their main actions such as the insurgents of 1916 did. Besides, the IRA's extensive use of guerrilla tactics, with a recurrent use of raids and ambushes to inflict their attacks "represented a gradual adaptation to practical necessity, dependent more on local initiative than on central planning" (CONNOLLY 2004, p. 17). The IRA's guerrilla warfare eventually rendered Ireland rather expensive for the British government in financial, military, and political terms. That Ireland had become ungovernable other than by military means eventually forced Westminster to negotiate with the *Dáil*.

In addition to that, there was a marked ideological split within the IRA, in a way that "essentially there were still two nationalist organizations in operation, closely intertwined but with distinct core values" (TOWNSHEND, 2010, p. 89), which would have a catastrophic effect with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty. Signs of this division were particularly noticeable in the fact that it was only in 1921 that the *Dáil* took responsibility for the actions of the Volunteers, and also in the requirement of the Irish assembly that the Volunteers vowed fidelity to it. It is also worth noticing that the Volunteers changed the name of their group to Irish Republican Army, not the Army of the Irish Republic, and that their new title was never translated into Irish either. These nuances and details suffice to offer at least some evidence that the *Dáil* and the IRA stuck to different core values, and as a result viewed the nationalist and the republican questions from two distinct perspectives.

The British retaliation against the IRA campaign was both swift and draconian. "In response to [the] challenge [of the guerrilla] the government deployed regular troops and created two new forces, the Black and Tans and Auxiliaries, to reinforce the Royal Irish Constabulary" (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 17), the latter one of the main targets of the IRA ambushes and raids. It did not take long for the Black and Tans to be detested by

the Irish population who endorsed the republican project. Their nickname arises from the improvised uniforms they initially wore, made of parts of the khaki British army uniform and the darker green RIC uniform. The Black and Tans acquired an infamous reputation for the truculence and brutality of the attacks they perpetrated on civilians and their property such as in random shooting, looting, and breaking into people's houses for all intents and purposes in search of IRA members. Irish soldiers who had also been recruited to become a Black and Tan were seen as traitors, and their aggressiveness made the Irish people wary of the RIC.

The Anglo-Irish War of Independence inflicted heavy casualties on both sides, and “continued violence in the first half of 1921 brought the total death toll for the period to 405 police, 150 military, and an estimated 750 IRA and civilians” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 17-18). Despite that, for some commentators and historians, the terms ‘Anglo-Irish War’ or ‘War of Independence’ remain, not surprisingly, fairly controversial. According to Connolly, this is so mainly because,

IRA activists and leadership determinedly employed the vocabulary of conventional warfare to assert their status as combatants in a national conflict. In doing so, they glossed over the sporadic, hit-and-run character of most operations, the limited scale of the violence prior to late 1920, and the predominance among the early victims of the IRA of the locally recruited, and predominantly Catholic, RIC. The government was equally determined to deny the ‘murder gang’ the legitimacy of belligerent status. It condoned reprisals, including the widespread destruction of property in such incidents as the Black and Tan raid on Balbriggan, Co. Dublin, on 20 September 1920, and the ‘sack’ of Cork city by Auxiliaries and Black and Tans on 11-12 December 1920. It also ignored the assassination, clearly by security force members, of several republican activists. (2004, p. 17).

To assess the extent to which the IRA truly represented the interests of the population is no less complicated either, and it has often provoked heated debates and fuelled massive historical speculation in Ireland. In the words of Connolly,

Modern historians, reacting against an earlier tradition of uncritical glorification, have emphasized the extent to which violence was deliberately employed by a militant minority to block any possibility of a compromise settlement, and the ruthless action, shading into a more general intimidation against ‘informers’ and ‘collaborators’. (2004, p. 18)

As is the case with the Easter Rising, the War of Independence frequently finds its way into Irish literature. Authors as different as Sean O’Casey, J. G. Farrell, and William

Trevor, among others, have incorporated the political tensions and the violence of the armed conflicts into their plays and novels either as a theme or as part of the historical background for the stories they created.

In O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923), the guerrilla war is raging, and Donal Davoren, a poet who shares a room with Seumas Shields, is mistaken for an IRA Volunteer by the other tenement dwellers. Davoren does not dispel the misunderstanding, mainly when he notices that young and attractive Minnie Powell is attracted to that idea – “a gunman on the run! Be careful, be careful, Donal Davoren. But Minnie is attracted to the idea, and I am attracted to Minnie. And what danger can there be in being the shadow of a gunman?” (O'CASEY, 1998, p. 32). Meanwhile, Mr Maguire, friends with Seumas and the actual IRA Volunteer, hides hand grenades in Seumas's room before getting killed as he took part in an ambush. Seumas' apartment is then raided by the Auxiliaries, and Minnie Powell, who had hidden the bag of grenades in her own room, is arrested. At the end, the Auxies that had arrested her are ambushed, and Minnie is shot as she tries to get away from the crossfire that results.

J. G. Farrell's *Troubles* (1970), which is part of a trilogy on the fall of the British empire, deals with history and historical memory. In the claustrophobic atmosphere that it creates, the novel stands not only as a commentary on the “Troubles” of the guerrilla War of Independence, but also on the “Troubles” starting in Northern Ireland in the late 1960s. As Garratt argues, Farrell's *Troubles* is “particularly attuned to problems caused by distorted versions of history” (2011, p. 19), which has drawn the keen interest of Irish novelists and historians alike. Garratt explains that the essential fictional narrative of *Troubles* consists of a “detailed use of contemporary historical materials, especially Irish newspaper articles, and a temporal mixing of past and present in the framing device Farrell uses to begin and end the novel” (2011, p. 19-20). In many ways, *Troubles* works as a narrative matrix for more contemporary Irish novels that deal with matters of traumatic memory and the construction of different historical narratives.

William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune* (1983) tells the story of an Anglo-Irish family caught up in the War of Independence. The fictive strategy in Trevor's novel is redolent of Farrell's *Troubles* in blending together the past and the present, so that the violence and the barbarity which afflicted Willie are still a sore wound. For Garratt *Fools of Fortune* “opens not as a straightforward chronicle of the turbulent events in the

early 1920s, but rather as a backward look from the fictive present, suggesting that the story about to unfold is a recollection” (2011, p. 53). In other words, *Fools of Fortune* relies on remembrance as its main literary technique, and the telling of its story centres around what can be recovered by memory and reorganised in the present time of the narrative. Garratt sees a gradual development of the plot in this novel, and explains that “as each of the principal characters – Willie, Marianne, and their daughter, Imelda – gives his or her version of past events as a type of dramatic monologue, addressed to one another, explaining things that the others could not know” (2011, p. 53-54). As a consequence, the matter of perspective in storytelling and in the telling of history is brought to the fore in Trevor’s novel, which demonstrates that these different viewpoints ultimately set the scene for potential half-truths to be built and for misunderstandings to arise as a result.

Trevor also returned to the traumas generated in the individual by the War of Independence in *Silence in the Garden* (1988), and in *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002), which reinforces the importance of shifting perspectives as a key fictive strategy in Trevor’s main fictional works. As Garratt explains, “the novels present different voices and points of view (...) and with them a means by which the reconstruction of the past becomes less simplified and more nuanced” (2011, p. 68). All in all, Trevor’s novels seem to encapsulate the idea that one can only achieve a greater understanding of the past when the different voices that have been suppressed are given the chance to speak and tell their story – and with it their history – from their own perspective.

The War of Independence officially ended on 11 July 1921, when both parts agreed to a ceasefire, and posterior negotiations led to the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, on 6 December 1921. The Treaty established the Irish Free State as self-governing, but within the British Commonwealth, and gave Northern Ireland the possibility of seceding from the republic, which actually happened, thus cementing the partition of Ireland. The Treaty was controversial, not only because it subordinated the Irish Free State to the British Commonwealth, but also because it abolished the Irish Republic established in 1919, and allowed for Britain to retain the ports at Lough Swilly, Queenstown, and Berehaven due to their strategic position in military terms. The political and religious sectarianism between republicans (mostly Catholics) and loyalists (mostly Protestants) and the radical split in the republican movement that the

signing of the Treaty created led to an almost immediate and ferocious civil war in Ireland.

### 1.1.3. The Irish Civil War (1922-1923)

(...) the whole country's in a state o' chassis.

*(Juno and the Paycock – Sean O'Casey)*

It is not too much to say that the Civil War was largely fought over a document, and essentially opposed “two factions of the republican movement over the acceptance of the Anglo-Irish treaty. Although widely supported by the population, the treaty split *Sinn Féin* and the IRA” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 277), which immediately exposed the political and ideological fissures of the newly established republican state. As a matter of fact, one could argue that the Anglo-Irish Treaty was the last straw, resulting in the outbreak of a conflict which exposed the political and ideological tensions that had remained unresolved by independence. Indeed, these tensions would only lead to more paramilitary conflicts in the future. As Townshend explains,

The partition of Ireland in 1920-1921 was the unintended byproduct of the Irish national revival. Not for the first, or the last time, the emergence of an assertive nationalist movement, *Sinn Féin*, intensified the determination of Unionists to resist incorporation into a single autonomous Irish state. (2010, p. 178)

Indeed, the Irish Civil War cemented the partition of the island, especially because of the armed conflict between opposing nationalist sectors. In addition, the paramilitary dispute ultimately strengthened the Unionist prejudice against any nationalist mindset, thus making it impossible for the reunification of Ireland to occur in the foreseeable future.

The split in the nationalist movement over the terms and conditions set by the Treaty did not take long to produce more concrete political actions. A Provisional Government was formed by the pro-Treaty side under the leadership of Michael Collins. The pro-Treaties controlled the political sphere, and as head of the Provisional Government, Collins was also the commander-in-chief of the National Army that was

put together to protect the institutions established by the Treaty. Not surprisingly, the majority of the IRA stood against the Treaty, and due to their insubordination they became known as “Irregulars”, in a clear rhetorical move on the Provisional Government’s part to ideologically and politically delegitimise the claims of the anti-Treaty side. “Hostilities finally broke out on 28 June 1922 when government troops attacked the headquarters of the Irregulars in the Four Courts building” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 277), which culminated in the Battle of Dublin, a week of intense street fighting that sparked off the Irish Civil War. As a consequence of the pro-Treaty attacks, the Four Courts building was burned down and the Irish Public Record Office was irreparably ruined.

What followed then was a barbarous conflict of catastrophic proportions for the newly independent Ireland. Indeed, Townshend claims that “the Irish Free State (*Saorstát Éireann*) was almost mortally wounded at birth” (2010, p. 117) due to the uncontrolled violence of the fights and the consequent chaotic atmosphere that prevailed in the country. The street battles between the pro-Treaty and the anti-Treaty troops killed “a total of 927 people by June 1923, including 77 executed by the government” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 277), which by then had made extensive use of internment – that is, the detention of suspects without granting them the right for a trial – and determined that those caught with guns should be sentenced to death. For all that, the Irish Free State only managed to survive the political divisions as well as the economic costs of the war due to widespread disappointment at the republican ideology, and not for any kind of unstinting support for the new government.

Ruthless though it was, however, the Irish Civil War cannot be remembered only for the brutality of its conflicts or for the serious casualties that resulted from its battles. Indeed, it had a powerful symbolic edge, and “the depth of the divisions left a lasting legacy on the Irish political scene” (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 277). The Provisional Government installed with the signing of the Anglo-Irish Treaty knew that it was paramount to build a favourable image to its enterprise both discursively and ideologically. Bearing that in mind, the Provisional Government,

symptomatically [insisted that] press coverage should reflect the legitimacy of the new state; reports must refer to ‘the government’ rather than the Provisional Government, and its troops must be described as the ‘Irish Army’ or ‘national

troops', whereas the anti-Treaty forces were 'irregulars', 'bands' or 'bodies of men'. (TOWNSHEND, 2010, p. 115)

What Townshend shows here is that parallel to the physical confrontation of the battlefield there was an insidious battle of words which clearly aimed at undermining the ideological basis of the opponents of the Provisional Government. This rhetorical strategy worked towards destabilising the anti-Treaty forces by making the country hostile to the political legitimacy that sustained their actions. In other words the Provisional Government created an image of disorganisation and inconsequence that they attached to the anti-Treaty forces by describing them in terms of unlawfulness and disturbance. The ultimate goal of this strategy was to discredit the opposition and at the same time reinforce the legitimacy of the government and that of its military actions.

The Irish Civil War has also been used as either theme or historical background for the stories told in the work of different novelists, short story writers, and playwrights like Liam O'Flaherty, Julia O'Faolain, and Sean O'Casey. By recreating the historical and political turmoil of the hostilities in their fiction, these writers strengthen the links between literature and history in Ireland while they also inspect the aftermaths of the conflicts. What is more, their literary works show how ordinary people have struggled to negotiate the often traumatic state of affairs installed by the Irish Civil War. At the same time that they pose profound moral and ethical questions that sceptically interrogate the ideological premises of the opposing sides and with it the accepted narratives of the overt warfare that historiography as science has formulated throughout the years.

O'Casey's *Juno and the Paycock*, for example, is set in 1922 and uses the Irish Civil War as its historical background. The play centres on the Boyle family who, after learning that they have inherited a fortune from a distant relative, litter their tenement room with plentiful furniture of a vulgar nature, and that they would be able to afford only when they had access to the inherited money. Yet this does not happen, and they end up having to return the goods they had purchased. However, the greatest tragedy in the denouement of the play lies in the fact that Johnny, Juno and Jack Boyle's son, who had lost an arm fighting in the War of Independence, is assassinated as a traitor by the members of the IRA. Indeed, Johnny spends the whole play in constant fear of being found and executed in retaliation for his having informed on Tancred, a comrade in the

IRA who was then murdered by Free Staters. In the words of Murray, “O’Casey, the debunker of sham and satirist of pretension, never was guilty of sentimentality when the coiled spring of his material unwound in stark tragedy” (1998, p. xiii). Indeed, that is the case not only of *Juno and the Paycock*, but also of *The Plough and the Stars* and *The Shadow of a Gunman*, in which the effects of armed conflicts on the individual’s psyche are shown to be both disruptive and terribly tragic.

The figure of the informer and the tension between loyalty and betrayal that it represents is also used by Liam O’Flaherty in *The Informer* (1925), a novel set in Dublin right in the wake of the Irish Civil War. It tells the tale of Gypo Nolan, who gets hunted and murdered by his fellow revolutionaries for having sold out his friend and comrade Frankie McPhillip to the police. Of interest here is that O’Flaherty creates in this novel a story of deep psychological torment that is felt more intensely between the act of betrayal itself and the moment when the protagonist is executed as a form of punishment. Indeed, the way O’Flaherty aesthetically builds such an atmosphere of distress and agony in this novel eventually becomes an extended metaphor for the perplexity of the individual in a time of war as well as for the remorse that results from the hasty decisions one eventually takes in such a context.

A similar perplexity and remorse can be observed in O’Flaherty’s short story “The Sniper”. Originally published in 1923 in the *Labour Leader*, a socialist weekly based in London, this short story marked the beginning of O’Flaherty’s career as a fiction writer. This short story deals with the Irish Civil War while the street battles were still raging, and the sniper of its title, caught in the middle of a shooting, comes up with a ruse that will enable him to kill his assailant and escape the crossfire alive. The ruse he devises works and when he turns the body of his assailant over, the sniper finds out that he had just killed his brother. The irony at the end of O’Flaherty’s story is bitter and tragic, in that it captures the contradictions at the heart of the armed conflict between the pro-Treaty and the anti-Treaty sides with uncanny precision.

O’Faolain’s *No Country for Young Men* (1980) centres on the story of Sister Judith Clancy, who has been emotionally scarred by her traumatic past experiences, and is continuously bothered by memories connected with the violence of the Irish Civil War in 1922. In the words of Garratt, O’Faolain’s novel portrays “an individual trapped and incapacitated by personal history” (2011, p. 37), and he adds that “the traumatic is

also embedded in the novel's structure, chiefly in a plot that dramatically reveals how the present generation acts out the behaviour of its predecessors" (2011, p. 37). As is the case with other novels mentioned earlier, *No Country for Young Men* relies on a self-conscious manipulation of the narrative technique to muddle the line between the past and the present through remembrance. Indeed, Garratt goes on to say that O'Faolain's novel "shows the actions and behaviour of a previous generation repeatedly interrupting and intruding upon the lives of those in the present" (2011, p. 38), a typical trope in the tradition of Irish fiction and drama that is commonly evoked as a way to negotiate the unresolved historical disputes in Ireland throughout the period of English domination as well as after independence and partition.

Historiography has long treated the Civil War as "the consequence of the actions of individuals, or alternatively as an inevitable result of the independence struggle which had brought a disparate group of people together" (CONNOLLY, 2004, p. 277). Indeed, Independence, and principally the terms and conditions of the Anglo-Irish Treaty, completely ignored the heterogeneity of the Irish society, and as a result people with diametrically opposed ideological and political persuasions ended up occupying and fighting for the same territory. What is more, as Connolly explains, "there was no negotiated peace and consequently the Civil War was never officially ended" (2004, p. 277). As the offensive capability of anti-Treaty campaign was eroded, the war came to an end in 1923, when IRA volunteers eventually laid down their arms and gave up on a fight they would not be able to win. Even though this one-sided ceasefire did in practical terms put an end to the state of war between the Provisional Government and the IRA, it could not erase political, ideological, and religious differences. In fact, the period that followed was to see an aggravation of these disputes with the incubation of probably the most violent period in twentieth century Irish history: the "Troubles".

#### 1.1.4. The Troubles or the Northern Irish Conflict (1968-1998)

But my tentative art  
 His turned back watches too:  
 He was blown to bits  
 Out drinking in a curfew  
 Others obeyed, three nights  
 After they shot dead  
 The thirteen men in Derry.  
 PARAS THIRTEEN, the walls said,  
 BOGSIDE NIL. That Wednesday  
 Everyone held  
 His breath and trembled  
 ('Casualty' - Seamus Heaney)

The Troubles, sometimes also referred to as the Northern Ireland conflict, are a period of thirty years during which security forces and paramilitaries perpetrated numerous acts of violence, most notoriously street battles and car bombings. The conflict occurred between the two main political/religious groups in Northern Ireland, Catholics and Protestants, and its roots can be traced back to disputes over Home Rule at the beginning of the century, to issues arising from the partition of Ireland in 1921, as well as the constitutional status of that area.

On the one hand, Catholics saw the conflict as a nationalist struggle for self-determination, in opposition to what they saw as unfair practices by unionists between the 1920s and the 1970s. Such practices included job discrimination, unequal voting rights and powers created by gerrymandering, and the imprisonment without trial of republicans and nationalists under the terms of the Special Powers Act from 1922. They wanted Northern Ireland to join the Republic of Ireland, which would then put an end to the 1921 partition. On the other hand, Protestants viewed the conflict in constitutional and security terms. Their primary concern was to preserve the union with Britain and resist what they perceived as the 'threat' of a united Ireland. Religious sectarianism was a major force in this dispute, and the determination of loyalists/unionists and republicans/nationalists to fight as fiercely as possible to defend their agenda made it clear that the seeds of later violence had already been sown in the early years of the twentieth century.

The conflict erupted with advent of the civil rights movement of the 1960s, when Catholics started to campaign for more access to political power and cultural recognition, in a determined attempt to reject second-class citizenship. They complained about their lack of political representativeness, demanded better housing, and protested against their dire economic straits caused mainly by the unequal distribution of job opportunities. As a result of these demands for political representation, paramilitary groups began to operate more intensely on both sides, and marches and protests became increasingly common throughout Northern Ireland. British troops were ultimately brought in to control the rioting, whilst the Provisional IRA emerged in defence of the Catholics after a rift in the original IRA.

Amongst the most significant and symptomatic events of the Troubles is what came to be known as Bloody Sunday. On the morning of 30 January 1972, a civil rights march in Londonderry ended up in what local people have also called the Bogside Massacre. The British Army set up barricades in order to lead demonstrators to the nationalist part of the city, but a number of protesters marched on towards one of the army barricades and threw stones at the soldiers. The army responded with rubber bullets, water cannon, and CS gas, and when the riot dissipated, the British soldiers were told to try and arrest as many of the demonstrators as possible. Nevertheless, these soldiers received orders to fire on the crowd and, as a consequence, the 1<sup>st</sup> Parachute Regiment killed thirteen men and injured another thirteen, one of whom died months later due to injuries sustained from the attack. In the words of Mulholland, Bloody Sunday “was the debacle that led to the almost complete collapse of Catholic opposition to political violence” (2002, p. 79), mainly because none of the victims of the massacre was a member of the IRA.

The violence then rapidly escalated and moved on to a fairly vicious phase. As Connolly explains, “during 1970 the conflict took an even more serious turn as the provisional IRA began a campaign of terrorist warfare against both the security forces and major commercial centres” (2004, p. 412). Indeed, the IRA orchestration of car bombings was particularly terrifying, not only because it caused the death of thousands of civilians, but also because it created a haunting atmosphere of intimidation, and reinforced the never-ending threat of violence experienced at street level. The Troubles had a profound impact on the public and the private sphere as well, in that people were assassinated where they lived, socialised, and worked. The horror of violent deaths was experienced on a daily basis.

An instance of this was what became known as Bloody Friday. In 1972, the Provisional IRA caused great mayhem across Belfast with the detonation of nineteen bombs within one hour and twenty minutes. This created an atmosphere of terror and confusion mainly in the centre of the city, as people ran blindly from one explosion only to become a potential target of another. The bombing killed a total of nine people – seven civilians and two British soldiers – and injured another one hundred thirty. In the face of the chaos that the Provisional IRA had created, the British government struck back forcefully with a military operation – Operation Motorman – to reclaim control of so-called “no-go areas”, mainly in Derry and Belfast. Indeed, the massive number of civil casualties that resulted from Bloody Friday left ordinary people perplexed and in panic.

After decades of sectarian and paramilitary conflicts, car bombings, hunger strikes, and even a failed attempt to kill British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, the IRA called a ceasefire on 31 August 1994, an attitude that had a major political and symbolic impact on the nation. That the ceasefire was representative is clear when one considers that,

Few people with access to the western media in the last thirty years can have remained unaware of the ongoing conflict in Northern Ireland. Christened the ‘Troubles’ in official discourse, and by and large uncritically adopted as such by the media, this conflict has been characterised as a protracted sectarian struggle between rival religious communities possessing deep yet problematic ties with the British and Southern Irish states (SMYTH, 1997, p. 113).

The ceasefire signalled reconciliation after twenty five years of a serious conflict that had inflicted major physical and psychological traumas on a considerable amount of the population. Ruane and Todd explain that “during that period 3,400 people were killed and over 20,000 suffered injury; some were left permanently disabled” (1996, p. 1). According to these authors, it was the population of Northern Ireland who suffered most grievously with the armed conflict, especially in Belfast and Derry. They claim that “almost half the population – over 80 per cent in some areas – knew someone killed or injured in the conflict; some experienced multiple personal tragedies” (1996, p. 1). These words both paint a gloomy picture of the ‘Troubles’ and hint at the traumatic effects violence had on people’s lives and memories.

The Northern Irish conflict caused many personal tragedies, which reinforces the idea that private and political history overlap rather peculiarly in the Irish social and

cultural context. In fact, the “violence of the Northern conflict until the mid 1990s was only the most obvious manifestation of a general pathology deriving from the colonial condition the Irish people have endured for centuries” (BROWN, 2004, p. 416). In other words, the roots of the Troubles in Northern Ireland were ultimately colonial in nature, and in many ways they were a direct consequence of pre-independence ideological issues that remained terribly unresolved after independence and partition. That said, if Stephen Dedalus saw history as a nightmare from which to awaken, local dwellers, and some of those living in Britain and in mainland Europe, tended to see history as a bitter everyday reality they had to cope with and somehow struggle to forget.

Novelists, poets, and playwrights have also responded to the Northern Irish conflict as they took up the challenge to reimagine the impacts of the Troubles in the aesthetic realm of their work. Amongst them are authors such as Seamus Heaney, Brian Friel, Glenn Patterson, and Bernard MacLaverty, who offered different perspectives on the reasons behind the conflicts, and with them indirectly questioned the fundamental premises used by the groups involved in the fights to justify the deliberate acts of violence that were perpetrated.

In *North* (1975), his fourth poetry book, Heaney directly tackles the brutality of the political upheaval in Northern Ireland in poems that engender images which connect the past and the present through the use of Greek mythology and other historical references to symbolically capture the tempestuousness of the Northern Irish conflict. Poems like “Whatever you say, say nothing”, “Funeral Rites”, “Punishment”, and “Strange Fruit” address the perplexity and uneasiness of the individual in the face of warfare as they also meditate on the legacy of violence and sectarian hatred that led to the Northern Irish crisis. Indeed, the unrest caused by the Troubles would be a recurrent theme in Heaney’s poetry, as poems like “Casualty”, from *Field Work* (1979) show. In it, Heaney paints a vivid and disturbing picture of the ordinary lives that were claimed in the conflicts as he makes clear reference to the killings of Bloody Sunday. Indeed, Heaney’s compositional method subordinates these historical events to the logics of the poem, making them an inner part of it.

Set in Derry 1970, Friel’s *The Freedom of the City* (1973) centres on the last hours in the lives of three demonstrators who unknowingly end up in the mayor’s parlour and are then mistaken for terrorists. Due to that, they are shot in cold blood by British soldiers, even though they are unarmed and had already surrendered. Of particular interest in *The Freedom of the City* is that this play alternates flashbacks to

tell the individual stories of these three marchers with the present when a hearing into the circumstances that sealed their fatal destiny is being conducted. During the hearing, several different versions of the events surrounding their death emerge, and *The Freedom of the City* ultimately becomes both a play about the manipulation of facts and a resounding outcry against injustice.

Patterson's debut novel *Burning your Own* (1988), portrays the struggle of its ten-year-old protagonist as he tries to come to terms with the expectations and pressures from his family and community. *Burning your Own* is set in 1969, and it reveals great self-consciousness about the nature of identity narratives and their capacity to create symbols that keep up the sectarian divisions in Northern Ireland. In the words of Smyth, "the real theme of Patterson's novel is in fact the classic tension between individual and community" (1997, p. 127). By addressing such a tension, Patterson's novel also deals with matters of memory and representation, thus digging into the main story of sectarian violence and scrutinising the different layers hidden behind it, in an attempt to find the truth beneath the narrated facts. Indeed, Smyth explains that in *Burning your Own* "these issues of memory and truth reflect upon the wider social uses of narrative, problematizing at the level of the individual the narrative effects around which tribal identities and sectarian conflict are organized" (1997, p. 127). Patterson's novel therefore encapsulates the uneasiness of the individual as he tries to negotiate and apprehend the different identity narratives with which he establishes contact and that inevitably affect him in the end. With that, his novel exhibits a close link between literature and history that is manifested first and foremost at the narrative level itself.

Indeed, Patterson returns to this tension between individual and community in *Fat Lad* (1992). Set in the 1990s, this novel centres on the return of Drew Linden to Belfast after being away for ten years, and his changed view of the city and its inhabitants allows him to take the necessary distance to dig into their history. As Smyth explains, in *Fat Lad* "the narrative is deliberately disconcerting in the manner in which it leaps from period to period, from character to character, and from discourse to discourse" (1997, p. 129). In other words, the narrative of *Fat Lad* is profoundly decentred in its form and content, and "in decentering the narrative in this way, the novel problematises the notion of a single, linear sense of self which can interact with the world" (SMYTH, 1997, p. 129). By doing so, Patterson's novel represents in the final analysis a sustained meditation on the nature of discourse and narrative. It exposes

the different perspectives which come into play in the complex process of identity formation, as well as how they affect the overall constitution of the self and raise questions that demand full symbolic negotiation.

In MacLaverty's *Cal* (1983), the title character, who is a member of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland, becomes an accomplice of his friend Crilly, who kills a reserve policeman. Cal is then consumed by guilt, not only for the crime he took part in, but also because he gradually discovers that he is falling in love with Marcella, the police officer's widow. In the words of Smyth, the fictive strategy of *Cal* consists of placing "realistic political detail in ironic juxtaposition with a self-conscious and recurring motif of Christian imagery" (1997, p. 42). Indeed, it is this irony that allows MacLaverty not to reduce the torment of the protagonist to private motivation. At the same time, the ironic juxtaposition upon which *Cal* is structured rejects the risk of the plot indulging in any voyeuristic violence out of hand. This is emphasised by the brutal treatment the protagonist receives when he is arrested, in such a way that the emotional pain he had endured becomes physical as he is savagely beaten.

The violence in Northern Ireland 'officially ended' with the Good Friday Agreement, in 1998. Nevertheless, sectarian divisions and ethnic conflicts still linger and "sporadic paramilitary violence continues to threaten the province's political and economic future, as does the embittered alienation of those socially deprived communities that have not felt the benefit of any peace dividend" (HARTE, 2014, p. 6). The persistence of these divisions also makes the memory of the atrocities of the period into a remaining haunting presence in the province and the country as a whole, in spite of the affluence and sense of liberation brought about by the Celtic Tiger.

### 1.1.5. The Rise and Fall of the Celtic Tiger

Mr. St. Lawrence, during this period would you describe your mental state as delusional?

*(The Devil I know – Claire Kilroy)*

According to Derek Hand, “every event that occurred over these years in the realm of culture, religion, politics and economics can be read as both a beginning and an end, heralding both the death of an old Ireland and the birth of the new” (2012, p. 254). This ambivalence implies that every beginning contains in itself its ending, in the sense that things are rapidly overcome and forgotten. Hence, the dynamics of this process reveals that the present, rather than the past, was fetishised as a value in itself. Indeed, the rapid changes brought about by the Celtic Tiger<sup>5</sup> had a major impact on the average Irish citizen, both economically and culturally. As a result, greater self-awareness of the country’s history was fostered in this period, which caused in Irish people a certain sense of liberation from what should now be considered a dim and distant past of poverty, backwardness, colonial oppression and battling for political sovereignty.

In addition, the power of religion and its strict moral codes was substantially reduced in this new scenario of affluence. Even though the church was still there, it no longer seemed to have overwhelming influence on people’s decisions as it used to three decades ago in the political and moral realms, with support to censorship and the imposition of a complete ban on divorce, for instance. This shift signalled a battle of tradition and modernity that was ultimately fought on the grounds of circumstances rather than providence. In the end, this changing situation evinced a process of increasing secularisation in Ireland, which would in turn affect the personal and the public spheres in ways that were previously unheard of in the island. Such a process was largely set in motion by the general understanding that, in the words of Brown, “good citizenship was uncoupled to a degree from the practice of religion, so a crisis in the church’s moral authority did not mean society lacked moral guidance and a sense of its autonomous worth” (2004, p. 381). Rather, this separation only meant that moral

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<sup>5</sup> Declan Kiberd offers a pithy account of the impact of the Celtic Tiger on Irish culture and society in *The Irish Writer and the World* (2005).

dogmas had been questioned and rejected, and that the sphere of political influence of religious figures and authorities had been sharply reduced. Ireland had then entered a process of secularisation that would be accentuated over the years as its economy opened itself up to globalisation and child sexual abuse allegations tarnished the image of the Catholic Church as an institution and a bastion of morality.

In addition to that, the thought of Ireland as a country of the past, celebrating rural life and suffering the impacts of extreme poverty and backwardness was quickly dismissed as no longer existing in the face of the Celtic Tiger. To a great extent, the idyll had been replaced by the skyscraper, and cranes were all over the place as the property bubble grew. As Brown comments:

from the mid 1990s the country enjoyed a remarkable economic boom which enormously increased national self-confidence at a time when revelations of political and economic malfeasance might otherwise have alienated the public from the freedoms of the neo-liberal, and increasingly global, marketplace. In the boom years the alleged misdoings of some of the few who found themselves before the tribunals paled before the success story that drew the attention of the world (2004, p. 381).

Indeed, the huge cash inflow that Ireland started to enjoy allowed the Irish people to embrace their economic ambitions in historically unprecedented forms. The economic boom nurtured “a sense of success, nationally and internationally, [which] gave the country a confidence that its problems could be overcome” (BROWN, 2004, p. 386). People (thought they) had the money, and then did not hesitate to spend it copiously. In the Ireland of the 1990s, Brown states, “an inveterate fatalism about the nation’s role in the world was replaced by a spirit of enterprise and expectation” (2004, p. 386), and the numerous economic achievements of the country in the early 1990s made the Irish people feel good about themselves in general terms.

In this context of economic optimism, desire took on an entirely new dimension. If in the past it was all about anticipating what one might have, the present was about having it, instead. The nature of desire had also changed, and it had become much more a question of possessing objects, bric-a-brac, and keeping up with the Joneses than not being able to afford one’s object of desire. Consumerism skyrocketed as a result, and this new sense of desire encapsulated so radically by the present marked an ultimate shift in what people put value on in “a suddenly wealthy country [that] had found a new

role, in a world which had seen the demise of the British Empire and the rise of a new globalized economy” (BROWN, 2004, p. 399). Indeed, Ireland plunged headlong into globalisation during that period, and in due time the country would learn that there is no such thing as free lunch in a globalised economy.

The Celtic Tiger conferred great relevance to the present moment and the increased national self-confidence that it nurtured signalled a dramatic rupture with the past, which then came to be seen more as a burden to be lifted than as a collection of memories to be cherished. That was so because to break away from the past also meant to break with a tradition of oppression, extreme poverty, famine, as well as political and cultural subjugation. The truth of the matter was that to “contemporary Irish people, nothing [seemed] more remote than the recent past” (KIBERD, 2005, p. 276). Kiberd’s words indicate, paradoxically, not only the traumatic nature of the country’s recent political and cultural past, but also the desire to overcome this trauma by forgetting, that is, silencing about it. In that sense, the Celtic Tiger caused a major generation split, and the Irish obsession with local history seemed to have given way to an effort to disremember it instead.

Nevertheless, swift transitions of this magnitude could not, and did not, take long to provoke considerable anxiety. Indeed, the rupture between generations caused by a radical emphasis on a supposedly new present created heightened tensions between imaginative and ‘real’ history. These tensions demanded serious negotiation in that they ripped the past open as not so much of a fixed thing. This is one of the reasons why the “Celtic Tiger must be understood not simply as a period of economic improvement, but also in relation to the socio-cultural changes that occurred in its wake” (LYNCH, 2009, p. 142). This was particularly evident, for instance, in the way that Ireland proved to be terribly unprepared to respond to the challenge posed by the rise in the immigration levels. In a way, it was as if Ireland had forgotten that immigration is a part of its cultural memory, and mistreated immigrants as a consequence.

The recurrent bursting of dead past events and experiences into the living present through remembrance fostered – and still does – the awareness of “buried, unfinished business yet awaiting definitive settlement [and] fuels the Irish habit of historical thought” (LEERSEN, 1996, p. 222-223). It is as if the only way to heal the

wound of the rupture between the past and the present is to try and juxtapose them so that one can illuminate the other. As Brown argues,

What kind of country was Ireland, moving as it was from economic crisis to sudden affluence in the European Union and the global economy? How should it relate to its past and commemorate that past, what is the role of woman in the national story, and what of the Irish language and the cultural traditions associated with it in a period of multiculturalism, what of the role of the plastic arts, and how could technology and science sustain the newly rich Ireland that had so amazingly come into existence? – these were some of the questions asked and answered in various ways in the 1990s and at turn of century (2004, p. 399).

The economic affluence and the promised cessation of violence in the 1990s ultimately suggested, then, that all the categories by which the Irish understood themselves, or were understood, one might argue, had either been drastically altered or were in the process of being dramatically reversed. This was so because in the end the basic premises of the narratives that determined Irish identity and in many ways helped perpetuate social and national stereotypes were fundamentally challenged in the newly rich Ireland. In that sense, harking back to memories of hardship would be like inviting the ghost to the feast, a terribly anachronistic attitude to take now that Ireland had finally come into big money and was still somehow intoxicated by the material prosperity it had achieved.

In literature, authors have had to negotiate different ways of capturing the idiosyncrasies of such a discontinuous contemporary Ireland in their fiction. To put it differently, novelists had to offer “narrative responses to the changing life of the times in general, and to the complexities of a mutating Irish culture and identity in particular” (HARTE, 2014, p. 3), which required from them not only great mastery of the novel as narrative form, but also pungency of language, and a trained eye for diversity. In the words of Harte, the challenges posed to novelists by these rapid economical and cultural changes in Celtic Tiger Ireland have ultimately made for “works of fiction that have extended and consolidated the Irish novelistic tradition after Joyce, intellectually, affectively, and imaginatively” (2014, p. 3). As examples of such authors Harte mentions Roddy Doyle, John McGahern, Patrick McCabe, Colm Tóibín, William Trevor, Edna O’Brien, Seamus Deane, Sebastian Barry and Anne Enright. Other names like Emma Donoghue, John Banville, Dermot Healy, Hugo Hamilton, Claire Kilroy,

and Paul Murray could be included in this list, and what follows is a brief account of two novels that address typical questions raised by the Celtic Tiger.

Anne Enright's *The Gathering* (2007) is narrated by Veronica, a thirty-nine year old affluent woman who gathers together with her eight surviving siblings for the funeral of their brother Liam, who committed suicide. In fact, Liam's death pulverises Veronica's certainties and radically undoes her affluent façade. As Harte explains, at the end of the novel, Veronica "realizes, in short, that she has been surviving rather than experiencing life, hiding behind a protective persona, cut off from feeling in order to feel less pain" (2014, p. 224). *The Gathering* is narrated in a predominantly confessional tone, and the novel constantly tackles the fallibility of memory as a way of finding or expressing the truth, as well as the issues of reliability commonly associated with it. In the words of O'Brien, Enright's novel mixes "memory and imagination, desire and loss, [and] the non-linear storyline produces a prismatic view of three generations of emotional history" (2012, p. 170), which fundamentally challenges the limits imposed by chronology in the act of telling and rescues events and feelings that had been lost in the continuum of time. This liberates the facts from the constraints of chronological time, thus converting them into "presentiments, hauntings, fears, resistances and needs through which the ineffaceable particularity of individual experience is registered" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 170). Indeed, trauma is at the heart of *The Gathering*, and underneath a narrative peppered with images of consumerism and bric-a-brac, there is a profound meditation on the tension between the story being told and the way it is being told.

Paul Murray's *Skippy Dies* (2010) deals with the events that culminated in Daniel "Skippy" Juster's death while he participated in a donut eating contest in the opening scene of the novel. Set in the fictitious Seabrook College, an essentially traditional Catholic boarding school for boys in Dublin, *Skippy Dies* not only tackles what might have caused Skippy's death, but also its consequences for the Seabrook community. Indeed, as the plot unravels, life at Seabrook becomes its central aspect and theme, in that the school "is a place where worlds collide – the different realms of staff and students, those of the old regime and the new" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 181). In other words, as an institution, Seabrook school is so riddled with contradictions that things always seem to be on the verge of falling apart. As O'Brien explains, the school in Murray's novel "is nothing like the stable state it claims for itself by virtue of its

reputation and tradition. Change is in the air, but the way it is being handled is hamfisted, at best” (2012, p. 180-181). In the end, the school turns out to be a microcosm that exposes in bitterly satirical ways how parents put money before their children in Celtic Tiger Ireland, and how denunciations of sexual abuse would be gladly swept under the carpet as long as doing so helped keep appearances.

However, the era of economic prosperity came to an end when the 2008 recession busted the property bubble and provoked a vertiginous decline in consumer spending that put an end to the economic boom whose quintessential image was that of tower cranes dotting the landscape of Dublin. The dealer always wins, and it was no different with Ireland when the Celtic Tiger finally collapsed. As a matter of fact, future generations will be paying for Ireland’s flighty economic progress that was abruptly halted, and whose devastating effects are symbolised by Ireland’s countless ghost estates that still remain.

## 2. THE IRISH CONTEMPORARY NOVEL AND IRISH CONTEMPORARY HISTORY

The novel is the only developing genre  
and therefore it reflects more deeply, more  
essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality  
itself in the process of its unfolding.  
(*The Dialogic Imagination* – Mikhail Bakhtin)

In the changing economic, cultural and moral context created by the Celtic Tiger, the novel form gained special significance and relevance, and, “if there is one literary landmark more prominent than another in Irish culture over the past fifty years, it is the growth and development of the novel” (O’BRIEN, 2012, p. ix). Indeed, the novel as a constantly evolving genre proves rather fitting to capture in its immanence the contradictions and tensions of the Irish historical experience. For that reason, O’Brien argues that it is virtually indisputable that “the contemporary Irish novel and the careers of contemporary Irish novelists are integral to and illustrative of the country’s recent history” (2012, p. ix). Novelists such as Patrick McCabe, Hugo Hamilton, Sebastian Barry, John Banville, Roddy Doyle, and Anne Enright are amongst those who have systematically tried to apprehend aesthetically in their works the tensions and contradictions of a society that have had its foundations profoundly shaken in the last decades. Bearing that in mind, one can say that “the novel is important in modern Irish culture because as a genre it evolved to formulate narratives in which social, political and historical change could be accommodated” (SMYTH, 1997, p. 6), which also reinforces the presence of an intense dialogue between the novel as a fictional account and its historical context.

As Hand argues, the novel “is perhaps best suited to deal with and register these fluctuations” (2012, p. 254) that the period of sudden transformations and profound contradictions that mark the rise and fall of the Celtic Tiger inevitably provoked. The novel as form, he maintains, is “basically awash with contradictions and, perhaps, beyond any final definition as it willfully plunders various forms and genres for its own ends” (HAND, 2012, p. 2). For all that, the novel encapsulates not only the aesthetic but also the historical tensions of its context of production, since its deliberate appropriation, mixture, and subversion of literary forms, conventions, and discourses

allow external elements to become intrinsic features of the plot, for instance. In this way, historical and social tensions are more often than not reimagined aesthetically in the fictional realm of the novel, so that critics and commentators have to study the literary techniques and procedures used by a given author in conjunction with the reality that is being fictionally recreated.

That the novel is particularly positioned to capture the angst of this period of rapid economic and social change in Ireland can hardly be disputed then. The novel's link to the new "is obvious as it self-consciously craves to be the chronicler of the here and now, each novel trying to encapsulate the urgency of being indispensably relevant" (HAND, 2011, p. 1). To put it differently, in the impetus towards reconfiguring and narrating the world out of which it arises, the novel embodies an uncertainty that resonates "profoundly alongside the idiosyncrasies of the Irish experience" (HAND, 2012, p. 2). Besides, the fact that many novelists have used memory and remembrance as key literary procedures in their fiction, therefore enabling the past to be coeval with the present in ways which are neither illogical nor anachronistic, serves as an illustration of the novel's capacity to accommodate the distinctive features of Irish society, its concerns and cultural traditions.

Thus, "writing and reading the Irish novel are acts fraught with the confusion and contradiction that underpins the novel form itself" (HAND, 2012, p. 2), as well as the formative narratives of Irish history and identity. It is in this sense also that both this confusion and contradiction in contemporary Irish fiction are worthy of notice, since they arise mainly, but not only, from the novelists' need to address "specific situations and characters which may or may not have been treated in fictional form before" (HARTE; PARKER, 2000, p. 2). Indeed, writers such as Roddy Doyle, with novels like *The Commitments* (1987) and *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* (1998) develop an intricate view of Irish culture in their re-examination of the ideological status of the family as an institution in Ireland, for instance, as well as in their portrayal of domestic violence as a theme.

Deane sees in the mutations that both Irish history and Irish writing have been through in the past decades a "mutual attraction [from which] there is no escape" (1985, p. 16). Indeed, Deane's comment not only serves as a statement of his critical method, but also reinforces the idea that fiction and history are virtually inseparable in Ireland. Moreover, nowhere is this mutual attraction between literature and history more evident in Irish writing than in the closer focus that contemporary novelists have given to the

individual experience of their characters and protagonists.<sup>6</sup> In the words of O'Brien "this new focus sees the individual in the context of his or her inviolability, even – or especially – when the adequacy of that context is placed under stress by either the threat or the actuality of violence" (2012, p. x). Of greater interest, though, is how this focus on subjectivity provides the opportunity for the establishment of more intimate reflections on the way the individual negotiates the traumas created by violence and the anxiety produced by breakneck changes.

What is more, one can argue that the novel as a genre brims with distinctive features which "appear to lend themselves to the 'in-between' intellectual, cultural and emotional spaces in which writers dealing with subject matter that has been hidden or eschewed altogether find themselves" (PEACH, 2004, p. 3). In other words, given its capacity to incorporate elements from other literary and non-literary genres alike, the novel sets up the paradigmatic conditions for a middle ground between the private and public spheres, as well as the discourses that mediate the relationship between them. Peach goes on to say that contemporary Irish fiction "has offered new interpretations of Irish history" (2004, p. 7), which is particularly evident in the ways a significant number of novels have blurred the lines between fact and fiction with their extensive use of memory as a narrative technique, not to mention their self-awareness of their status as texts. Due to that, a tension between imaginative and 'real' history is instated, and so are questions about what is remembered and commemorated and/or how it is done and by whom. Once again, matters of perspective turn out to be coeval with issues of authority and ideological affiliation.

That said, all these queries reveal an obsession with history at work in Ireland and in Irish contemporary fiction. As Kiberd says, "far from being fixated upon the past, the Irish are obsessed instead with their power over it, including the power to change its meaning whenever that seems necessary" (2005, p. 280). Indeed, the fine line between telling the truth and lying is a key aspect of the Irish culture, and in the final analysis it shows that the Irish people are aware of the inclusions and exclusions that occur when a story and a version of history is narrated. This power to change the meaning of history at one's convenience ultimately exposes the problem of perspective in historical accounts, as it also exposes their essentially rhetorical and interpretative nature. In like manner, this power over the past dispels any notion according to which the facts of

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<sup>6</sup> "Among the most fundamental of these formal changes is a closer focus on individual experience" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. x).

history are immovable. It makes room for more sceptical interpretations that conceive the notion of real facts as non-existent in the end, in the sense that access to them is possible only via narrative accounts that are first of all a rhetorical elaboration of what might have really happened.

It is in this sense that the contemporary Irish novel is said to have “given a voice to what was previously unarticulated” (PEACH, 2004, p. 7), in that they exhibit heightened awareness of their metafictional status.<sup>7</sup> Even though it is not true to say that the Irish fiction of the Celtic Tiger wrote about what had never been written or expressed before, or that these novels were innovative for giving voice to previously silenced minorities for the first time, it is hard to gainsay that many of them “bear the imprint of the unresolved political and cultural narratives and debates” (HARTE; PARKER, 2000, p. 2). The constant reference to the past as a ghostly presence in some of the finest novels of this period, for instance, offers a paradigmatic example of how unresolved historical issues are negotiated in fictional terms. In other words, unresolved political and cultural debates are ultimately captured in the different literary techniques employed by Irish writers, as well as in the themes and tropes that they explore in their fiction, thus making the relations between literature and history more evident. In this context, the past is constantly looked back on in contemporary Irish novels, which suggests an attempt to break with a tradition of historical conflict and political upheaval by holding it up for inspection.

At the same time, the sense of disconnection between the present and the past in Celtic Tiger Ireland ironically embodies a sense of desperation to bring back some type of lost Romantic union to the Irish experience as well. Indeed, memory and desire tend to work together towards the recovery of this Irish experience, while they paradoxically expose their limitations to do so. The struggle to remember is ultimately a struggle to control time and explore the possibilities of telling by scrutinizing the different layers of the stories that are told, and the little details which are uncovered in the process. All this shows that the past haunts the present in Irish fiction, and at the same time, that the country’s traumatic history still demands symbolic and aesthetic negotiation. Indeed, as Robert Garratt argues, at the end of the day, “history can be as inventive as fiction” (2011, p. 144), a statement which not only echoes White’s comments on the narrative nature of history, but also key aspects of Benjamin’s philosophy. In other words, the

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<sup>7</sup> Gerry Smyth discusses this idea more thoroughly in his book *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (1997).

possibility of endless historical revision that is inevitably opened up “puts the object (if in fact there is one) forever in abeyance” (COMAY, 2000, p. 280), which has been a hallmark in Irish literature in the past decades. However, to take this into consideration should not imply the tacit acceptance of a dangerous scepticism which denies that a given event has ever taken place. In fact, to do so would be a huge mistake, especially in a country with a history of subjugation and colonial barbarity such as is the case with Ireland. Instead, to put the object in abeyance in this sense has more to do with discussing how the narratives of a given set of past events are crafted and passed on, and how discursive access to those events is ultimately impossible because there will always be selection, exclusion, and addition of details on the teller’s part.

This, in turn, implies the need to acknowledge “the seminal role of writers in reimagining a culture and society which (...) is in a continual state of dispute and development” (HARTE; PARKER, 2000, p. 10). By reimagining culture and society, that is, by recreating them aesthetically, Irish writers have forged new identities and new forms of consciousness and imagination. The need for them to forge such an uncreated consciousness of their race, to quote Stephen Dedalus,<sup>8</sup> stresses not only the cultural but also the political and ideological overtones of their craft, as well as the necessity of always historicising the study of Irish literature in order to obtain a full critical appreciation of its aesthetic and political achievements. Indeed, one could plausibly argue that Irish novelists, whether self-consciously or not, have constantly tried to encapsulate in their aesthetic approach to reality the myriad tensions generated by dispute and development in the political, economic, cultural and moral realms in Ireland, which explains the countless points of similarity between literature and history in the island.

That these tensions are so exacerbated in Ireland is not surprising when one casts a historical eye on them. Indeed, as Kiberd states, “the country has gone through in the past century and a half the sort and scale of changes which took four or five hundred years in other parts of Europe” (2005, p. 280). He complements his statement by arguing that it is “no wonder that people have looked in the rear-view mirror and felt a kind of motion-sickness” (KIBERD, 2005, p. 280). Kiberd’s analogy captures neatly the

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<sup>8</sup> The whole passage in Joyce’s novel reads as follows: “*26 April*: Mother is putting my new secondhand clothes in order. She prays now, she says, that I may learn in my own life and away from home and friends what the heart is and what it feels. Amen. So be it. Welcome, O life! I go to encounter for the millionth time the reality of experience and to forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race” (JOYCE, 2006, p. 223-224).

different ways in which individuals have perceived and tried to assimilate the social and cultural changes that occurred in Ireland in the past decades. In addition, the great discomfort suggested by Kiberd's words explains why more contemporary novels have brought the individual into sharp focus. As O'Brien says, it is "difficult to dispute the argument that the contemporary Irish novel and the careers of contemporary Irish novelists are integral to and illustrative of the country's recent history" (2012, p. ix). This is due not only to the increased commercial and critical success that Irish novelists have enjoyed lately, but also to the ways in which novels have questioned the received narratives from the past. Besides, more recent novels have shown a profound scepticism about the economic boom that has now come to pass, as is the case with Claire Kilroy's novel *The Devil I Know* (2012), which is a biting satire on the intoxication of the Celtic Tiger and its "the-sky-is-the-limit" ideology.

Hence, a comprehensive examination of the historical aspects that Irish writers have tried to reimagine and negotiate in their work must be taken into consideration in the study of the Irish novel. These historical changes and tensions reverberate in the aesthetic choices the authors make, and are captured by the dialogue with tradition implied in their attempts to establish a rupture with the past. Indeed, the conflation of private and public story/history in the Irish novel suffices to show that history is a source of contention in Ireland. This contention becomes more evident when one considers that the dispute is not so much about what happened, but much more about how it is interpreted and retold. It is not only that the Irish remember the past too much and the English remember it insufficiently. On the contrary, it is a matter of opening the past up to an ongoing debate about who has got access to it and who is entitled to look back and retell it. In other words, it is the process of making history that is important, and the ways in which it is open to the operations of language. In this sense, the past is never really past in Ireland, and the issues it raises are never entirely dead and buried.

As a result, one can hardly dispute Harte and Parker's argument according to which "any informed discussion of contemporary Northern Irish fiction must increasingly take account of the impact of external as well as internal literary, cultural and political forces" (2000, p. 5). Irish writers have confronted in different forms the question of how some histories are made and told, and how some are forgotten. Consequently, the idea of history as a narrative of violent events has been a constant presence in the work of different Irish novelists. Indeed, how the individual can overcome the often traumatic burden of Irish history and how the past is mediated into

the present, especially through memory and recollection, are major concerns that haunt the pages of some of the finest Irish contemporary novels. This emphasis on exploring potentially different versions of the past ultimately turns the ‘real’ into a place of symbolic negotiation, much as the imaginary world is. As a result, the thin line that separates the so-called reality from invention tends to become a faint blur. Hence, to negotiate these questions in their fiction, writers had to find a way to aesthetically accommodate in their work this broader sense of history so that these issues of language, landscape, and ideology could become an intrinsic compositional element of their novels, poems, and plays.

### **2.1. Seamus Deane: the Critic, the Poet, the Novelist.**

Seamus Deane is a major voice in the Irish cultural and political debate, as he is arguably one of the most important literary critics and Irish literature scholars alive. He was born in 1940, in Derry, Northern Ireland, and was educated at St. Columb’s College, Queen’s University Belfast, and Pembroke College, Cambridge University, where he obtained his PhD. Deane is part of the board of directors of the Field Day Company, which was originally established as a theatre company in 1980 by Brian Friel and Stephen Rea. Field Day has played a crucial role in Irish cultural and literary studies over the years, with the publication of works of cultural studies, literary criticism, history and politics authored by leading critics and theorists like Terry Eagleton, Edward Said and Fredric Jameson. The Field Day “enterprise [has] the conviction that we need a new discourse for a new relationship between our idea of the human subject and our idea of human communities” (DEANE, 1990, p. 3), a profound political and cultural gesture in a troubled period in which people died precisely because of ideas inherited uncritically.

The company began its activities with the staging of Friel’s *Translations* (1980), and produced and toured several plays over the years, including Friel’s *The Communication Cord* (1982) and *Making History* (1988), Derek Mahon’s *High Time* (1984), Tom Paulin’s *The Riot Act* (1984), Thomas Kilroy’s *Double Cross* (1986), Stewart Parker’s *Pentecost* (1987), Terry Eagleton’s *Saint Oscar* (1989) and Seamus Heaney’s *The Cure at Troy* (1990). With regard to the company’s approach to art, Deane argues that,

Field Day sees art as a specific activity indeed, but one in which the whole history of a culture is deeply inscribed. The interpretation of culture is not predicated on the notion that there is some universal quality or essence that culture alone can successfully pursue and capture. That is itself a political idea that has played a crucial role in Irish experience. One of Field Day's particular aims has been to expose the history and function of that idea and to characterize its disfiguring effects (1990, p. 7).

In other words, for the Field Day enterprise, art and the history of a culture cannot be seen as separate things, to the point that the idea of a universal essence regulating artistic manifestation should be dismantled and rejected as a form of false consciousness. Indeed, Deane's words here are both a statement and a defence of his critical method, and his efforts, as well as Field Day's, converge to show that the history of Irish culture is profoundly rewritten in the singular artistic manifestations which are the works of novelists, poets, and playwrights. Deane's words then reaffirm the need to historicise art in its specificity as a way to combat the distortions created by a universal or essential interpretation of artistic and cultural manifestations.

In 2005 Field Day launched the *Field Day Review*, an annual journal of Irish literary criticism and political culture, coedited by Seamus Deane and Ciarán Deane, and that has published essays by distinguished critics and commentators like Benedict Anderson, Giovanni Arrighi, Terry Eagleton, and Luke Gibbons, to name but a few. In addition to that, Deane was also the general editor of the *Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*,<sup>9</sup> a five-volume collection of selected Irish fiction, plays, poetry, essays, political writings and speeches. According to him, "*The Field Day Anthology* is also an exercise in renaming, the resituation of many texts, well known and scarcely known, in a renovated landscape or context" (1990, p. 18), which reveals an attempt to establish a cultural identity that could both represent and create an audience, in an ultimate gesture to resist the idea of the unthinking Celtic. Kelleher and O'Leary (2006) see the publication of these volumes as,

the first attempt to formulate a standard if not definitive anthology of Irish literature [that] has in effect established a canon of Irish literature (...). The

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<sup>9</sup> The first three volumes of the anthology were published in 1991. The first three volumes met with ferocious criticism for what its critics saw as a lack of proper representation of women writers. As the general editor of the anthology, Seamus Deane invited women scholars to produce an additional volume, which ended up being split into two. *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing Volumes IV and V: Irish Women's Writing and Tradition* was eventually published in 2002.

existence of such a canon, however contested, only makes more compelling – even urgent – the need for an accessible and reliable historical framework within which the newly canonical texts can be read, and marginalised texts, together with the reasons for their marginalisation, can be explored. Indeed, the *Field Day Anthology* has created the anomalous situation in which Ireland now has a chronologically organised literary canon but no comprehensive literary history in light of which to think about it. (p. 1).

Apart from being the general editor of the *Field Day Anthology*, Deane has also published several critical books on Irish literature, including *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature* (1985), *A Short History of Irish Literature* (1986), *The French Enlightenment and Revolution in England 1789-1832* (1988), *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing since 1790* (1997), and *Foreign Affections: Essays on Edmund Burke* (2004). His critical works have helped to bring about a marked change in the way Irish writing is received. Deane belongs to that generation of critics and scholars who have been instrumental in giving an ideological and political shape to Irish studies in that his works have given an intellectual edge to the debate of Ireland in literature and culture. As a critic, he has been actively engaged in giving intellectual rigour to Irish writing and experience.

Deane's criticism as a whole suggests that the notion according to which the Irish cannot be critical of their own art should be dismissed as merely stereotypical. Indeed, he states that "in the attempted discovery of its "true" identity, a community often begins with the demolition of the false stereotypes within which it has been entrapped" (DEANE, 1990, p. 12). Deane is well aware in his critical work that to demolish the conventional, formulaic, and oversimplified conceptions of the Irish, and the false consciousness that sustains them is "an intricate process, since the stereotypes are successful precisely because they have been interiorized" (DEANE, 1990, p. 12), thus making it necessary that these ideas be subverted from within. Therefore, by showing that the Irish produced art as well as the critical apparatus with which to comment on it, Deane has made an invaluable contribution to overturning the stereotype of the Irish as incapable of critical reasoning, for his work as a critic has categorically disproved the premise of that idea.

In addition to being a leading literary and cultural critic, Deane is also a poet and a novelist. The first volume of poetry he published was *Gradual Wars* (1972). The poems in this book offer very personal meditations on themes like death, absence, violence, and conflict, and create an atmosphere of personal and political struggle that is

pithily encapsulated in the metaphorical connotations of its title. In 1973, Deane won the AE Memorial Award for Literature with that book. *Rumours* (1977) was his second poetry book, and it features poems that examine the relationship between the private and the public sphere more intensely, with a strong focus on a profoundly subjective apprehension of the world. Indeed, the poems in *Gradual Wars* and *Rumours* capture perfectly the uneasiness and perplexity of the individual at the beginning of what was a present crisis in Ireland at the time of their publication. The rumours about public events and sectarian violence establish an elusive yet substantial connection to private feelings in Deane's second poetry book, for instance. The poems reveal an attempt to find a language capable of expressing an intimate viewpoint on themes like death, childhood, and the vagueness of rumour, without being excessively introverted at the same time. The impacts of conflict and violence on the individual sensibility and perception of the world, and a culture that was struggling hopelessly to eschew the crises which were addressed in the first two books are also investigated in his third volume of poetry, *History Lessons* (1983). Departure, exile, return, and death are crucial images in the poems of this collection, which also embodies an ongoing preoccupation with the status and nature of history and memory, and their complicated relationship with the truth. It seems then that Seamus Deane's poetry seeks to capture an inherited world of grief and half-truths in its use of language to try and make this universe more palatable and plausible for the individual imagination.

The questions explored by Deane's poetry are revisited in his only novel to date, *Reading in the Dark* (1996). This thesis is reinforced by the emphasis this book places on oral stories and rumour, the use of memory as its structural principle, the unnamed first person narrator-protagonist, and the constant presence of death as a leading motif. As a matter of fact, one can argue that the whole of Deane's artistic production is concerned with the negotiation of private subjectivity and public events that find their way into the consciousness of the speakers in his poems and of his first person narrator-protagonist in the form of rumours. Therefore, it is safe to say that rumours, history, memory and death are shared elements and concerns that establish an aesthetic and thematic continuum in Deane's *oeuvre*.

## 2.2. Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* and the critics.

*Reading in the Dark* was written when the peace process was coming into being in Ireland, and is “essentially an account of the discovery of a secret that has rendered the narrator’s family and especially his mother foreign to him” (PEACH, 2004, p. 54). The plot of this novel covers a period of twenty-six years, from 1945 to 1971, and is presented from the perspective of an unnamed adult recalling his life as a boy in Derry, Northern Ireland. In the novel, the boy finds himself in a reality replete with Gothic and heroic stories, legends and folklore, all mingled with secular accounts of family feuds and political assassination. In this context, he gradually reveals his fascination for words and for the textual nature of the reality that surrounds him.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, he realizes that there is always something else to be told as he hears, overhears, repeats and sometimes complements the stories that are passed on to him, most of which he can at times capture only partially. That makes room for a series of half-truths to be installed at the heart of the narrative, in such a way that “Deane’s novel frequently opens on to a myriad of different narrative possibilities, not all of which are pursued or anchored convincingly from a realist perspective” (PEACH, 2004, p. 52). Irrespective of how anchored in realism *Reading in the Dark* might or might not be, what really does matter is that, as the narrator recollects his past, the novel creates a sophisticated kaleidoscopic scenario of riot, celebration, and commemoration that forms complex layers of mystery and meaning that hold the plot together and keep the action in the novel going. The resulting atmosphere captures the angst behind the protagonist’s desire to discover why his family is haunted, and becomes more intense as he gets to know more about himself in the process.

*Reading in the Dark* has drawn warm critical praise for its skilful elaboration and poetic language. For Jon Saari, Deane’s prose style is “lyrical, and his ability to shape scenes in a few pages is powerful” (1997, p. 377), a statement which confirms that echoes of Deane’s poetry can definitely be heard in the language and scope of his novel. Saari also claims that *Reading in the Dark* “has an inner beauty that comes from Deane’s masterful command of the language and his knowledge of how to make all the elements of fiction writing work in his favour” (1997, p. 377), which is achieved by a

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<sup>10</sup> These excerpts offer a good account of this: “That was long before the feud, as my mother called it. The feud. *The word had a grandeur about it that I savoured*, although it occurred to me that maybe there was more to be told” (DEANE, 1996, p. 51, *emphasis added*).

certain economy of style that makes his prose both elegant and poignant. In like manner, Kakutani highly praises Deane's command of fictional technique as well as his story-telling ability, and says that *Reading in the Dark* "testifies to Mr. Deane's lyrical gifts as a writer and establishes him as a storyteller of the very first rank" (1997). Indeed, Deane's use of storytelling is a strong element of his prose, and the way the narrator's story is interwoven with the other stories he remembers hearing as a boy and now shares with the reader of the novel are salient features of *Reading in the Dark*.

In spite of this largely positive reception, Deane's novel has also met with less enthusiastic reviews. For Robert Ellis Hosmer, Jr., for instance, *Reading in the Dark* abounds with "slight and stock characters" (1997, p. 533). The reviewer goes on to accuse Deane of attempting to "mimic Flaubert and Joyce in endowing the ordinary with the extraordinary" (HOSMER, 1997, p. 533), and claims that such attempts "are overdone and largely unsuccessful" (HOSMER, 1997, p. 533), opinions with which no serious reader who is familiar with Deane's fiction can agree. Hosmer concludes his scathing review by stating that Deane's novel "too rarely rises above the merely anecdotal" (1997, p. 533), which reflects a clear misapprehension of Deane's literary technique, and the aesthetic effects that it produces when studied in its relation to the main motifs and themes of *Reading in the Dark*.

In fact, a careful reading of Hosmer's text reveals that his criticism is not only unduly vituperative, but also based on fundamental theoretical misconceptions that eventually undermine his analysis of *Reading in the Dark*. When he accuses Deane of fruitlessly trying to mimic Joyce and Flaubert, Hosmer clearly mistakes mimicry for influence, which severely weakens his general critical arguments. Deane, like any other writer of fiction, poetry or drama, writes from within a given tradition, and his work is, in one way or another, a continuation of that of his predecessors. That does not mean he is copying them at all. Nevertheless, the forceful way Hosmer argues his case leaves one with the distorted impression that original authors write out of the blue, which T. S. Eliot had already shown to be a misconception in his essay on tradition and individual talent. In the end, Hosmer's text is premised on a concept of originality and innovation that is critically naïve, to say the least. That Deane has published extensively on the works of James Joyce, who was in turn a fine reader of Flaubert's prose, only makes it more likely that *Reading in the Dark* will bear resemblances and have parallels with the works of the latter authors. Indeed, some commentators have already pointed out possible parallels between Deane's novel and Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a*

*Young Man* (1916). However, that *per se* is scarcely a problem. Hosmer's reading would come across as less cursory had he looked at Deane's novel from a less opinionated viewpoint and tried to see this influence – which he insists on derogatorily calling “mimicry” – as a rereading of tradition, instead. In fact, *Reading in the Dark* forces the reader to acknowledge the existence of a body of literary works which preceded it and that have been incorporated into its structure.

In trying to judge *Reading in the Dark* by the standards of his influences, Hosmer misses the whole point of a narrative that is highly self-conscious of its status as fiction, as well as of its place in the tradition of Irish prose writing in the twentieth century, a novel that can cast an eye on the past and at the same time project its future as a fundamental text in Irish fiction. In that sense, Eamonn Wall's review is much more sensitive to Deane's aesthetic project and is diametrically opposed to Hosmer's arbitrary criticism. For Wall, Deane's novel “seems destined to be regarded as one of the great Irish novels published this century” (1997, p. 220), and one could add that this is so not only for its aesthetic project, but also for the kind of historical and political issues that it addresses. Indeed, Wall argues that *Reading in the Dark* succeeds “so magnificently [due to] the quality of [its] writing. Each chapter is brief (...) with the narrative growing more complex as the boy grows older” (WALL, 1997, p. 220) and his and his family's histories unravel in his memories of his childhood and adolescence.

In the words of O'Brien, “*Reading in the Dark* meditates on history and inheritance from more intimate perspectives” (2012, p. 129), since the work of memory and remembrance is a key aspect of the narrative. By doing so, O'Brien adds, the book also reflects upon “the power and function of narrative” (2012, p. 130), which is patent in Deane's ingenious combination of storytelling, myth, and history as ways to reconfigure and transmit experience in the way Walter Benjamin understands it. Indeed, the telling and the inheritance of apparently fragmented and disconnected stories is one of the key literary techniques that Deane uses in his novel. The most immediate effect of his compositional method is the creation of a kaleidoscopic atmosphere in which family secrets and national history overlap to great extents, but that at the same time eschews simplistic interpretations of the protagonist as a sort of national hero. To put it differently, the narrator's history is not necessarily that of Ireland in its social, political, and ideological complexity. However, they are not entirely unrelated either. The difference here is rather subtle, but absolutely fundamental, for it enables that one gets to know the different historical accounts embedded in the stories the narrator is told as a

boy. Moreover, it is also this difference that allows for the Irish history of sectarian violence and political conflict to emerge in Deane's novel without necessarily suffocating the fictional content of the book and sacrificing plot structure and characterisation.

*Reading in the Dark* "details both the growth of the narrator's consciousness and the more general significance of the depths, subtleties and intricate resources with which knowing his inherited story will furnish him" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 130). Perhaps more important, though, is the fact that his consciousness of the intricacies of his inherited story and history grows as he remembers his life as he retells it, thus showing that as a boy his view of things was more limited. Hence, many of the intricacies that are now accessible to the adult who narrates were not so to the boy who had lived through them. That each chapter is presented in chronological order provides the clearest evidence of this growth, and confirms on the level of the novel's structural organisation what can be observed on the narrative one. The book starts with the narrator recalling the events that occurred in February 1945 and progresses almost on a yearly basis until the penultimate episode, dated June 1961. What follows then is a ten-year gap between the latter and the concluding chapter, dated July 1971. This coming-of-age is matched by traces of greater maturity in tone and perspective, which led a few critics to situate Deane's novel in the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*.

This was the case of Hosmer, for whom *Reading in the Dark* "belongs to the tradition of the *Bildungsroman*: the story of a young, unnamed Catholic lad growing up during the 1940s and 1950s in Northern Ireland" (1997, p. 533). In like manner, O'Brien writes that "as is demonstrated by numerous instructional set-pieces featuring authority figures of church and state, his story is a *Bildungsroman*" (2012, p. 132). It seems though that the criteria each critic used to inscribe *Reading in the Dark* in this particular novelistic tradition are random and essentially subjective. Whereas Hosmer sticks to a more general explanation for calling Deane's novel a *Bildungsroman*, O'Brien tries to offer a justification based on the boy's expression of individuality. According to him, the narrator "has exercised the choice to inquire into his parents' stories, and doing so is an expression of individuality and development, his stubbornness and callowness notwithstanding" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 132), in a deliberate effort to take charge of the narrative of their story. Even though O'Brien has a point about the narrator's choice to inquire into the family's past and his determination to do so, this alone will not suffice to allocate *Reading in the Dark* within a *Bildungsroman*

tradition. In their attempts to allocate Deane's novel within this novelistic tradition, of which they tend to take Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as Young Man* as the aesthetic paradigm, both Hosmer and O'Brien reveal an attempt to trace the generic purity of *Reading in the Dark*, and in doing so, they mask the tensions and the sense of irresolution that permeate Deane's prose.

Whether or not *Reading in the Dark* fully complies with the conventions of the *Bildungsroman* is therefore of little interest in the end. In fact, the debate about the generic purity of Deane's novel and the obsession that it has become to some critics proves in the end to be largely sterile. As a matter of fact, part of Deane's novel's strength is precisely its capacity to draw influences from different genres, of which the *Bildungsroman* is just one, and blur the distinctions between them. Of greater interest is how the protagonist becomes mature and grows more aware of the textual nature of his reality as the novel progresses, which is manifested in the tone of the language that he uses. At the close of the novel, the narrator, drawn to the window by the sound of hooves<sup>11</sup> realizes that "the present is not a place of hard facts, and as with the past it, too, is a site of potential ghosts and strange disconnected apparitions" (HAND, 2012, p. 248-9). This reveals that his ultimate discovery is that the past and the present can happen simultaneously in the individual's memory.

The moment of triumph when both the narrator and the reader would celebrate the former's discoveries and his attainment of full maturity is then completely withheld. The end of the novel ironically reveals that the narrator had undertaken a frustrated enterprise. For him "gaining knowledge only results in driving a wedge between himself and both his parents" (HAND, 2012, p. 251), because this eventually stood as a silent revelation of the source of their trauma. Indeed, at the close of the novel, the narrator "has discovered the facts of the secret that has haunted his family, yet he is denied a name and is seen to have gained no true knowledge or wisdom" (HAND, 2012, p. 10). He is denied an identity, and with it the right to claim his story and possess it. In other words, his investigation has made him none the wiser, and the fact that "the striking of a

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<sup>11</sup> "I lay awake until dawn, when the noise of horse-hooves roused me to the window again. As though in a dream, I watched a young gypsy boy jog sedately through the scurf of debris astride a grey-mottled horse. Bareback, he held lightly to the horse's mane and turned out of sight in the direction the army had taken hours before, although it was still curfew. The clip-clop of the hooves echoed in the still streets after he had disappeared" (DEANE, 1996, p. 232-3).

celebratory note that the reader might expect is completely absent” (HAND, 2012, p. 10) in the end is the clearest evidence of that.

Reviewers and commentators have specifically highlighted the connection between the private and the public realms in *Reading in the Dark*, which is one of the sources of the dilemma of the protagonist. Thomas Smyth, for instance, argues that Deane’s novel is “a wonderfully insightful story of growing up, full of the narrator's driving thirst to understand both his own environment and the larger world that is opened up by education” (1998, p. 133). The narrator’s attempt to put together the mosaic of narratives that reach him in the form of rumours as a boy is central to his painstaking search for knowledge and close scrutiny of his memories as he recollects them. Indeed, Deane’s novel “carefully traces the complex workings of memory and innuendo, the intricate webs of family and community ties that condition [their lives]” (SMYTH, 1998, p. 133), especially in the Northern Irish context where it is set. Wall, who also sees *Reading in the Dark* as a story of growing up, mentions that there is a complex relationship between individual and community at work in the novel’s plot. According to him, “in addition to coming to terms with body and soul, this young man is forced to discover and accept the hard secrets which have burdened his family and to come to grips with the history of Derry and Ireland” (WALL, 1997, p. 220), a history that is made of sectarian conflicts, massive killing, and endless fight for territory and political representation.

Of interest in Wall’s review is that he allocates the search that the boy does within the realm of Irish historical and cultural troubles at the beginning of the twentieth century. Wall suggests that the boy’s ultimate goal is therefore to unlock the secrets that have haunted his family and then try to make sense of them as he also attempts to understand the history of his family and community. Yet his investigation produces an adverse final outcome because “at the heart of the boy's family are secrets so terrible that they could tear the family apart, were the various adult members to share the pieces of information that they know” (SMYTH, 1998, p. 133). Indeed, as he looks back on his life, the narrator peels back the layers of the stories he has been told and gradually realizes in this process that silence about their past is the unwritten law within his family and community. He discovers in his investigation that members of his maternal and paternal families had played roles “in the I.R.A. and [that] both families and their interrelationships have been undermined by desertion, treachery, and wrongful

execution” (WALL, 1997, p. 220). These have been shameful events for those directly and indirectly involved in them, and whose traumatic nature is therefore distilled in the account of how “claustrophobic and difficult it can be to grow up in the turmoil of Northern Ireland and how past events can draw in and destroy the lives of the living” (WALL, 1997, p. 220), plunging them into a life of secrecy and quiet desperation.

Wall finally draws attention to the “adroit use of a first-person narrative” (1997, p. 220) in *Reading in the Dark* and how it influences the overall effect of the story being told. For him, by choosing to retell the boy’s family’s story from the perspective of an unnamed adult first-person narrator-protagonist, Deane opens his novel to the suggestion that “in the less-well-off neighbourhoods of Northern Ireland there can be no separation of the personal and the political” (WALL, 1997, p. 220). Indeed, he never draws a clear line between them, which also insinuates that the personal and public spheres cannot be seen in isolation in Deane’s novel. At the same time, the first-person narrative implies that what the reader is given access to is, in the end, only another version or rather subjective perception of the events of the story being narrated. Besides, it suggests that there are other stories to be excavated, other voices to be heard, and other histories to be told, since the narrator’s telling implies selection, and therefore exclusion or suppression.

Hence, to reread the shadowy narrative of the past that is handed down to him through the stories he is told by different people, and therefore from different perspectives, also means to dig into, and acknowledge the existence of, potential versions of his family history that have been forgotten because they have been silenced. “Irish history is bad history. So says one character in Seamus Deane’s first novel, and no other character in the novel seems much inclined to deny it” (BOYERS, 1997, p. 33), which is not at all surprising, given that theirs is a history of violence, betrayal, shame, and torment. The first-person narrative focus is in this sense one of the main techniques that is used in *Reading in the Dark* to undermine any absolute interpretation of its plot, as well as the stories and histories that are evoked in the aesthetic realm of the novel.

Hand is therefore right when he mentions that “confusion is at the heart of [*Reading in the Dark*]” (2011, p. 247), which can be observed both formally and thematically. After all, not only does Deane’s novel use mystery, secrecy, treachery and deception as motifs and themes, but it also hovers “elusively between numerous

narrative genres – the ghost story, detective fiction, the Gothic, and *Bildungsroman* – never finally settling on any single one” (HAND, 2011, p. 247). That *Reading in the Dark* never settles on a single genre is one of its greatest strengths, and in many aspects the reluctance that Deane’s novel shows to be easily accommodated within the conventions of this or that genre hints at the existence of close affiliations between Deane’s fiction and his critical works. Besides, this deliberate confusedness allows that *Reading in the Dark* to explore different thematic nuances on a formal level and creates a complex relation between the novel’s aesthetic project and the issues that it addresses.

Indeed, Deane’s novel appropriates different narrative genres and submits them to the regulations of its own compositional logic for the creation of its singular aesthetic effects. What this suggests is a profoundly critical rereading of the traditional tropes of the Irish novel in order to rewrite them in a more contemporary context. It also intimates that no one genre is dominant in contemporary novel writing in Ireland at the end of the day, since none of the discursive traits that are typical of the genres drawn into the narrative of *Reading in the Dark* is privileged over the others. In a book in which telling and reading are as important as what is told or read, this elusiveness implies that perhaps part of the problem in Ireland is embracing one form of discourse rather than another. As Eagleton wrote, Deane’s novel is “all about who knows what in a place awash with rumours, hauntings, metamorphoses and misinformation” (1996, p. 46), which is one of the most succinct and comprehensive accounts of *Reading in the Dark* a reviewer ever offered. The plot is woven with uncertainties and the boy is driven by a personal search for a kind of truth that is beyond the reach of his informed reasoning. In Deane’s novel, “people and things materialise and evaporate, mysteriously change shape or sex, cocoon themselves and others in ever thicker layers of deception” (EAGLETON, 1996, p. 46). As these layers of deception unfold with the boy’s uncovering of his and his family’s history, “the certitudes of the present are infiltrated by the ghostly fictions of the past (EAGLETON, 1996, p. 46). In such a scenario, absolute certainty is radically undermined, and the past becomes a ghostly fiction inherited through the stories handed down from one generation to the next.

In the words of Colon, *Reading in the Dark* “covers the public epic of the Irish struggle, with its slogans and rebel songs, and the profoundly articulate silences of a family whose martyrs and traitors evade easy judgment” (1997, p. 16). At the same time, given the peculiarities of its aesthetic project, Deane’s novel stands as a firm

rejection of the methods of positivistic historiography. This is so because *Reading in the Dark* assigns great importance to storytelling for the constitution of the boy's – and later on the narrator's – subjectivity, and also attests to the formative role that the telling of those stories ultimately has on him. That the boy shows his fascination with words and the textual nature of his reality throughout the novel only makes it more noticeable – “the tales are not so much what you tell, or what you do; they define who you are” (COLON, 1997, p. 16). In that sense, Deane's novel postulates a close connection between storytelling and identity as well, and Deane's hero is ultimately a critical reader of his own past, so that the narrator's “is the story of stories: of history, of ghosts and of family secrets” (COLON, 1997, p. 16). One might also add that what the narrator tells is ultimately a tale of how stories and rumours that are told from one to another eventually sediment into a sort of mythical “truth” or form of false consciousness.

As another reviewer pointed out, *Reading in the Dark* “richly [conveys] the social milieu of the time [and] the story has a haunting quality not easily forgotten” (SAARI, 1997, p. 377), which indicates that the narrator's memories about his past and his family's are in many aspects traumatic, since they keep coming back in often disturbing ways. What is more, the uncovering of layers and layers of betrayal as the narrative progresses resonates in the evasive nature of the narrator-protagonist's memories, which illustrates and once again reinforces the logical coherence in the composition of *Reading in the Dark*. The interconnection between past and present in Deane's novel implies that the former, “after all, is what we are made of; and in the Derry and Donegal of this book it is literally coeval with the present, strewing the contemporary landscape in the form of ruins” (EAGLETON, 1996, p. 46), in such a way that his family's history is the story of an accumulation of catastrophes. In the words of Hand, the boy has to contend with “a constantly encroaching geographic world – real life experienced at street level – with various landmarks dotting the scene, looming large in the imagination, demanding to be negotiated” (2012, p. 248). At the same time this geographical world proves a source of endless stories that indirectly address the violence and betrayal which has permeated his family's history. The past is the body of experiences, in the Benjaminian sense, which has shaped the characters' subjectivity and as such it still remains a determining influence on their present relationship with the world.

What is more, the connotations of destruction, disintegration and decay attached to ruins, either literally or metaphorically, indicate the constant presence of death as a leading motif in *Reading in the Dark*. Indeed, there is in Deane's novel "a dark undertow to the narrator's childhood (...): a heightened awareness of death and violence and loss" (KAKUTANI, 1997), which once again lend support to the argument that the narrator's family's history is an accumulation of catastrophes both in the private and public spheres. The protagonist remembers his sister's passing away after her having fallen ill, a boy being crushed to death by a lorry, not to mention stories of a riot and shooting at the distillery. Near the end, there is also the scene of the British soldier who died in a street battle at the narrator's father's door in the early years of the Northern Irish Conflict. Most importantly, there is Uncle Eddie's assassination, who is wrongfully accused of informing on his IRA comrades and executed as punishment.

This awareness of death as a constant presence in *Reading in the Dark* only lends more structural and thematic coherence to the novel. This is so because death thematically connects key passages that a cursory reading would probably mistake as merely anecdotal. Indeed, the general awareness of death is determinant in driving a wedge between the narrator and his family, principally between himself and his mother. Besides, it is also death – or the awareness of its ghostly presence – that ironically brings the protagonist and his family together. All in all, the secrets they keep from each other are connected with acts of betrayal that culminated in somebody getting killed. Uncle Eddie's assassination, the portrayal of the violence of the War of Independence at the beginning of the century, the absence at the heart of the "Field of the Disappeared, August 1950" and the family's silence about these episodes are all instances of that.

Death also reverberates in the ghostly silence that haunts the family, the silence about Uncle Eddie's death and the circumstances surrounding his wrongful execution. In addition, both death and the memories of it encapsulate the barbarity of the conflicts in Northern Ireland that are alluded to in the novel, and that have a marked and permanent effect on the individual that remembers and narrates them. Indeed, death bespeaks barbarity in *Reading in the Dark* as much as it constitutes the ultimate experience that is transmitted to the narrator in the stories he is told, and that he himself passes down to the next generations as he tells his story and his version of his family's history. At the end of the novel, the "tragedy of the narrator's family (...)" has become a metaphor for the tragedy of Northern Ireland, a land whose troubles have been handed

down generation to generation, from father to daughter to son” (KAKUTANI, 1997), which makes Deane’s novel not only a document of culture, but also a document of barbarity, in the Benjaminian sense.

*Reading in the Dark*’s resistance to easy categorisation at the formal level resonates in the complexity of its themes, especially because, as Kennedy-Andrews points out, the narrator’s Derry “is a place of darkness, emblematic of the political situation; a place full of ghosts and shadows, ‘silence everywhere’ (...) echoing with the cries of the past” (2006, p. 248-9) that cannot be left behind. The recurrence of these images suggests that the “truth” about the past, sedimented by the telling of stories, is in fact open to speculation and unlikely to be reached. “Ghosts and spectres abound in Deane’s novel, which gives it a kind of Gothic speculativeness” (PEACH, 2004, p. 48), and to read in the dark is in a sense to speculate about the circumstances of one’s past and how things have come to pass, as well as to what extent one is allowed to know what really happened or to tell remembrance from invention. All in all, if memory can somehow recover history, the novel deliberately fictionalises it, and the narrative in *Reading in the Dark* pushes both memory and fiction to their limits in the darkness and confusion on which it deliberately rests.

Indeed, “Deane’s novel seems all the more terrible for being located in an apparently ordinary domestic setting” (PEACH, 2004, p. 49), which is nevertheless constantly explored as an extension of the characters’ feelings and also as a community within the larger community of the Derry in which the novel is set. Thus, what seems, upon a first reading, to be merely a citation of Gothic conventions on the formal level, with no real thematic connection to the implications of the story being narrated, or with the context with which it is related, becomes an extended metaphor for the narrator’s “almost Faustian quest” (PEACH, 2004, p. 207) for knowledge and for the ghosts he has to exorcise in his search. The narrator’s quest, nevertheless, can only make him ironically become “as implicated as those around him in the conspiracy of silence to suppress the facts of the past” (KENNEDY-ANDREWS, 2006, p. 249), which is eloquently demonstrated in the last vignette of the novel.

Indeed, the wealth of narrative devices and elements in *Reading in the Dark* and the way they are aesthetically organised indicate that Deane as an author is highly self-conscious of the nature and scope of his fictional narrative, both structurally and

thematically. Hand has a point when he argues that “an integral element of [Deane’s book] at the level of meta-narrative is how it traces the struggle towards being a novel” (2011, p. 249), in the sense that it skilfully weaves together influences from different narrative forms and genres without ever coming apart at the seams. The episodes that form *Reading in the Dark* are intimate sketches of the young boy’s life that are evoked by the narrator’s account of the bits of experience that have been orally transmitted to him.

Deane’s novel is therefore “obviously self-consciously concerned with the act of storytelling itself, as it is with reading” (HAND, 1996, p. 249), which is reinforced not only by its motifs, diction, and textual organisation, but with the idea of interpretation as suggested in its title. On the linguistic level, for example, the constant use of the passive voice<sup>12</sup> lays great emphasis to the indeterminate origin of the stories that constitute the narrator’s memories. This stresses at the formal level the cardinal importance of rumour as a driving narrative element in the novel. Consequently, the ambiguities of a narrative whose objects of desire are “knowledge and knowing [are amplified as the] unnamed narrator searches for the truth at the heart of the secret that troublingly haunts his family” (HAND, 2011, p. 247). Amplified they are, but fulfilled they are not.

In the end, the potential inconclusiveness of the protagonist’s investigation is the strongest implication of *Reading in the Dark*’s plot structure, as it suggests that there can be no decisive interpretation for a history which is built upon conflict, half-truths, betrayal, rumours and uncertainty. Indeed, the narrator’s family’s history “came to [him] in bits, from people who rarely recognised all they had told. Some of the things [he remembers], [he does not] really remember” (DEANE, 1996, p. 225), which supports the previous argument. Besides, the uncertain nature of remembrance and the vagueness it implies ironically undermine the possibilities of the narrator’s achieving his ultimate goal. In fact, this installs a potent paradox within the novel, which rather than undermining its logical and compositional coherence, only makes it stronger as a work of fiction, since it is the central element that denies a full closure to the facts and situations being narrated. Memory is “so uncertain or unstable, both epistemologically and ontologically, that [the narrator does] not even know if a given set of memories is [his] or someone else’s” (OLNEY, 1998, p. 7-8). This not only keeps Deane’s

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<sup>12</sup> “The truth *was swollen* inside me.” (DEANE, 1996, p. 194, *emphasis added*).

protagonist from having full access to the past as it was, but also testimonies to the impossibility of an exact reconstruction of what has been.

This installs a bitter irony in the novel, for “the assumption guiding [the boy’s] whole undertaking is that there is a missing element whose discovery will banish unease and establish wholeness” (O’BRIEN, 2012, p. 130). Even though this missing element – Uncle Eddie’s execution and the reasons behind it – is eventually tracked, this discovery neither alleviates the narrator’s pain nor does it re-establish any lost order. The narrator wants to remember these stories and investigate his family’s history mainly “because it is so important for others to forget them” (DEANE, 1996, p. 225), and his narrative shows a profound commitment to the history of those whose official historiography would inevitably leave behind. Ultimately, the narrator’s effort is of a redemptive kind, as much as it is a metaphorical rereading of the potential versions of the past that is opened before him. His investigation demands that these memories, either his or someone else’s, be rescued from oblivion. Recollecting and retelling what he has been told are then the only ways for him to hold his past up for inspection, but the means he has to proceed with his quest are nonetheless flawed and likely to be misleading. His inquiry eventually gets him nowhere, and the irony is that he only finds out in the end that memories and stories can conceal as much as they can reveal.

It should also be mentioned that narrator’s connections with his community transcend the limits of the individual and enter the public realm in Deane’s novel. As the protagonist comes to terms with the ghosts his family cannot fully exorcise, he has to contend with memories intrinsically connected to the political tensions that have severely afflicted his family and the Derry and Donegal of the novel. *Reading in the Dark* thus establishes a close dialogue with the world out of which it was written, especially in its incorporation of the political and ideological tensions that have fuelled decades of sectarian violence in Northern Ireland. Indeed, Deane’s book incorporates the external elements of its context of production in its fictional realm that it eventually becomes an aesthetic rethinking of individual experiences, of the Irish scene, and of the economic, sectarian and cultural oppression in Derry and Donegal in the 1940s and 1950s. As such, Deane’s novel brings into “sharp, pristine focus concerns with power and authority” (HAND, 2011, p. 248), which strongly reverberate in the discussion of who is entitled to remember and commemorate their past.

As a matter of fact, *Reading in the Dark* embodies an “overwhelming sense of pain that develops throughout the text, and which is never finally exorcised” (PEACH, 2004, p. 47), which in turn reveals that “ghostly presences and haunting within the novel [suggest that] the past is never over and done with, [and that] it necessarily lingers on to trouble the present” (HAND, 2011, p. 250). That a novel which came out during the booming years of the Celtic Tiger, when the peace process in Northern Ireland, represented by the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, was being negotiated, is certainly not to be ignored. Far from being confined to the individual sphere, the ghostly presences and spectres of a violent and traumatic past extend into the public realm in *Reading in the Dark*, making the issues addressed by Deane’s novel at the same time aesthetically enticing and politically symbolic.

### 3. REMEMBRANCE, LANGUAGE, EXPERIENCE, HISTORY

History, the angel, was stirred  
 To turn her face upon us. Bird  
     Or beast, as she turned,  
     The streets split and burned.  
 Homeward she glanced and we cried  
     At the feathery rush of her wide  
     And spreadeagling wings  
     Which the wind has split and flings  
     So severely back that it seems  
 She cannot fly. In her face the wind screams.

(‘Northern Ireland: Two Comments’ – Seamus Deane)

If the “experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn” (BENJAMIN, 1986, p. 84), and if “among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (BENJAMIN, 1986, p. 84), then *Reading in the Dark* can be seen from a Benjaminian perspective as a meditation on the nature of telling, and on the impact of this mouth-to-mouth transmission of experience (*Erfahrung*) in the constitution of the individual, as well as in its relation to his community. Considering this, one can therefore argue that the fact that the plot of *Reading in the Dark* is woven from a myriad stories told to the narrator by others makes this Benjaminian reading of Deane’s novel both possible and valid. Indeed, the narrator’s continuous metaphorical reading in the dark is a ceaseless excavation of vestiges or traces of experience (*Erfahrung*) which he struggles to redeem or save from complete obliteration. This “narratable experience”, though, does not correspond to the narrator’s immediate lived experiences, which Benjamin would call *Erlebnis*. However, since Benjamin never gave a final conceptual form to these notions in his essays, it is necessary at this point to make a few theoretical considerations about the notions of *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* that emerge from his philosophical writing and literary criticism.

Broadly speaking, the *Erfahrung* that Benjamin discussed in texts like “Experience” (1913), “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” and “Experience and Poverty” has a formative character to it, and implies learning, not

in the sense of schooling, but in the sense of having something brought to one's attention. In other words, the *Erfahrung* for Benjamin is therefore a form of communicable knowledge that is born of immediate experience (*Erlebnis*), and which is apprehended as a way of learning. The *Erfahrung* is, then, an experience that is universalised and can therefore be shared by a group or a community in the form of a narrative that is preserved in the collective memory of the members of a community, thus eventually becoming a tradition in the sense of a common heritage. To put it differently, what Benjamin saw as *Erfahrung* is the rationalised form of the *Erlebnis* – the immediate lived experience. The *Erfahrung* is handed down orally, through the telling of stories and the spreading of other forms of proverbial knowledge, as the fable with which Benjamin opens his essay “Experience and Poverty” illustrates well:

Our childhood anthologies used to contain the fable of the old man who, on his deathbed, fooled his sons into believing that there was treasure buried in the vineyard. They would only have to dig. They dug, but found no treasure. When autumn came, however, the vineyard bore fruit like no other in the whole land. They then perceived that their father had passed on a valuable piece of experience: the blessing lies in hard work and not in gold. Such lessons in experience were passed on to use, either as threats or as kindly pieces of advice, all the while we were growing up: “Still wet behind the ears, and he wants to tell us what's what!” “You'll find out [*erfahren*] soon enough!” Moreover, everyone knew precisely what experience was: older people had always passed it on to younger ones. It was handed down in short form to sons and grandsons, with the authority of age, in proverbs; with an often long-winded eloquence, as tales; sometimes as stories from foreign lands, at the fireside (BENJAMIN, 1999, p. 731).

Remembrance, in this sense, implies a type of search, and the narrative nature of the *Erfahrung* creates a link between a relegated past and the present. Given its roots in memory and narrative, and given the tension between remembering and forgetting that is inherent to the dynamics of memory, one can say that the Benjaminian *Erfahrung* also contains an aesthetic dimension to it, since the content of what it transmits is then open to inventiveness let alone to other interpretations. This in turn highlights its status as a narrative more akin to the artistic and inventive potentialities of storytelling than to the faithful retrospective account of the primary immediate lived experience. Indeed, one could even argue that this is one of the greatest strengths of the *Erfahrung* as a form of communicable knowledge given that its openness constantly invites reflection and investigation. To put it differently, the way Benjamin sees the *Erfahrung* allows one to

think that the way a given communicable experience, and the potential for it to bring things to notice, is as important as that which it effectively transmits in terms of content.

Considering this, it is not hard to see that the *Erfahrung* can thus be possible only in its own *Medium*.<sup>13</sup> In other words, the notion of “narratable” or “communicable” experience elaborated by Benjamin is intimately connected to the language of the narrative by means of which it is passed on. Indeed, this idea refers back to Benjamin’s seminal text “On the Language of Men and on Language as Such” (1916), in which he develops a particularly personal philosophy of language that would serve as the epistemological foundation for his philosophical essays on narrative and history, as well as his literary criticism and reviews. Indeed, being necessarily at the heart of the language that transmits it, the Benjaminian *Erfahrung* is open to potentially different meanings and reinterpretations, just as the parable at the beginning of “Experience and Poverty” implies. From this Benjaminian perspective then, the storyteller who hands down “narratable experiences” has only to guarantee that the events he narrates maintain their secret force, just as the old man on his deathbed did to his sons in the parable quoted in Benjamin’s essay. To do so, the storyteller is compelled to withhold thorough explanations about what he tells, in an attempt to avoid that the interpretation of what he narrates is confined to a single vision or version.

Unlike the *Erlebnis*, which, as an immediately lived experience, is ephemeral and as such necessarily circumscribed and restricted to the limits of chronological time, the *Erfahrung*, the rationalised form of the *Erlebnis*, has an unfinished character to it and can therefore be closely associated with memory. This is so because, due to its essentially open-ended structure and nature, the *Erfahrung* explodes chronology and holds the past and the present together. What is more, the way Benjamin uses the notion of *Erfahrung* in his writings shows that it contains in itself a marked tension between remembering and forgetting which forestalls the possibility of interpretive closure. Indeed, the *Erfahrung* eliminates the chronological constraints that separate the immediate lived experience of the past from its present articulation in terms of narrative,

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<sup>13</sup> This idea of ‘medium of reflection’ is at the core of Benjamin’s doctoral dissertation *The Concept of Art Criticism in German Romanticism* (1919). Marcio Seligmann-Silva (2009) explains that the German term *Reflexionsmedium* can be understood as both a medium of reflection and the reflection’s medium, an ambiguity that Benjamin fully explores in his critical writing. Further details on this idea can be found in *A atualidade de Walter Benjamin and Theodor W. Adorno* (2009).

and therefore establishes the means of sharing knowledge between generations, thus linking the individual to his community by creating the conditions for a shared tradition to be developed.

Indeed, the first links between memory and *Erfahrung* are formulated by Benjamin in “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, and also in “Experience and Poverty”, two texts that contain not only thematic but also clear structural parallels. In both essays, Benjamin draws attention to the decline of the art of storytelling and claims that, as a consequence of the atrophy of this form of communicating knowledge, modern man has become poor in “narratable experiences”. For Benjamin, this poverty of experience arises from the fact that modern man has gradually traded the *Erfahrung* as a form of knowledge for the fleeting and episodic lived experience of the *Erlebnis*, which is incommunicable because it can neither transcend per se the limitations imposed by time nor can it extrapolate the isolation and in the final analysis the profound loneliness of the individual, deprived as he is of communal contact.

Even though “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov”, and in “Experience and Poverty” are rather different in tone – the former is more nostalgic whilst the latter is more revolutionary – they bear a striking resemblance to each other for their fierce denunciation of a world in which the real dimensions of things are lost, since modern man, for Benjamin, aspires to fundamentally break away from the *Erfahrung* as a method of knowledge transmission and acquisition. As a result, a new form of misery arises from the wealth of experiences that cannot be narrated because they are restricted to the succession of unrelated events of the *Erlebnis* as the expression of a form of existence that is self-sufficient within its limits. Indeed, the poverty of experience against which Benjamin speaks out so vehemently in these two essays results from the impossibility for the fragmentary lived experience to become a transmittable form of knowledge that can transcend the limits of the individual and be of some value to a larger group or community. In the final analysis, then, Benjamin sees the decline of the *Erfahrung* not only as a form of poverty but also as a manifestation of barbarism. Considering this, it is no coincidence that Benjamin uses the soldiers that fought the World War I and returned home in silence from the battlefield as the ultimate example of the barbarous side of this poverty of experience. Benjamin implies in “Experience and Poverty” that the war in the trenches epitomised the huge development

of technology brought about by modernity, at the same time that it entrapped the individual within the trauma of the first-hand experiences of the battlefield.

With the demise of the *Erfahrung* denounced by Benjamin, other narrative forms besides that of the traditional oral storytelling would emerge and/or eventually prevail. Indeed, Gagnebin explains that Benjamin saw the novel and the journalistic information as such narrative forms, and she adds that, for Benjamin, these forms of narrative shared the need to provide full and definite explanations for fictional and real events respectively.<sup>14</sup> As a matter of fact, in the essay on the storyteller, Benjamin relates the death of the oral narrative to the emergence of the novel as a genre, and defends the existence of a fundamental distinction between the nature of the novel and that of the oral tradition of storytelling, as he argues the case that there are close connections between the solitary individual and the rise of the novel. Indeed, Benjamin insists that,

What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature – the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella – is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or, that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others. To write a novel means to carry the incommensurable to extremes in the representation of human life. In the midst of life's fullness, and through the representation of this fullness, the novel gives evidence of the profound perplexity of the living. (2007, p. 87)

It must be pointed out that Benjamin wrote these comparisons under the influence of Georg Lukács' *A Theory of the Novel* (1919), a book that Benjamin held in high esteem at the time he wrote his essay on the works of Nikolai Leskov. Lukács' ideas had a huge influence on the way Benjamin conceived of the differences between the narrative of oral tradition and the deliberately fabricated narrative of the writer of fiction. Indeed, Benjamin's emphasis on the isolation of the novelist culminates in the description of the reader of the novel as an equally isolated figure. However, in the final analysis, the comparisons made by Benjamin between the art of oral storytelling and the novel in that excerpt testify to the poverty of experience which afflicts the modern man. On that topic, Gagnebin explains that for Benjamin the reader ultimately turns to the novel in

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<sup>14</sup> Gagnebin develops these ideas in great detail in her preface to *Magia e Técnica, Arte e Política* (1996), and also in *Walter Benjamin* (1982).

search of an explicit meaning which can no longer be found in society. Gagnebin adds that Benjamin saw this as an explanation for the reader's need to put an end to the story being read. It is only by doing so, Gagnebin continues, that the isolated reader can prove to himself that his endeavour has not been in vain. Gagnebin concludes that this is what sets the ancient oral narrative and the classic novel apart: the former is essentially open-ended, while the latter moves towards a conclusion so as to provide a meaning for the reader's isolated existence.<sup>15</sup>

Indeed, when Benjamin draws the line between the novel and oral tradition, he once again attests that the art of storytelling is coming to an end. The death of storytelling, in turn, leads to the demise of the *Erfahrung* as a form of “communicable knowledge” that is rooted in a shared, communal sense of tradition. What this means is that with his progressive isolation, modern man has confined himself to a form of existence in which the immediate lived experience and the real measure of things is lost to the point that no significant differentiation can be made. As Benjamin states,

Nature and technology, primitiveness and comfort, have completely merged. And to people who have grown weary of the endless complications of everyday living and to whom the purpose of existence seems to have been reduced to the most distant vanishing point on an endless horizon, it must come as a tremendous relief to find a way of life in which everything is solved in the simplest and most comfortable way, in which a car is no heavier than a straw hat and the fruit on the tree becomes round as quickly as a hot-air balloon. And now we need to step back and keep our distance. (1999, p. 735)

Ironically, to step back and keep distance from the *Erlebnis* is precisely what modern man, according to Benjamin's account, is unable to do. For, having given up one portion of human heritage after another, he is now incapable of logically organising his first-hand experiences so as to make them both transmittable and valuable to the next generation. To put it differently, for Benjamin, modern man has become impoverished because he is no longer able to derive a valuable communicable experience – *Erfahrung* – from his immediate and episodic way of living.

Indeed, if, on the one hand, Benjamin establishes a clear opposition between the novel and oral storytelling as far as the predominance of the *Erlebnis* over the *Erfahrung* in modernity is concerned, on the other hand, he demonstrates in his literary

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<sup>15</sup> Gagnebin discusses these questions in the preface to *Magia e técnica, arte e política* (1996), and also in *História e narração em Walter Benjamin* (2009).

criticism that authors like Proust and Kafka challenge this opposition in the essential open-endedness of their fiction.<sup>16</sup> Hence, Benjamin's critical commentary on the fiction of both authors hints at a marked rupture in their work with the classic novelistic model which culminates in the search for a settlement of the narrative tension and an eventual conclusion. This break is particularly noticeable, for instance, in Proust's search for analogies in *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* between the past of the lived experience, on the one hand, and the present circumstances that trigger the involuntary memory on the other. As a result, it is the mechanisms of the involuntary memory in Proust's masterpiece that create the conditions for the similarities between the past of the immediate lived experience, confined to the prison-house of chronology, and the present of remembrance to emerge with full force. Indeed, this capacity of Proust's novel to produce infinite possibilities for the past to co-occur with the future of the individual in charge of the telling has provided the quintessential narrative matrix for other twentieth-century novelists to produce their own fiction about memory and the always tense relationship between the past and the present that arises as a direct consequence of that.

In "The Image of Proust",<sup>17</sup> Benjamin reflects on the way Proust reintroduces the infinite "in the limitations of bourgeoisie individual existence" (GAGNEBIN, 1996, p. 15, *my translation*)<sup>18</sup> in *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. This paradox arises from the fact that the infinite finds its way into the life of the novel's protagonist because of the manner in which memories and similarities are convergently established in his essentially retrospective narrative. Indeed, Benjamin points out that in *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* Proust opens to view a form of eternity that is convoluted in time rather than being timeless. Proust's true interest in his novel, Benjamin notices, is in "the passage of time in its most real – that is, space-bound – form, and this passage nowhere holds sway more openly than in remembrance within and aging without" (2007, p. 211). Here Benjamin touches on a central aspect of Proust's novel, the tension between remembering and forgetting, and how one process is closely linked to the other. Benjamin's essay shows that there is a strong dialectical interaction between remembering and ageing at the heart of *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* that reaffirms

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<sup>16</sup> Gagnebin explains this in her preface to *Magia e técnica, arte e política* (1996), *História e Narração em Walter Benjamin* (2009), and in *Limiar, aura e memorização: ensaios sobre Walter Benjamin* (2014).

<sup>17</sup> A better translation for the title of this essay into English would be "Towards an Image of Proust" (*Zum Bilde Prousts*).

<sup>18</sup> (...) nas limitações da existência individual burguesa." (GAGNEBIN, 1996, p. 15)

the importance of reflexive memory for the interchange between the past and the present to be established, and with it the profound analogies between them to be revealed when remembrance occurs.

Indeed, in his investigation of the uses memory as a literary technique in *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*, Benjamin also examines how the laws of remembrance and forgetting operate within Proust's novel. As Benjamin states,

in his work Proust did not describe a life as it actually was, but a life as it was remembered by the one who had lived it. And yet even this statement is imprecise and far too crude. For the important thing for the remembering author is not what he experienced, but the weaving of his memory, the Penelope work of recollection. Or should one call it, rather, a Penelope work of forgetting? Is not the 'involuntary recollection, Proust's *memoire involontaire*, much closer to forgetting than what is usually called memory? And is not this work of spontaneous recollection, in which remembrance is the woof and forgetting the warf, a counterpart to Penelope's work rather than its likeness? For here the day unravels what the night was woven. When we awake each morning, we hold in our hands, usually weakly and loosely, but a few fringes of the tapestry of lived life, as loomed for us by forgetting. However, with our purposeful activity and, even more, our purposive remembering each day unravels the web and the ornaments of forgetting. (2007, p. 202)

Benjamin's analysis here shows that Proust's stroke of genius was to have made *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu* the narrative of a life as the protagonist remembers having lived it, and not a book of memories. In his search for lost time, Proust's protagonist stumbles upon the presence of the past in the present, and notices at the same time that the present is already prefigured in the past.<sup>19</sup> This is what Benjamin actually means when he argues that “an experienced event is finite at any rate, confined to one sphere of experience; a remembered event is infinite, because it is only a key to everything that happened before it and after it. (2007, p. 202-3). In other words, Benjamin revisits the opposition between the finitude of the sphere of lived experience (*Sphäre des Erlebens*), on the one hand, and the open-endedness of remembrance, on the other. What Benjamin is doing in this passage is discussing once again the essential difference between the *Erlebnis* as the immediate lived experience confined to the restraints of chronology, and the *Erfahrung* as the “narratable experience” that relies on remembrance to exist, to be passed on, and in the process of its transmission to reveal the profound similarities

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<sup>19</sup> Gagnebin discusses this in “Walter Benjamin ou a história aberta”, her preface to *Magia e técnica, arte e política* (1996), and also in *História e Narração em Walter Benjamin* (2009), *Lembrar escrever esquecer* (2006), and *Limiar, aura e rememoração: ensaios sobre Walter Benjamin* (2014).

between the past and the present. If, in Benjamin's essays on the storyteller and on experience and poverty, the relationship between the *Erfahrung* and memory was dealt with in terms of the interchange between the individual and his community, in "The Image of Proust" this relationship emerges from the fictional writing that triggers remembrance and that in turn leads to more writing, in ceaseless metaphorical associations of concepts which are diametrically opposed on a first reading.

In "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), Benjamin revisits key aspects of his analysis of the central role of memory in Proust's novel and also inscribes his reflections on the aesthetic potentials of memory and remembrance in the context of Baudelaire's lyric poetry. Indeed, Benjamin sees Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857)<sup>20</sup> as pivotal to the understanding of modernity, since Baudelaire's buffoonery has intimate connections with the fact that he had to seek out and claim the dignity of the poet in a society that was practically devoid of dignity.<sup>21</sup> In this essay, Benjamin argues that lyric poetry has become less favourably received since it rarely enjoys an instant rapport with the experience of its readers. For Benjamin, "this may be due to a change in the structure of their experience" (2007, p. 156), and his analysis of Baudelaire's poetry, like his comments on Proust's novel, returns to a discussion of the differences between the *Erlebnis* and the *Erfahrung*. In the context of Benjamin's literary criticism, the distinctions between the *Erlebnis* and the *Erfahrung* allow for an understanding of the literary procedures used by Baudelaire and Proust in connection with those historical conditions and nuances that their poetry and prose incorporate in their innermost aesthetic elements.

Indeed, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" serves as a fine example of Benjamin's ambitions as far as his literary criticism was concerned, for his analysis of Baudelaire's poetry shows the extent to which the critic can deeply articulate the immanence of the work of art with the historical and social changes that art has somehow to come to terms with. Hence, in this essay Benjamin shows that there are close affinities between the enigmatic tone of Baudelaire's allegories in his lyric poetry and the disjointed relationship of time and space that is characteristic of modernity. To put it differently, Benjamin does not reduce Baudelaire's poetry to a direct consequence or an expression

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<sup>20</sup> *The Flowers of Evil* in the English translation.

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this idea, check Benjamin's *The Writer of Modern Life: Essays on Charles Baudelaire* (2006), *Charles Baudelaire: um lírico no auge do capitalismo* (2000), and Martha D'Ângelo's *Arte, Política e Educação em Walter Benjamin* (2006).

of modernity. Rather, Benjamin sets out to see modernity through Baudelaire's lyricism, and, in so doing, he can also see that, in Baudelaire, the history of modernity is rewritten from the perspective of the vanquished. Benjamin can only see this process as a critic because his primary concern is with the linguistic materiality of Baudelaire's poetic discourse, and how his lyric poetry negotiates the reality of the time and space of modernity.<sup>22</sup>

It is with Benjamin's analysis of the works of Proust and Baudelaire in mind that his "Theses on the Concept of History" (1940) should then be read. This is so because, as Gagnebin notices, the method of Benjamin's materialist historian owes a great deal to Proust's aesthetics of memory and forgetting. Indeed, Gagnebin points out that both the Proustian protagonist and the materialist historian are concerned with one and the same thing, that is, with saving the past in the present because there is a profound similarity that can potentially transform them both. The realisation of this similarity, Gagnebin explains, transforms the past because it takes on a new form that could have been forgotten, and at the same time transforms the present in the sense that it becomes the fulfilment of an earlier promise that could have been – and still can – be lost if it is not inscribed in the present instant of remembrance.<sup>23</sup> As Benjamin insisted, "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]" (2007, p. 261), which reinforces the idea that for him, history should be seen as "a tiger's leap into the past" (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 261) to explore the deep relations between that past and the present. Indeed, Benjamin radically eschews any historical account that is premised on the idea of a universal history when he says that a given historical subject can only be approached as a monad, a concept he takes straight from Leibniz's philosophy. The following is Benjamin's explanation of the method of the materialist historian:

A historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past. He takes cognizance of it in order to blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history – blasting a specific life out of the era or a specific work out of the lifework. As a result of this method the lifework is preserved in this work and at the same time canceled; in the lifework, the era;

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<sup>22</sup> Martha D'Ângelo develops these ideas more fully in "A modernidade pelo olhar de Walter Benjamin", in *Arte, Política e Educação em Walter Benjamin* (2006).

<sup>23</sup> Gagnebin develops this idea throughout "Walter Benjamin ou a história aberta", in *Magia e técnica, arte e política* (1996)

and in the era, the entire course of history. The nourishing fruit of the historically understood contains time as a precious but tasteless seed. (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 263)

In fact, the materialist historian, for Benjamin, should never regard anything that has ever come to pass as being lost to history. To put it differently, the Benjaminian historian is a chronicler “who recites events without distinguishing between major and minor ones” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 254), since it is the narrative of the past in its entirety that interests him. Indeed, this passage is important to an understanding of Benjamin’s reflections on history for two main reasons: it reaffirms the central role of remembrance as an all-inclusive process by means of which the past can be fully redeemed, and it also strikes a fierce attack on the positivist ideology of progress, which Benjamin saw “as the common denominator of the tendencies he will criticize: conservative historicism, Social Democratic evolutionism and vulgar Marxism” (LÖWY, 2005, p. 17). Moreover, implicit in Benjamin’s criticism of these tendencies is his idea of revolution as the interruption of this historical evolution that culminates in both catastrophe and barbarism.<sup>24</sup> Benjamin says in Thesis V that “every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 255), which is not only another statement of the method of the materialist historian, but also further evidence of the parallels between the work of the historian and the workings of involuntary memory in Proust’s *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

Indeed, Löwy comments that Benjamin’s “Theses on the Concept of History” is “an enigmatic, allusive, even sibylline text, its hermeticism studded with images, allegories and illuminations, strewn with strange paradoxes and shot through with dazzling insights” (2005, p. 4), and adds that it is “indispensable to situate it within the development of Benjamin’s work” (LÖWY, 2005, p. 4). In other words, even though Benjamin did not develop his ideas within a philosophical system, and his thinking predominantly took the form of the essay or the fragment, the careful reading of his “Theses on the Concept of History” as Löwy proposes shows that it is possible to find

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<sup>24</sup> As Michael Löwy explains in greater detail, “contrary to vulgar evolutionary Marxism – which is, admittedly, able to point to sources in some of the writings of Marx and Engels themselves – Benjamin does not conceive revolution as the ‘natural’ or ‘inevitable’ outcome of economic and technical progress (or the ‘contradiction between the forces and relations of production’), but as the interruption of a process of historical evolution leading to catastrophe” (2005, p. 9).

some coherence and continuity that would escape an essentially decontextualised approach to this text. To put it differently, when interpreted in the light of the philosophical and critical texts that preceded it, the “Theses on the Concept of History” show that, for Benjamin, history was inseparable from matters of language, art, culture, literature, and theology. This Benjaminian idea of history can be reconstructed from the fragments and citations that permeate his philosophy and literary criticism.

Of interest for the purposes of the present study is the narrative principle of Benjamin’s philosophy, and the close relationship between experience (*Erfahrung*), literature, and history that it establishes. The importance of narrative for Benjamin’s theses on the concept of history becomes more evident when the reader takes into consideration the German title of the essay: “Thesen Über den Begriff der Geschichte”. As Gagnebin explains,

if we bear in mind that the word “Geschichte”, as “history”, refers both to the process of development of a given reality in time as well as to the study of this process or any given account, we will understand that the theses “On the Concept of History” are not only a speculation on the historical development “as such”, but also a critical reflection on our discourse about history (histories), a discourse which is inseparable from a certain practice. Thus, the question of the writing of history refers to the broader questions of political practice and the narrative activity. (1996, p. 7, *my translation*)<sup>25</sup>

Considering this, it is no coincidence that Benjamin places this notion of history as *Geschichte*<sup>26</sup> at the heart of his theses. It encapsulates the idea of history as both an act of narration and a document. Indeed, the Benjaminian *Geschichte* conceives of history as a real process, in which history as a discipline (*Historie*) shares a common narrative basis with the telling of stories as tales, parables, and other forms of proverbial wisdom that hold the potential to rake up the past and evince its similarities with the present. Bearing that in mind, one can say that the materialist historian in Benjamin’s “theses”

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<sup>25</sup> Se nos lembrarmos que o termo “Geschichte”, como “história”, designa tanto o processo de desenvolvimento da realidade no tempo como o estudo desse processo ou um relato qualquer, compreenderemos que as teses “Sobre o conceito de história” não são apenas uma especulação sobre o devir histórico “enquanto tal”, mas uma reflexão crítica sobre o nosso discurso a respeito da história (das histórias), discurso esse inseparável de uma certa prática. Assim, a questão da escrita da história remete às questões mais amplas da prática política e da atividade da narração. (GAGNEBIN, 1996, p. 7)

<sup>26</sup> It should be noticed that *Geschichte* comes from the participle form of the verb *geschehen* (to happen, occur). Due to that, *geschehen* refers not only to “what has come to pass”, “what has occurred”, but also to “the set of facts” and “what was done or committed”.

has to ultimately channel all his efforts at recreating the conditions for the *Erfahrung* to exist and constitute a form of communicable knowledge in a world which has seen the demise of “narratable experiences”. In that sense, it is indeed possible to speak of an open-ended history (*Geschichte*) in Benjamin, in which the *Erfahrung* that is transmitted by the historian/narrator is denied any final form or definite explanation. In this process, the roles of narration, remembrance, and interpretation are given great prominence, and reinforce the unfinished nature of the narrator’s/historian’s account.

Indeed, a careful study of Benjamin’s main essays shows that he understood that each history ever told has its origins in another history. This resulting history will then produce a third history, which will therefore produce a fourth one, and so on.<sup>27</sup> Implicit in this attempt to scrutinise Benjamin’s thoughts is the recognition that memory and remembrance play a vital role in creating the dynamics of this history of histories. This is so because memory and remembrance are the categories that link a given “narrated experience” with a shared tradition of a community, for instance. Hence, it is memory and remembrance that allow for different forms of communicable knowledge to be preserved in their essentially mediated form and handed down to the next generation as narratives that eschew causal conclusions. In addition, memory and remembrance are of the essence for the *Erfahrung* to be passed on and preserved, in that they contain within themselves endless possibilities for other stories and histories to emerge, and for what is conventionally referred to as reality to be symbolically negotiated. Indeed, Gagnebin explains that the endless wanderings of memory are the driving force in the composition of the historical account in this Benjaminian sense, since each text evokes another text, and with this the importance of reading and interpretation of what is brought to attention as well<sup>28</sup>

It is with this notion of *Erfahrung* as “narratable experience” in mind, as well as with Benjamin’s ideas of memory and history, that this study seeks to examine how *Reading in the Dark* makes “the events of an individual life (...) fully compliant with the demands of a political narrative” (PATTEN, 2007, p. 68), where the convergence of fictional narrative and historical narrative forges the narrator’s individual identity and

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<sup>27</sup> Gagnebin offers a pithy explanation of this dynamics of history in Benjamin’s philosophy in the preface that she wrote for *Magia e Técnica, Arte e Política* (1996), a collection of Benjamin’s essays translated by Sergio Paulo Rouanet.

<sup>28</sup> These ideas are developed not only in the preface to *Magia e Técnica, Arte e Política*, but also in other books of hers like *História e Narração em Walter Benjamin*, and a few essays from *Lembrar, Escrever, Esquecer*.

connects him to the community to which he belongs. By reading Seamus Deane's novel from this essentially Benjaminian perspective, this study also argues that the undermining of certainties that permeates *Reading in the Dark* is rooted in the fact that, in it, literature and history converge in the narrative principle embodied in the act of telling as Benjamin discusses it in his essays, and which is fundamental for the idea of *Erfahrung* which provides the main connection between his literary criticism and his philosophy of history.

As the narrator in *Reading in the Dark* remembers his childhood and adolescence and tells his and his family's history, he also listens to it and tries to apprehend the facts that are brought to his attention by critically investigating the stories he remembers having been told. In so doing, Deane's narrator rereads the memories of his recollected past from his own distanced present viewpoint. As a consequence, he realises that there are gaps in his and his family's past that need filling, and that the missing links that connect the shards of history he redeems through recollection bear a great influence on and huge similarities with their present. Indeed, one can argue that what the narrator in *Reading in the Dark* 'remembers', to a great extent, is what he has been told about his own and his family's lives, so that his is also an effort to make that history his own somehow. In that process, which can ultimately be understood to be that of the writing of the book, Deane's narrator reveals his own version of his family's history(ies) and secrets, an act of betrayal because, by doing so, he also becomes an informer, in the sense that he opens the cupboard where his family have kept their skeletons of their past. To unlock their secrets is to inform, which is also to betray his family and community.

The idea of reading in the dark which is expressed in the title and permeates the entire book also suggests that there is an inherent "communion between life and word" (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 10, *my translation*)<sup>29</sup> within Deane's novel, and eventually hints at the turning of the individual experience – the Benjaminian *Erlebnis* – into "an act of re-reading, a recognition of openings and opportunities that the received text tacitly makes available without taking responsibility for them" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 130). In this sense, Deane's narrator gets closer to Benjamin's storyteller because his account is the mediated form of his own and his family's immediately lived experiences. As a

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<sup>29</sup> "caráter de comunidade entre vida e palavra" (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 10).

result, the communion between life and word in Deane's novel is complete in the aesthetic materialisation of the *Erfahrung* that constitutes the foundation of the narrator's account. This in turn reveals that *Reading in the Dark* gives the figure of the critical reader a central role in that Deane's narrator makes no concessions as far as the elucidation of the deepest content of the material presented is concerned. Indeed, *Reading in the Dark* marks a dramatic shift from writing the Irish experience to writing and reading it, and, due to that, Deane's novel acknowledges in its aesthetic choices that the active participation of the critical reader in this process is a fundamental part of novel's interpretive scope. Indeed, the extent to which *Reading in the Dark* incorporates the premises of Deane's critical method as a critic and scholar remains yet to be investigated.

Memory can "absorb the course of events on the one hand and, with the passing of these, make its peace with the power of death on the other" (BENJAMIN, 1986, p. 97). In other words, the work of memory and remembrance is only of interest if, in revisiting the past, they can apprehend it in such a way that what is remembered both transforms the present and is at the same time transformed. In Benjaminian terms, the remembrance of the past is of interest only as a form of *Erfahrung*, a transmittable form of knowledge, and not as the unmediated lived experience of the *Erlebnis*, which is constrained to the limits of chronology and, in the final analysis, incommunicable. To put it differently, memory and remembrance acquire a revolutionary aura when they can absorb the events of the past and highlight the profound similarities between the past and the present in such a way that this "leap into the past" is both a form of destruction and construction. It is the destruction of the limits of chronology and the establishment of connections between the past and the present which operates on an essentially metaphorical or allegorical basis.

What is more, memory – "the epic faculty *par excellence*" (BENJAMIN, 1986, p. 97) – is the means to fictionalise affective, familial, political and historical experiences in *Reading in the Dark*. In fact, considering the nature of Deane's novel, there is a marked tension in it between the impossibility of telling and the necessity of doing so that imposes the need for another form of history writing that privileges the destruction of the limits of chronology over the reconstruction of the *Erfahrung* as a form of communicable knowledge and experience. History therefore emerges as a potent epic force in *Reading in the Dark* in the narrator's reconstruction of the different

forms of experience that are transmitted to him in the stories and yarns he remembers hearing as a child. His is a redemptive effort, which necessarily implies a reconstruction. In this sense, the activity of Deane's narrator is at once akin to that of the Benjaminian storyteller and to the materialist historian of the "Theses on the Concept of History". Besides, Deane's narrator is essentially a collector, a key figure in Benjamin's philosophy, who picks up the disconnected shards of past experience and metaphorically tries to reconstruct their connections in order to make sense of them in the present.

Bearing that in mind, it is easy to see that Deane's self-conscious use of memory in *Reading in the Dark* is "more nearly akin to the inventive, shaping power of *poiesis* than it is to the mechanical retrieval of fixed content" (OLNEY, 1998, p. 68). Indeed, the emphasis in Deane's novel's is much more on the myriad possibilities that unfold in the narrator's investigation of his past than on settling the tensions that it raises at its outset, which then again reinforces the parallels between Deane's aesthetics and the roles of the storyteller and the materialist historian in Benjamin's philosophy. This in turn lends thematic and formal coherence to the narrator's Benjaminian rereading of his and his family's history against the grain. This process constantly brings to notice the presence of the past in the present in order to reaffirm the deep similarities between them. In fact, it is due to the inventive potential inherent to memory that there is, in *Reading in the Dark* "a powerful and significant confluence between art and the act of interpretation, so that the kind of power struggles inherent in all acts of saying and writing are interrogated" (HAND, 2011, p. 251). After all, if memory retrieves history on the one hand, the novel deliberately fictionalises it on the other.

Considering this, one can say that the narrative in *Reading in the Dark* addresses two major questions that permeate Benjaminian philosophy and still concern contemporary literature and history: "what is it to tell a story? What is it to tell history?" (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 2, *my translation*).<sup>30</sup> The narrator is the main storyteller in Deane's book and his is "merely one human story among many possible human stories" (HAND, 2011, p. 252-3). As such, his story is inconclusive per se, since he ultimately narrates the aesthetic materialisation of the *Erlebnis*, the immediate lived experience that reached him in the form of stories and rumours in the past and that he recollects

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<sup>30</sup> "o que é contar uma história? O que é contar a história?" (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 2)

from his present perspective. In his account, the *Erlebnis* becomes the *Erfahrung*, which due to its essentially narrative form and nature, is interpretable because it is first and foremost communicable. As is the case with Irish history, his story “is not fixed, finished or complete; there are always more stories to be told and more stories to be read” (HAND, 2011, 252-3) and, one could add, more stories to be saved from oblivion. In fact, this redemptive move reinforces the parallels between Deane’s novel and Benjamin’s philosophy since it reveals that, for them, both the narrative activity and its interpretation are an essentially aesthetic and historical process at the same time. This process involves a discursive elaboration of its questions and the establishment of similarities between what is and what has been, no matter how disconnected the past and the present seem to be on their surface level. In that sense, Deane’s narrator is similar to Benjamin’s historian, because he tries not to neglect any of the individual lived experiences that come to him. Instead, he collects them all and transforms them into pieces of communicable experience which can be remembered and investigated, and that can contain in themselves, as a monad or a ruin, the potential for its reader to reconstruct that history in the present from the perspective of those who have been ignored by historiography as science.

There is a major tension concerning the accuracy of the narrator’s memories at the heart of *Reading in the Dark*, mainly due to the fact that, in Deane’s novel, “remembering seems indissolubly coupled with forgetting” (CUBITT, 2007, p. 76). As Cubitt argues,

Past experience is not a tape that memory can rewind, tracking backwards through a continuous series of remembered events is always a somewhat speculative navigational labour, a quest for points of recognition across a territory of the more or less forgotten whose features we never succeed in bringing into stable focus (2007, p. 76).

Moreover, the mixture of truth and untruth embodied in the notion of rumour does not offer substantial contributions to remove speculativeness and instability either. The narrator’s “shards of memory frustrate the conciliations of organic closure, announcing the endlessness of a mourning which keeps on exhuming or unearthing what has been buried” (COMAY, 2000, p. 250). In fact, Deane’s compositional method in *Reading in the Dark* reveals both an attempt to recollect and to reconstruct history, at the same time that it is fictionalised as an intrinsic element of the novel’s raw material. Indeed,

*Reading in the Dark* constantly attests to the inseparability of memory and forgetting since it captures the tensions and contradictions of Irish history in the paradoxes that the text imposes on its reader. Indeed, Deane's novel demands that its readers make a serious effort to actively reconstruct the latent meanings of the *Erfahrung* that are communicated by Deane's narrator. To read in the dark in this sense is also to seek to find the metaphorical associations between the apparently disconnected fragments and ruins of the past that are saved by the protagonist's acts of remembrance, and also to try and interpret history not as a succession of facts but from the perspective of how these facts are constructed and represented.

Hence, Benjamin's idea of history as *Geschichte* is of great interest in an analysis of *Reading in the Dark*, especially because of its connections with his thoughts on memory, remembrance, and forgetting. Besides, this notion of history as *Geschichte* is also useful because of its connections with the idea of experience as *Erfahrung*, which allowed Benjamin to think of matters of language, literature, history, and politics from within the narrative *Medium* that is at their heart, and which is also the basis for the metaphorical associations upon which memory and remembrance operate, an idea that Benjamin derives straight from the uses of memory in Proust's *À La Recherche du Temps Perdu*. Indeed, as Comay explains, Benjamin understands the mechanisms of memory "as the ceaseless, 'rhapsodic' excavation of vestiges: 'ruins or torsos in a collector's gallery', fragments broken off from the chain of prior connections so as to stand unassimilated in the 'sober chambers' of retrospection" (2000, p. 250). To a great extent that is what one finds at work in *Reading in the Dark*: an excavation of fragments of memory that gradually allow the narrator to reconstruct his own version of his family's traumatic history and also to assign meaning to the past at the same time in order to try and use that past to make sense of their present.

That said, the next chapter will focus on the role of memory as a narrative procedure in *Reading in the Dark* and will discuss how the constant references to ghosts, shadows and family secrets are reinforced by the hesitant tone of the narrator's diction. The study of these elements in combination with the predominantly oral nature of the narrator's memories should demonstrate that they create an atmosphere of uncertainty that reverberates aesthetically and thematically throughout Deane's novel. Indeed, a distinct feature of *Reading in the Dark* is that the oral tradition of yarns and rumours irrupts like a strong epic force from within its narrative, thus encompassing the

whole of the historical experience that the book fictionalises and also drawing the reader's attention to the fact that this experience is only possible within the language that is its *Medium*.

#### 4. WHATEVER YOU SAY, SAY NOTHING: MEMORY, GHOSTS AND FAMILY SECRETS

‘On my oath, missis. The crown jewels are safe with me. No point in telling a secret, is there? What good’s a secret if too many people know it?’

(DEANE, 1996, p. 213)

The fictive strategy of *Reading in the Dark* is to make “both [the] repression [and the] awakening [of memory] the true subject of the plot” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 18). Indeed, the work of memory and remembrance is fundamental to Deane’s novel, and constitutes one of its most distinctive features. The range and scope of this fictive strategy allows for the distance between the past of lived experience and the present of narration to be maintained yet, at the same time, blurred. With that, the narrative technique in *Reading in the Dark*, with its reliance on first-person narration, and the retrospective and investigative look the narrator casts on his and his family’s lives, suggests that in Deane’s novel the way “meaning evolves is as important as meaning itself, thereby rendering a profound truth about history, that its “reality” is largely a matter of perspective, both emotional and rational” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 18). Perspective is actually a matter of concern in Deane’s novel, but Garratt’s idea here should be expanded in order that it may include not only the viewpoint of the individual who takes charge of the narration and selects what he will tell and what he will not, but also the perspective of the interpreter who will, like the Benjaminian historian, engage in an active reconstruction of the lived experience that is transmitted by its narratable form, the *Erfahrung*.

Indeed, meaning and interpretation are focal aspects of this novel, and its subordination of reality to the intimate perspective established by the memories of its narrator suggests so. This is because Deane’s fictive strategy brings the reader into contact with an already mediated account of what others have been through, in the sense that not all of the events the narrator recalls are necessarily his first-hand lived experiences. To put it differently, the account of the narrator is only possible because the “communicable experience” he transmits is already the result of his own interpretation of the traces of lived experience that have been derived from different sources as a boy and young man. In addition, the way Deane manipulates his fictional

material allows him to forge in the intricacies and paradoxes of his novel the conditions to negotiate the always complex connections between his protagonist as an individual and the community to which he belongs. In fact, the history represented in *Reading in the Dark* is “a kind of nightmare, waking from which necessitates reliving it through memory; only then can one arrive at some understanding of how present circumstances evolved” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 18). In other words, the only way to deal with this past is to try and understand how it contains the seeds of the present, on the one hand, and at the same time, how the present can illuminate the aspects of the past which have been left behind by causal explanations and hasty conclusions. Even so, to trace the changes and circumstances that culminated in the present conditions in which Deane’s characters find themselves is no guarantee that true, liberating knowledge will be attained.

Deane’s narrator remains unnamed throughout the novel and he inquires into the recondite past of his family to try and penetrate into the origins and depths of his and his family’s current torments. His inquiry is essentially made of “attempts to reconstruct crucial moments in [his family’s] history [that] define the central action of the novel” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 97). In order to make sense of these moments, the narrator has to redeem them from their chronological constraints and make sure that he highlights in the narratable experience that results from this process the similarities between the past of the lived experience and the present of remembrance. Due to that, telling and reading become two key aspects of *Reading in the Dark*, and the juxtaposition of personal memory and history ends up “rendering the past more as a dynamic process of questioning and interpreting difficult, complex, and even disconnected memories and stories, rather than as an event temporarily fixed in time” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 97). Deane’s narrator’s is a present look back on a past that is mysterious and puzzling to him mainly because it is shot through with loose ends whose connections are not readily apprehensible.

Moreover, by using memory and remembrance as its structural principles, *Reading in the Dark* poses a radical challenge to chronology in that his narrator’s account pulls forgotten past moments out of the continuum of time and reinscribes them into the present for closer scrutiny. This is particularly evident in the novel’s two temporal settings: “the late twentieth-century narrative present and a remembered or rediscovered past focusing on events during the War of Independence and the Irish Civil War, the period from 1919-1923” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 97). This marked distance

between what is narrated and the narrative act itself not only indicates the presence of a rift between past and present in *Reading in the Dark*, but also attests to the permanence of the former within the latter. What makes it possible, once again, is Deane's use of memory and remembrance as compositional techniques, not to mention the fact that, at the heart of the narrator's account, is the transmission of a Benjaminian *Erfahrung* that in both its aesthetic and historical dimensions brings the past and the present together by means of metaphorical associations. Indeed, the temporal distance between the past and the present becomes textually evident right in the first chapter of *Reading in the Dark*, when the narrator tells that he "loved [his mother] *then*. She was small and anxious, but without real fear" (DEANE, 1996, p. 5, *emphasis added*). His use of "then" here signals at a gap in time between what was and the discursive account of it, and suggests that his relationship with his mother will change throughout the novel.

In addition, the temporal distance between what the narrator hears or sees and what he retrieves from memory to retell creates a tension between remembrance and invention that permeates the novel and adds to the lingering uncertainty and open-endedness of his retrospective account. This tension can be better observed in "All of it? November 1954", when the narrator claims that "a choice, an election, was to be made between what actually happened and what I imagined, what I had heard, what I kept hearing" (DEANE, 1996, p. 182). His words here are not only a reflection on the fallibility of memory and its subjugation to the passage of time. More importantly, they show that his memories are not necessarily his, and that the distinction between remembering and inventing is not as clear as one might be willing to admit. Besides, his comment here is a statement of the distance between the lived experience and its mediated narrative form. The narrator's memories are in this sense very much akin to the Benjaminian idea of history as *Geschichte*, which, in its emphasis on the role of narrative for historical thought, encapsulates both the potential for redemption and conservation of history and the potential for invention of the story.

*Reading in the Dark* opens with "Stairs, February 1945", a vignette<sup>31</sup> in which only the protagonist and his mother appear. In it the narrator looks back to the moment in his childhood when he detects for the first time the presence of a shadow between his

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<sup>31</sup> Divergences about the name these chapters should have are few and far between. For the purposes of the present study, all the episodes, vignettes, etc. will be named chapters, simply because there is no particular need for quibbling over terminology.

mother and him. The opening dialogue takes place on the short staircase located inside their house, and in it his mother says that “there’s something there between us. A shadow. Don’t move” (DEANE, 1996, p. 5), much to the boy’s surprise and enthrallment. From the tenth step where he is standing, he hears her tell him, from the landing, to “go back down the stairs” (DEANE, 1996, p. 5) because there was “somebody unhappy” (DEANE, 1996, p. 5) there. Mystified, the boy then retreats one step, upon his mother’s command, despite his claims, as the narrator recalls, that he “could see no shadow” (DEANE, 1996, p. 5). His mother then tells the boy that the shadow will go away, which prompts him to question how she will know when it will be gone. The answer – “I’ll feel it gone. (...) It always does” (DEANE, 1996, p. 5) – is both evasive and elusive, and comes across more as an attempt to stop his questioning than to clarify his childish doubts.

Indeed, his mother’s tone in this passage is also a good example of the predominant tone of Deane’s prose throughout, which is largely imposed both by the nature of *Reading in the Dark*’s subject matter and the aesthetic project underlying the whole novel. Besides, the answer he gets from his visibly afflicted mother when he asks her if she had seen anything is also equivocal: “No, nothing, nothing at all. It’s just your old mother with her nerves. All imagination. There’s nothing there” (DEANE, 1996, p. 6). Her statement is only a half-answer to her son’s queries, and once again reinforces the elusiveness of a narrative language that has to handle the tension of being at once the aesthetic *Medium* of the novel as a fictional genre and also that in which the recollection of the past “as it was” may occur. In other words, his mother’s statement ultimately signals to the existing half-truths that set Deane’s novel going, and that the narrator will try to unveil as the plot develops and he attempts to actively reconstruct and interpret his family’s history from the fragments of stories he remembers hearing.

It must be clear by now that “Stairs, February 1945” is of paramount importance in setting the tone and the diction of *Reading in the Dark*. In this vignette, the overlapping of memory and erasure is established by the constant references to silence and secrecy that pervade the narration in it. Moreover, “Stairs, February 1945” contains the novel’s most recurrent motifs and images – the idea of silencing and secrecy, as well as the shadows and ghost-like appearances, for instance –, which will reappear under the most varied guises in Deane’s novel. This is evident not only in his mother’s distress, suggested by her frayed nerves, but also in the motifs of haunting in “I felt

someone behind me and turned to see a darkness leaving the window” (DEANE, 1996, p. 6). Indeed, the vagueness of “a darkness” hints at the presence of something, disembodied as a ghost is, which is felt in its effects but that is never given a full tangible form.

Furthermore, the haunting presence of a shadow that stands between the narrator and his mother in the opening dialogue carries strong metaphorical connotations of uneasiness and uncertainty, two other central motifs that Deane’s novel will explore throughout. The discomfort and indeterminacy of this atmosphere reverberate in the boy’s claiming that their house “was all cobweb tremours. No matter where I walked, it yielded before me and settled behind me” (DEANE, 1996, p. 6). The metaphor in this excerpt is unsettling, as it bespeaks the haunting presence of shadows and ghosts in the novel, and suggests that they make themselves felt in an apparently ordinary domestic milieu. As a result, the boy ends up immersed in a suffocating ambience generated by the ubiquity of ghostly presences made all the more disturbing by the claustrophobic setting of his “haunted” house. Indeed, excerpts like this reveal a microscopic attention to detail in Deane’s prose that has gone largely unnoticed by critics and commentators alike.

In addition, in describing his house as all cobweb tremours, the narrator imparts to the reader a peculiar perspective from which he unifies his subjectivity with the atmosphere forged by the setting in *Reading in the Dark*. At the same time, his description also hints at the web of mystery and secrecy that dominates the novel, and that will constitute a major source of torment to the narrator himself as he probes into their history and excavates the ruins of their past so as to make sense of them in the present. What is more, the analogy that sustains the metaphor of the house as all cobweb tremours embodies the sense of angst and uneasiness imbricated in the language of Deane’s novel, and introduces its general mood and scope. In other words, “Stairs, February 1945” lays out the main rhetorical devices and literary procedures used by Deane to forge the intricate web of deceit and revelation, of loyalty and betrayal, that thematically links the apparently random episodes that constitute the narrative fabric of his novel. All these notions are eventually redeemed in the *Erfahrung*, the narrated form of the character’s immediate lived experiences, which Deane’s narrator transmits to his reader while simultaneously demanding that he/she interpret this “communicable experience”, and all the paradoxes that it contains, in both fictional and historical terms.

Continuing with the close reading, it must be said that the diction of the opening sentence in *Reading in the Dark* is surgical, which will also prove to be a major feature of Deane's prose as a whole. The narrator states that "on the stairs, there was a clear, plain silence" (DEANE, 1996, p. 5), and in his description he offers a brief yet graphic account of the place where most of the events in this chapter will occur, and once again reinforces the general uneasy tone and mood of the novel. In fact, the clear, plain silence of the excerpt creates a stark contrast with the sombreness and complexity of the feelings that have tormented his mother and forced her into quietness, thus creating a paradox that will manifest itself in different forms thematically and structurally as the novel progresses. The unfolding of the plot gradually reveals that both his mother and his family were haunted, and the plain silence the narrator remembers seeing in the staircase is an ultimate indication that his family's history is fraught with events and facts which would be better off forgotten.

In the words of Hand, "central to *Reading in the Dark* is the slow uncovering of Eddie's story" (2011, p. 250) in that it is the key piece of the puzzle that the boy tries to solve throughout the novel. It is this gradual revelation of the details and secrets surrounding Eddie's story that gives room for the plot to thicken, and to some extent, makes Deane's novel read like a sort of Bogside whodunit. One might say that Eddie's story, recovered as it is by remembrance, is the clearest link between literature and history in Deane's fiction. Indeed, the stories that form the history of Eddie's disappearance encapsulate well the Benjaminian idea of history as *Geschichte*, in that they reveal an intimate connection between the personal/individual and historical/collective realms. Eddie's presence is all the more deeply felt and disturbing because of his physical absence. It is only because he is still remembered that he is still a haunting presence. His permanence is only possible within the memory of the characters, and, as a result of the potential for metaphorical associations that remembrance contains, Eddie's figure can draw the past and the present closer in the momentary instants when his story/history is (re)told and the indefiniteness about his final destiny is reaffirmed. Indeed, it is in Eddie's tale of betrayal and disappearance that history rears its ugly head and becomes an epic force that reinforces the juxtaposition between the individual and public spheres without naïvely subordinating one to the other in unmediated forms. As Garratt argues,

In this constant rehearsing of history, we feel the presence of Uncle Eddie throughout the story. A ghost who haunts his family, Eddie continually resurfaces in the thoughts of the grandfather who ordered Eddie's death on the false assumption that Eddie was an informer; in the memory of the narrator's father, who believes the rumor about his brother and lives with the shame of an informer in the family; and in the mind of the narrator's mother, who learns that it was her father who had Eddie killed, for something her first lover had done. Their bewildering and painful struggles, however they try to keep them to themselves, strike a chord of recognition with the narrator. The narrator methodically tests and amends the details of the versions he has uncovered, to sort out their often contradictory detail and to calibrate their emotional weight, both on the members of his family and on himself (2011, p. 106).

The narrator remembers the stairs in which the opening scene in the book takes place as being a "short staircase, fourteen steps in all, covered in lino *from which the original pattern had been polished away to the point where it had the look of a faint memory*" (DEANE, 1996, p. 5, *emphasis added*).<sup>32</sup> The subjectivity of the description implicit in "it had the look of" reveals the narrator's singular perception of his surroundings as a child. The peculiarity of his view dictates the personal tone of a narrative that finds in the remembrance of the past its strength and cogency. Also, the palimpsestic image of the staircase, whose original linoleum pattern had been eroded till it resembled a feeble memory, reinforces the hints at the different layers of meaning that will be excavated and removed by his acts of recollection. Indeed, the faint memories of his childhood unfold in myriad, at times contradictory, tales of secrecy, loyalty, betrayal, and haunting as the novel progresses, none of which can seem to find in his reality a definite objective correlative. However, like the Benjaminian historian, who has to reconstruct the latent connections between the past and the present from the fragments and ruins that he can collect, the narrator of *Reading in the Dark* has to (re)collect the stories of his past and show, in their inner contradictions, the profound connections and interdependence between the past that was forgotten and the present that tries to remember it.

The narrator's lyrical<sup>33</sup> account of his reality is also evident in "the turn of the stairs where the cathedral and the sky always hung in the window frame" (DEANE, 1996, p. 5). Here he subordinates the view from the window to his own visual paradigm

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<sup>32</sup> Another passage of palimpsestic tone is the following, from *Feet*, September 1948: "The lino itself was so polished that there were answering rednesses in it too, buried upside down under the surface" (DEANE, 1996, p. 13).

<sup>33</sup> This is a clear touch of the poet in the novel. His early volumes of poetry – *Gradual Wars* (1972), *Rumours* (1977), and *History Lessons* (1983) present a rather lyrical tone and diction.

in a rather uncommon and powerful turn of phrase. What this does in practical terms is to evince, from the beginning, that perspective will have a central role in the novel, which will become clearer later on in the analysis of the role that rumour as a narrative strategy plays in *Reading in the Dark*. In fact, there is even some humour in the first chapter, which arises from the discrepancies between his mother's more mature take on things, on the one hand, and the boy's puerile and partial understanding of the events that surrounds him on the other. Upon hearing his mother tell him that she did not want him to feel what and how she did – “it's bad enough me feeling it; I don't want you to as well” (DEANE, 1996, p. 5) – , the boy promptly replies that he did not “mind feeling it. *It's a bit like the smell of damp clothes, isn't it?*” (DEANE, 1996, p. 5, *emphasis added*). That the smell of damp clothes is the first image of badness that comes to the boy's mind only shows how naïve his perception of their reality and drama was back then. And it is his initial ignorance about their past that eventually makes him embark on his inquire into the secrets of his family. As the scene progresses, his mother laughs at his puerile apprehension of human affairs, and warns him not to “talk [himself] into believing it” (DEANE, 1996, p. 5), a remark that in the context of the book suggests that there was a good deal more to these shadows that his childish eye could meet.

Indeed, the image of the window frame can also be read as a hint at the limited personal/subjective perspective of the novel's first person narration, which in turn subordinates the narrator's account to the pitfalls and misunderstandings entailed by an inevitably partial apprehension of events and reality. With that, Deane's novel not only exhibits a textual self-awareness of problems of perspective and how they influence the telling, but also manages to drag the reader into the immediate experience of the tensions and conflicts of the Irish history. In other words, *Reading in the Dark* plunges the reader into a scenario of death, trauma, betrayal, and secrecy, and gets him to see it all with the eyes of an individual who is deeply immersed in a reality he can barely apprehend, but that affects his life in direct and terrifying ways.

Apart from that, *Reading in the Dark* is fraught with Gothic, turn-of-the-screw moments like “I heard the clock in the bedroom clicking and the wind breathing through the chimney” (DEANE, 1996, p. 6), which reinforce the idea of haunting in other parts of the novel. Indeed, this passage not only contains the citation of a classic horror trope, but also suggests that the passage of time is a crucial element in Deane's novel, since it establishes the necessary distancing from the past that enables memory to work.

Vignettes like “Haunted, December 1953”, and “Kate’s Story, October 1950” offer clear examples of that, and will be addressed later on in this study. For now, it suffices to say that these moments, in combination with the metaphors of torment that they engender and the indefinite trait of the ghost-like figures they encapsulate denote the lasting presence of a past that would be best repressed and locked away into the silent realms of the characters’ unconsciousness. This, in turn, creates in *Reading in the Dark* an air of concealment that dictates the pace and tone of the novel, while it also stresses its general tension between knowing and not knowing.

“We were haunted!” (DEANE, 1996, p. 6), says the boy, enraptured, after learning there was a shadow between his mother and him. “We had a ghost, even in the middle of the afternoon. I heard her moving upstairs” (DEANE, 1996, p. 6), he adds, and his childish excitement at the news only accentuates his initial ignorance of the actual origins of his family’s haunting. To a certain extent, this discrepancy between his understanding of “being haunted” and his mother’s creates the conflict which will also get him to look into their history more critically. In addition, the narrator’s unduly rapturous tone here emphasises the subtle yet powerful irony at the heart of the novel. This irony obtains its effects throughout the book largely from the narrator’s inglorious search for what lies behind his family’s secret. Finding this out does not necessarily restore a sense of order that was previously lost, so to speak, in that the tension between knowing and not knowing in the deepest sense is never resolved.

“Stairs, February 1945” concludes with the narrator remembering his mother weeping silently at the fireside. As he recalls, when he saw her that way he “went in and sat on the floor beside her and stared into the redness locked behind the bars of the range” (DEANE, 1996, p. 6). Much of the eloquence in this passage actually derives from the unspoken remarks exchanged between them, which also shows on the aesthetic level that Deane’s prose is elegantly economical when the content being narrated requires that for dramatic effect. The narrator’s wordless expression of sympathy towards her bereavement, of which he had little or no awareness by that time, hints at the unwritten rule to which both seemed to subscribe, and according to which silence about the family’s past should be kept. Besides, the image of the fireside with the redness of the flames drawing the boy’s rapt attention becomes, in the greater context of the novel, an extended metaphor for his mother’s emotional turmoil and his sense of bewilderment as his awareness of the sources of her distress is potentially heightened.

Indeed, that his mother evokes this image of fire burning in moments of great torment and suffering only reaffirms the passage's symbolic power. This becomes more evident in "Mother, May 1953," a vignette in which the boy, relatively more aware of the reasons behind his mother's emotional and mental distress, describes in greater detail, as far as his puerile perception allows him to, how afflicted she was by the ghosts of a past that, for him, she seemed unable to exorcise. "My mother moved as though there were pounds of pressure bearing down on her" (DEANE, 1996, p. 139), recalls the narrator, "and when she sat, it was as if the pressure reversed itself and began to build up inside her and feint at her mouth or her hands, making them twitch" (DEANE, 1996, p. 139). The way Deane uses similes for aesthetic effect here draws a thin line between her inner self and her external world so that these two apparently distinct realms overlap in virtually inseparable ways. This, in turn, suggests that her "becoming strange, becoming possessed" (DEANE, 1996, p. 141), which the boy back then did not want "anyone else outside the family to know or notice" (DEANE, 1996, p. 141) was actually rooted in the circumstances that dictated their isolation from one another. As the narrator remembers,

I knew now, or thought I knew, what it was, especially when I watched her eyes follow my father with such fear and pity that I wondered he didn't stop dead and realise there was something wrong, something she wanted to be forgiven for. I couldn't tell him if she didn't. I couldn't even let her know that I knew. It would make her more frightened, more depressed. I longed to find some way to give her release, but could think of nothing; every set of words that came to my mouth felt lethal. I would come in to find her at the turn of the stairs, looking out the lobby window, still haunted, but now with a real ghost crouched in the air around her. She would come down with me, her heart jackhammering, and her breath quick, to stand at the range and adjust the saucepans in which dinner simmered, her face in a rictus of crying, but without tears" (DEANE, 1996, p. 139).

This passage invites especial attention to textual detail because it contains several of the motifs from the first chapter of *Reading in the Dark*. These motifs are here revisited from a more mature perspective on the boy's part, and show that his mother was afflicted by a mysterious sense of guilty. Most of this scene takes place on the stairs, as does the scene in the opening vignette, which reinforces the idea that the house is indeed a key setting in Deane's novel. The difference however is that the boy reveals now some awareness of the reasons why his mother is haunted, which is suggested by his reference to "a real ghost crouched in the air around her". Moreover, the hesitancy embodied in "I

knew now, or thought I knew, what it was”, in a sentence in which two mutually excluding propositions exist, captures the uncertainty of memory as a source of knowledge and access to the truth, if any, that constitutes one of the main strengths of Deane’s novel. At the same time, the sentence also denounces that the narrator was back then still largely in the dark about what haunted his mother so grievously. At the same time, this ultimately reveals that the past will surrender no definite answers to the narrator’s queries. Indeed, one could wonder to what extent such an uncertainty results from the boy’s naïveté, on the one hand, or from the fallibility of the narrator’s present apprehension of his past via remembrance on the other. In other words, the narrator is not sufficiently distant from the past to be able to affirm anything about it categorically, which means that no ultimate truth concerning that past can actually be claimed. What is more, this passage is fundamentally structured on the motifs of silence and secrecy since it shows that the narrator as a boy could not tell his mother that he knew there was something wrong between her and his father which still needed expiating. At the same time, it shows that he could not tell his father if she could not do that herself either. A remark hung in the air between them, with none saying a thing, in a silent moment of great eloquence that reinforces the aesthetic and thematic concerns of Deane’s novel.

In “Mother, May 1953” the narrator recalls his mother’s habit of being “at the lobby window, looking out, whispering to herself, sometimes crying out an incoherent noise” (DEANE, 1996, p. 139) and remembers the occasion when he approached her only to hear “burning. It’s burning. All out there, burning” (DEANE, 1996, p. 139), which she repeated with tears in her eyes. Once again the image of something burning is revisited in Deane’s novel, and the idea of tormenting that it embodies is reinscribed in another context by means of metaphorical association. Besides, the incoherent noises uttered under her breath help to build up the atmosphere of secrecy and mystery that permeates the novel, for they create an image of silencing, incoherence, disconnectedness, and perplexity that set the tone for the novel’s other vignettes. In “Mother, May 1953,” the boy’s mother lays outside in the cold and refuses to come back inside in spite of her husband’s insistence. As she kept “staring beyond, her face shiny with tears” (DEANE, 1996, p. 139), the narrator recalls how he and his siblings would crowd at the door to observe their parents outside in the yard, having conversations that their children would not hear:

Everyone would awake, huddled at the back door, watching [mom and dad] in the yard: he with his raincoat over his pyjamas, she slippery in the light and dark, moving always towards the blackness beyond the range of the kitchen light. Then always, when he reached her down there near the yard wall, there was a murmuring and a sobbing, and his arm would black out her shoulders as it went round her. And they would come up towards us, she with her head bent, all of us retreating into the kitchen, out to the foot of the stairs in the hall, as he led her to the fold-out bed and persuaded her to lie down. I could see her shiver as the blankets were drawn over her and he came to shoo us up the stairs to bed, his face heavy and graven, the stubble visible on his cheeks.” (DEANE, 1996, p. 140).

The evocation of memories here is textually evident in phrases like “everyone would awake”, “his arm would black out her shoulders”, and “they would come up towards us”, which all bespeak repetition and reinforce the re-enactment of her suffering, as well as the frequency with which the scene would occur. Moreover, the murmuring and sobbing in this excerpt, together with the symbolic connotations that light and dark acquire in it engender another image of excruciation that add to how detached his mother progressively became from them. Another, more eloquent, account of his mother’s pain is in the following passage:

‘See that?’ she’d say. ‘The pain is terrible. The flame is you, and you are the flame. But there’s still a difference. That’s the pain. Burning.’

Then she would weep again. Sometimes she’d let me hold her hand as she cried. Sometimes she’d brush my hand away and sit rigid, with only the tears moving on her face until she was wet under the chin and the skin in the valley of her throat looked liquid (DEANE, 1996, p. 141).

The eloquence of the passage is produced mainly by the metaphors in his mother’s speech – “the flame *is* you” and “you *are* the flame.” By bringing together the two different conceptual realms of “you” and “flame”, Deane forges a new connection between them that translates with poignancy the suffering and distress of the protagonist’s mother. In addition, sentences like “then she would weep again” suggest both the retrieval of disturbing memories and the recurrence of these moments back in the narrator’s childhood. Once again, the permanence of the past in the present is reinforced, and with it the need for the narrator to highlight the similarities between them. It is in this way that the past can be seen not from the perspective of the facts themselves, but from the perspective of the meaning of these represented facts, which the narrator of *Reading in the Dark*, as well as the reader of Deane’s novel, is compelled to reconstruct and interpret through a metaphorical chain of associations. Besides that,

the fact that this scene is redolent of the closing paragraph of “Stairs, February 1945” insinuates that the relationship between the narrator and his mother will progressively become structured on unformulated remarks about their past. It also suggests that, in compositional terms, there is a profound formal and thematic link between the vignettes in Deane’s book, which escapes an initial, cursory reading. Indeed, a close reading of Deane’s text can reveal that its different episodes converge in the rationale of the novel to create the conditions for the story to open into endless possibilities in the darkness of the character’s history as it is retrieved by memory and remembrance that are central to the narrator’s account. Hence, even though the ultimate truth about their past “as it was” – that is, their immediate lived experience – is inaccessible, the metaphorical associations that can bring to notice the similarities between the past and the present are limitless.

In “Mother, May 1953”, the narrator remembers that his mother “was increasingly distant from everyone; slowly slipping out of our grasp, slick with hostility” (DEANE, 1996, p. 147), a passage that forecasts to great extents the scene in “Mother, November 1958”, when the narrator retrospectively laments the shattering of the filial love he used to have towards her, thus confirming the suggestion, at the beginning of the novel, that there would be a progressive change in their relationship as the story progressed.

Looking through the window, I could see her still swaying back and forth, and my heart went out to her even as *I wished I could love her in the old way again*. But I could only grieve for not being able to; and grieve the more that she could not love me like that any more either. (DEANE, 1996, p. 217, *emphasis added*)

In the same vignette, the narrator offers another poignant image of his mother’s wretchedness. He remembers that “her anger stayed in her eyes when she was speaking, but when she was silent an empty panic took its place” (DEANE, 1996, p. 147). He then adds that on that day he handed a golden iris to her in the kitchen with a promise that he would never say a word about what he knew, because that was all past now.<sup>34</sup> What the boy’s words, attitudes, and gestures suggest is that his mother’s distress is directly connected with the facts and events of Eddie’s death. The boy ascribes her distancing

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<sup>34</sup> ‘Don’t worry any more. I’ll never say a word. Don’t worry about it. It’s all past.’ (DEANE, 1996, p. 147)

from him to her apparent awareness that he knows she had been in love with McIlhenny, the real informer, for whom Eddie had been mistaken, and had been assassinated by his fellow IRA members as a consequence. Eddie was the brother of the boy's father, who in turn was not aware of his wife's connections with McIlhenny before marrying her. In the end, what happens in this chain of events is a complex negotiation of personal and political matters which is captured in the tensions between revelation and secrecy, as well as loyalty and betrayal. Indeed, "Deane's novel seems all the more terrible for being located in an apparently ordinary domestic setting" (PEACH, 2004, p. 49), and, in fact, it is in this apparently ordinary setting that complex individual, social, ideological and historical questions and dilemmas are negotiated. To put it differently, it is in this claustrophobic, domestic setting that the external elements of the historical narratives of Irish society and their troubled relationship with Britain become internal elements of *Reading in the Dark*. For all that, Deane's novel transcends the limit of individual consciousness and inserts its narrator at the heart of an ever-encroaching reality that demands negotiation, and from which there can be only partial or temporary refuge at best.

His mother's increasing self-inflicted isolation is also apparent in the following excerpt:

She took to the lobby window again. But she disliked anyone standing with her there to talk, *most especially me*. There she was with her ghosts. Now the haunting meant something new to me – *now I had become the shadow*. Everything bore down on her. She got smaller, more intense, her features sealed into no more than two or three expressions. In addition, she fell silent. My father persuaded her to let the doctor come and see her. 'Her nerves have got the better of her,' he announced and prescribed sedatives that she refused to take. 'Don't bring that fool near me again,' she told my father. (DEANE, 1996, p. 217-218, *emphasis added*)

That the boy had become a shadow to his mother confers a different meaning to the "something between us" from the opening scene of *Reading in the Dark*. By reading this passage in the light of the events of the novel, one realises that this had occurred because, in his progressive disclosure of their history, the boy had found out about a past of treachery and execution and revealed their guilt. Besides, as the boy digs into the roots of their silence and secrecy, he also reveals the existence of profound and complex links between each member of his family as an individual and the political unrest in his community, and these relations are potentially redeemed in his acts of remembrance.

Indeed, the most immediate political atmosphere and historical conflicts that Deane's novel captures in the contradictions of its language are those of the ever-tense colonial and postcolonial relations between Ireland and Britain, which are manifest not only in the remembrance of gun-battles on the street but also in the commemorations that acquire heightened political overtones in the novel.

One of the fundamental paradoxes in Deane's novel, though, is that the more the boy learns about his family's past, the more distant he grows from them, especially his mother, and he realises that the only way to remain loyal to either his mother or his father is to be disloyal to the other. That paradox becomes all the more evident if one considers that "stories, as acts of communication, are usually thought to connect people, not set up barriers between them" (HAND, 2011, p. 250-251). In other words, stories are believed to create a sense of community that brings individuals together with the creation of a shared tradition that is rooted in the oral transmission of knowledge born out of first-hand experience. Indeed, the way the various stories and yarns are arranged in *Reading in the Dark* creates an atmosphere in which revelation walks hand in hand with concealment. This brings Deane's narrator closer to the Benjaminian storyteller or chronicler, who never gives his telling a final closure, and also to the Benjaminian historian, who sees in the *Erfahrung* as the mediated form of the *Erlebnis* – the lived experience – the opportunity to save the past in the present and make sense of both of them. In that sense, Deane's novel demonstrates great self-consciousness about its status as fiction, as it leaves in its formal constitution a plethora of gaps for the readers to fill, just as the narrator has to do with the family history he tries to scrutinise in his memory. At the same time, *Reading in the Dark* plays with the narrative juxtapositions between story and history that are embodied in the Benjaminian idea of history as *Geschichte*.

Even though one can argue that the narrator's undertaking is guided by the premise that "there is a missing element whose discovery will banish unease and establish wholeness" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 130), the truth of the matter is that a triumphant conclusion in which the reader and narrator "should celebrate his discoveries and thus his maturity [is] not allowed to happen" (HAND, 2011, p. 250). This is so because the nature of the episodes that are narrated, as well as the narrative act itself, based as it is on the tension between remembering and forgetting, cannot allow for this conclusion to happen. With that said, one can also argue that the narrator takes out of the continuum of time a series of episodes of his family history which "certainly

[indicate] an interdependence between meaning and absence” (O’BRIEN, 2012, p. 130) that constitute a major structural and thematic *tour de force* in Deane’s novel. That is also of the essence for the Benjaminian historian, who is aware that the past can only be fully understood not as a history of the facts, as in the casuistic ideology of historicism and positivism, but instead as a narrative representation – a piece of experience as *Erfahrung* – that is derived from the immediate lived experiences which are not accessible or transmittable through language.

The emphasis *Reading in the Dark* lays on shadows and ghosts depicts “the past as a haunting, maddening presence in the lives of those whom it ensnares” (HARTE, 2014, p. 173). The portrait of the narrator’s mother as a distressful figure throughout the novel is the clearest evidence of the extent to which Deane’s characters are entrapped by the permanence of their traumatic past into their present. Also, the hesitant tone and irresolute nature of a literary discourse that is structured on memory and remembrance is the key technique used by Deane to create in *Reading in the Dark* a self-conscious and “sustained meditation on the very nature of history, one that dramatizes the problematic relationship between facts, representation, and truth in a community that has endured “repeated violations” (HARTE, 2014, p. 173). In many respects, one can even argue that Deane’s novel ultimately throws into question the opposition between “telling a story” and “telling history”, since the repeated historical and political violations that his family and community had been through during the War of Independence and Civil War are also encapsulated in the stories the narrator remembers hearing as a boy.

Indeed, in his analysis of trauma in *Reading in the Dark*, Garratt mentions that the narrator “pieces together what he knows, [and] consistently applies more questions. Snippets and shards of the past are measured by a persistent interrogative as he struggles between the actual and the imaginary” (2011, p. 110-111). In other words, Deane’s narrator attempts to derive an *Erfahrung* from his constant recollection and questioning of his and his family’s past lived experiences so as to highlight the ways in which their past affects their present, and at the same time to try to make the similarities between the past and the present communicable to the next generations. His task is inglorious in that his investigation has to be carried out on the grounds of remembrance, whose nature can be as deceptive and elusive as the stories he used to hear and that he constantly recollects throughout the novel. As Garratt says, in *Reading in the Dark*

“information as evidence is always met with query, because details are opaque, partial, and half-hidden, coming from people who would as soon forget than remember; the narrator must tease each detail and shape it” (2011, p. 110-111). In fact, in Deane’s novel the narrative detail is at times explored to the level of paradox, thus preserving the strength of the narrator’s account in its capacity to reveal and hide at the same time.<sup>35</sup>

Even though one could argue that, as the protagonist “hears more and more of the family story from different sources, he actively shapes a representative kind of narrative, keeping close to his sources” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 110-111), one must also admit that, however accurate this narrative can purport itself to be, it alone would not guarantee that the truth, whatever it could be, was in fact discovered and told. As the boy wonders in “Sergeant Burke, December 1957”, “how did I know I had been told the truth?” (DEANE, 1996, p. 206). In the broader context of Deane’s novel, the boy’s question is a meditation on the work of language, memory, and telling in the narration and/or forging of facts, and reinforces that, whatever truth there may be, it is ultimately inaccessible because the distance between the event and its discursive account has become too great. To put it differently, the question he asks contains in itself a tension between truth and invention that in the end undermines the possibility for “the one truth” to ever exist. The narrator is therefore ultimately unable to put a real end to it all, and in many ways, the boy’s question echoes the reader’s perplexity as he reads on.

Thus, the history of the narrator’s family “remains a raw entity, essentially unstable and shapeless, like all events of the past, waiting to be interpreted and ordered” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 110-111) in his act of remembrance. Much of this instability and shapelessness comes from the fact that Deane’s novel operates mostly on the realm of supposition and hearsay, which triggers in it a “process by which the past becomes structured as a narrative” (GARRATT, 2011, p. 110-111) and, as such, it is only accessible as a representation of what has come to pass. As Kennedy-Andrews argues, *Reading in the Dark* constitutes, in many respects, “a story about the process of writing a story [and history], about the suppressions, withholdings, silences and gaps that are part of the narrative process” (2006, p. 249). As such, Deane’s novel exhibits a heightened self-consciousness of its language as the *Medium* within which fiction,

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<sup>35</sup> In his essay on the storyteller, Benjamin comments on the capacity of the story to retain its strength with the passage of time to highlight the fundamental opposition between the story and the value of information, which he saw as ephemeral.

memory, experience (*Erfahrung*), and history (both as *Historie* and *Geschichte*) converge and coexist as fundamentally narrative acts.

*Reading in the Dark*'s final vignette is "After, July 1971". In it, the narrator's memories still revolve around conflict and secrecy, and the past as trauma and nightmare is conveyed mostly by a language in which the predominance of silence bespeaks loyalty. This notion is particularly evident in the episode's opening sentences, when the narrator recalls an unwritten "pact of silence" of his own creation with his mother: "I told no one else, not even Liam, what I knew and *hoped my mother would notice I was keeping a pact with her*. But she seemed to pay no attention" (DEANE, 1996, p. 228, *emphasis added*). This pact that the protagonist creates in his mind depends heavily on his mother's perception of it, even though she does not seem to pay attention to the boy's efforts to make it happen. This reinforces the imaginary nature of "their" agreement, and accentuates the irony sustained by the frustration of his expectations. Indeed, what becomes clear after all is that it is their shared knowledge of the family's past that tears them apart. In addition, the boy realises that the gulf between himself and his mother is growing wider and wider, which accentuates his grief and estrangement.

"She kept her lips compressed, looking more severe, more like her father with his Roman stoniness, as the years passed" (DEANE, 1996, p. 228), remembers the narrator, and her stolid impassiveness is explained a few lines down by his assumption that "*perhaps* the only way [she] could go on was by forgetting, forgetting" (DEANE, 1996, p. 228, *emphasis added*). His tone here is once again hesitant, but it is also slightly commiserating. Indeed, the uncertainty generated as a consequence echoes the epigraph of the novel – "the people were saying no two were e'er wed/but one had a sorrow that never was sad" –, which indicates both the impenetrability of someone's self and the consequent impossibility of one's ever truly knowing what lies within another person, since the relationship between one self and the other is necessarily mediated by language and discourse. In the same scene the narrator recalls that he would watch on the dates of the anniversaries he thought his parents would remember, mourn or celebrate in a year:

The beginning and end of her relationship with McIlhenny, the death of Eddie, the birth of Maeve, the disappearance of McIlhenny, marrying my father, Una's death, her mother's, her father's death, our births, Maeve's marriage. While my father, ignorant of McIlhenny, had some of these things and perhaps the feud, his parents' death, Ena's death – *they were more intertwined than he knew, more so than she had ever wanted.* (DEANE, 1996, p. 228, *emphasis added*)

It is in this excerpt from “After, July 1971” that the narrator exposes more overtly the sources of the traumas that have afflicted his family, especially his mother, throughout the years. Their history, the list shows, has been one of beginnings and endings, of conflicts and death, all shot through with a marked discrepancy between these events and each person's degree of awareness of the maze that connected them. In a certain sense, to suppress the memories of these events by silencing them constitutes a desperate attempt to ensure that things do not become any worse between those directly and indirectly involved in them. The idea suggested in the previous excerpt is also revisited in this passage:

Was nothing ever said, in all those years afterwards, as we grew up, as their marriage mutated slowly around the secrets that she kept in a nucleus within herself and that he sensed, even though he also thought he was free of the one secret he knew, since he had told us, false as it was? I would watch them together as they aged. She was less haunted, it seemed, than before; he was still anxious with the air of someone whose anxiety was never focused. *He knew something lay beyond him but he had no real wish to reach for it.* (DEANE, 1996, p. 228, *emphasis added*)

The narrator has the impression that his father did not have any real interest in uncovering what he somehow knew that lay beyond him, which in the end stands as another pithy account of the family's effort to disremember their past. Unlike the boy, who becomes a sort of detective in this family whodunit, his father here seems scarcely inclined to embark on such an inquiry. Indeed, if anything, his father wanted it all dead and buried, as the rest of the family did too. The narrator's account indicates that his father seemed to tacitly subscribe to the idea that to revisit their past would only bring more problems to everybody in the family, which the narrator's inquiry would prove to be the case. His father's inclination to overlook the presence of this traumatic past into their lives would then be the only way to exorcise the ghosts and shadows that had haunted the family members in different manners since Eddie's execution as an informer.

As a matter of fact, the boy's desire to sort out the puzzle of his family's history only "propels him on a painful journey out of ignorance and confusion [that] ultimately leaves him with more guilt and sadness than closure or release" (HARTE, 2014, p. 174). This is so because in his inquiry the narrator has learnt details of his family's history that, if ever revealed, could lay to rest the ghosts that had haunted his parents, on the one hand, but that could also tear the whole family apart on the other. After all, as O'Brien points out, the narrator's and his family's traumatic past of violence and betrayal is a ubiquitous "presence that can neither be fully retrieved nor effectively appeased. Its weight on the minds of the two generations of family members involved is all the more oppressive for their complicity in the formative events" (2012, p. 131). As a matter of fact, one of the narrator's last accounts of his mother shows how their past did remain an increasingly suffocating and nightmarish presence in their lives as time wore on: "her small figure at the turn of the stair; when I had left home, that was how I remembered her. Haunted, haunted. *Now that everything had become specific, it was all the more insubstantial*" (DEANE, 1996, p. 229, *emphasis added*). The mutual exclusion of "specific" and "insubstantial" in this passage suggests that there is a huge gap between the lived experiences themselves and the only way in which they can be shared and accessed, namely, through a retrospective look at their mediated form expressed in language, which can sustain different forms of reconstruction and interpretation.

Curiously enough, it was only after the narrator's mother was permanently silenced by a stroke that they could actually get closer to each other again. As he confesses in "After, July 1971",

*I felt it was almost a mercy when my mother suffered a stroke and lost the power of speech, just as the Troubles came in October 1968. I would look at her, sealed in her silence, and now she would smile slightly at me and very gently, almost imperceptibly, shake her head. I was to seal it all in too. Now we could love each other, at last, I imagined. (DEANE, 1996, p. 230, *emphasis added*)*

In a way, this passage is strangely ironic, in that the reconciliation the narrator seeks to obtain throughout the novel by scrutinising the family's history and trying to make it palatable and communicable is obtained by sheer circumstance. The stroke that physically silenced his mother has also put an end to his deep, inner-conflicts and questionings about whether or not he should tell her what he knew, or whether or not his

family's history should remain in the dark. With his mother permanently sealed in her silence, they were ironically enabled to somehow appease the presence of a past that could not be exorcised through retrospective examination. In terms of fictive strategy, to give the narrator's mother a stroke enables Deane to leave his novel "unended", in the sense that no open conversation between the narrator and his mother about their past and the events that culminated in Eddie's assassination ever occurs. Instead of presenting a final resolution to the conflict it creates, Deane's novel leaves the reader in the dark, with silence and cunning, and thus reaffirms the open-endedness of the history of a family plagued by shame and betrayal, and immersed in a broader context of half-truths, political unrest and historical conflict.

The last scene of Deane's novel takes place on the same staircase where the book begins. The events remembered here occur after his father's dying as a result of a second heart attack. As the narrator recalls,

*I went down the stairs to make tea. In the hallway, I heard a sigh and looked back to the lobby window. There was no shadow there. It must be my mother in her sleep, sighing, perhaps, for my father. It was her last sleep of the old world. By nine o'clock, curfew would be over. That evening we would take my father to the cathedral that hung in the stair window and she would climb to her bedroom in silence, pausing at the turn of the stairs to stare out at the spire under which, for that night, before the darkened altar, he so innocently lay (DEANE, 1996, p. 233).*

This excerpt not only reaffirms the apparently endless grieving that permeates the novel, but also bespeaks the complexities of the human heart, and the impossibility for one to ever really know what lies between two people. This is so because each individual is ultimately entrapped in the incommunicability of their own fragmented, immediate lived experience. By this time in *Reading in the Dark* the reader already knows that the protagonist's mother's silence was due to a stroke, and as such understands that it was more of an imposition than a self-imposed quietness. Nevertheless, the narrator chooses to emphasise the fact that on the occasion of his father's funeral, she climbed to her bedroom "in silence", and by doing so he rhetorically suggests that the ghosts which have haunted the family, especially her, still remain. For O'Brien, in the narrator's "imaginative impetus towards finality, his reading ends up in conflict with the darkness which the story's subjects have selected as the best place for them" (2012, p. 132). In other words, the narrator realises in the end that to retrieve the past that can illuminate

their present conditions is also to bother those who want to let the sleeping dogs of their history lie.

If anything, the ending of *Reading in the Dark* ultimately reaffirms the impossibility of the narrator's impetus towards finality, simply because of the secrecy, mystery, and ignorance that results from the character's constant reluctance throughout the novel to break the silence about their past. "In a sense, it is not surprising that *Reading in the Dark* ends where it began – on the haunted landing of the narrator's home" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 132). The narrator's investigation thus comes symbolically full circle, since his ambition to discover "the God's truth" (DEANE, 1996, p. 63) is not fulfilled in the end. The narrator's inquiry has only "changed himself, not the past, and not those whose ghosts he has raised" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 132). Indeed, rather than constituting a liberating endeavour, the "pursuit of connections whereby meaning and closure may be assigned has led the narrator to see his family as characters in a narrative of self-inflicted entrapment" (O'BRIEN, 2012, p. 132). That Deane's novel ends where and in the way it does not only reinforces the character's entrapment but also indicates that their grieving and trauma has not been quelled. If anything, "a new phase of history is intimated, new conditions in which speech may yet be possible for the narrator" (KENNEDY-ANDREWS, 2006, p. 249), even though this possibility is not guaranteed to put an end to his anguish.

Indeed, memory "always involves the deepest kind of emotional engagement" (OLNEY, 1998, p. 373), and the erring and evasive nature of remembrance implies fragmentation and obliteration, as it does happen in Deane's novel. This leaves gaps for imagination to complete, and makes room for a reconstruction of events on the basis of metaphorical associations that can establish analogies between the past that is remembered and the present of remembrance, thus reinforcing the idea that nothing that has ever happened should be lost for the Benjaminian historian. As the protagonist states in "My Father, June 1961", "I celebrated all the anniversaries (...) in my head, year after year, until, to my pleasure and surprise, they began to become confused and muddled, and I wondered at times had I dreamed it all" (DEANE, 1996, p. 225). In fact, this excerpt shows that the fragmented events of the plot of *Reading in the Dark* eventually sink the shadows and ghosts that torment the protagonist's family into "the life of the [narrator], in order to bring it out of him again" (BENJAMIN, 1968, p. 91-92). Once again, the communion between life and word in Deane's novel is restated,

and with it the transmission of an *Erfahrung* which can enable the reader to perceive the patterns of violence, barbarism, and struggle against colonial subjugation that have affected the Irish people as individuals and as a nation as well.

Therefore, irrespective of the ontological character of the narrator's memories, the urge to tell prevails, and so does the importance of telling and of reading critically the nuances and impacts of this telling. Of interest, then, is how Deane's novel uses personal memory to inscribe external events of Irish history and politics into its narrative fabric. In other words, what matters is to investigate how his novel self-consciously recreates a world of war and conflict into its fictional realm, as well as how it refuses to offer a final interpretation to the events it addresses and to the dilemmas that arise in the telling of its tale. Considering this, *Reading in the Dark* can be seen as a document of culture that is at the same time a document of barbarity,<sup>36</sup> because in its aesthetics of memory it incorporates the traumas and perplexity of the individual in the face of political and historical conflict. From this perspective, the shadows, ghosts, and secrecy that haunt the narrator's family and his house are "reminders of the legacy of violence and betrayal, both in this personal story and in Ireland's bleak present" (SMYTH, 1998, p. 133). Indeed, in Deane's novel, there are close connections between the narrator's memories and the stories and rumours that went round in his community. As Harte points out,

The community in question is that of working-class nationalist Derry – or Londonderry, to give the city its official name – in the decades after the Second World War, an era of unionist hegemony in Northern Ireland during which the sectarian tensions that erupted in civil violence in the late 1960s were incubated" (2014, p. 173).

The awareness of this strengthens the links established in *Reading in the Dark* between the individual and the public spheres, without necessarily subordinating or reducing the former to the latter. Instead, Deane's novel exhibits in its narrative based on fragments

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<sup>36</sup> Benjamin advances this idea in the Thesis VII, from "Theses on the Concept of History". Chris Turner, who translated "Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'", translates the phrase "ein Dokument der Kultur" into English as "document of culture", while Harry Zohn translates it as "document of civilization". Of interest in these differences in translation is to notice how Benjamin's use of the term is as comprehensive as it can be, which is perfectly coherent with idea of history as *Geschichte* that he puts forward in the text of the Theses.

of memory an intricate relationship between form and content that challenges the critic to look at its textual procedures in connection with the external events the novel aesthetically address. To put it differently, the study of the relationship between literature and history in *Reading in the Dark* cannot lose sight of the historical elements as part of the novel's fictive strategy, in the sense that the fragments of Irish history found in Deane's novel are not loose motifs with no particular bearing on the development of the plot as a whole. On the contrary, to take the Irish history into consideration is part and parcel of the analytical and critical interpretation of *Reading in the Dark* in that history here is an integral element of Deane's fiction, much as plot, characterisation, space, setting, and time all are.

Deane's use of memory as a literary procedure is what blurs rigid distinctions between the past and the present in *Reading in the Dark*, and opens the possibility for profound connections between them to be established in the instant moment of remembrance. Now that memory and narrative have been dealt with more closely, it is time to discuss the intersection between literature and history in Deane's novel, and how rumour plays a decisive role in making this connection possible.

## 5. 'THE STORY RAN LIKE THIS...': RUMOURS, STORIES, AND IRISH HISTORY

“So we were told; I wasn't so sure.”

(DEANE, 1996, p. 81)

Part of the hesitancy and irresolution of *Reading in the Dark* is produced by what could be loosely called a rumour effect. Deane's novel is shot through with stories and rumours about family feuds, supernatural events, and political assassinations that at the same time clarify and complicate the already labyrinthine history of secrecy and betrayal of the narrator's family. As a result, the confusion at the heart of *Reading in the Dark* arises from the coexistence, enabled by memory and remembrance, of different versions of the past that informs the characters' present, not to mention the tentative nature of these different narratives that never allow for a final settlement and definitive explanation of what they communicate. Nevertheless, one of these versions is favoured over the other, which then highlights the insolubility and suspense of the family history probed by the narrator. On a similar note, this irresolution is also manifest on the formal level, in the novel's deliberate appropriation of conventions from different narrative genres for its own aesthetic and thematic purposes.

Stories like those of the great exorcism, for example, described in “Haunted, December 1953”, illustrate the different ways in which *Reading in the Dark* incorporates elements from other genres to undermine the possibility for one single perspective to prevail in the end. In this vignette, the narrator remembers his brother Liam telling him the story of Father Browne, the diocesan exorcist whose hair became white in one night fighting the devil. The whole episode revolves around the haunting of the Grenaghan family, and the exorcism of the spirit that haunted them. “Haunted, December 1953” is a clear reinforcement of the Gothic atmosphere that is occasionally given prominence in *Reading in the Dark*. “*The story ran like this*, said Liam, as he explained to [the boy] why Grenaghan should be left alone” (DEANE, 1996, p. 163, *emphasis added*). The way the narrator begins his account – “the story ran like this” – hints at the sense of vagueness that is quintessential for the effectiveness of rumour as both a form of oral storytelling and, in the case of Deane's novel, as a narrative technique to reinforce the open-endedness of the plot. Besides, that Liam goes over why the Grenaghan family should be given the cold shoulder resonates in the complicated

relationship his own family has with their community throughout the novel. What follows is how the narrator remembers being told about the great exorcism:

*You've heard it before, he told me, the old yarn about the diocesan exorcist, Father Brownie (...) Christ knows what the devil looked like after a night with that maniac. Anyway, it was that family – the Grenaghans – it was all about. Years and years ago, Jimmy Grenaghan, your man's grandfather, had been in love with a woman called Claire Falkener. But he had been one of those hopelessly shy men and had never told her, even though she knew it. Everything was so strict then, at the turn of the century. (DEANE, 1996, p. 162, emphasis added)*

There are important elements to consider in this account. First of all, the emphasis on rumour as a potential site for stories is shown by the way he starts retelling this tale – “you've heard it before” –, which implies a complicity that is scarcely a guarantee of access to the full knowledge of any given set of events. Second, Liam assumes that his brother would have heard of the story before, which emphasises the oral aspect of the old yarn about Father Brownie. Besides, Liam's words hint at the efficiency with which stories like this sediment into a kind of truth that is reinforced by the eloquence or even ignorance of those who make such a story their own before they actually pass it on orally. Additionally, the old yarn of the exorcism revolves around the Grenaghan family, which is also affected by the haunting presence of betrayal and ostracism, much as the narrator's own family is. Moreover, Jimmy is initially portrayed as being too shy to tell Claire he loved her, but she knew about his loving towards her. The narrator states that “he never told her”, but that “she knew it” all the same, which is another example of the use of silent remarks in the narrative of Deane's novel, and the way the plot unfolds reveals that there are more parallels between the narrator's family and the Grenaghan's than appear at first sight. This, in turn, suggests both formal and thematic links between this episode and the other vignettes in the novel.

“Haunted, December 1953” reiterates, in its Gothic speculativeness and images, the importance of rumour to the plot of *Reading in the Dark*, since the events narrated in it are essentially based on a story of indeterminate origin that has been taken for granted by his community and passed on irrespective of its truth. Of greater interest, however, is the secular origin of this supernatural story. As the narrator remembers Liam telling him, Jimmy,

took to visiting Claire, becoming a kind of second father to the children, buying them presents, even going so far as to go with her now and then to the New

Year's pantomime, or out the country roads for a walk. People pulled in their breaths and hissed their gossip. But then, during the War, *it was reported that Danno Bredin's ship had gone down off the coast of Argentina*, all hands lost. Claire and Jimmy waited six months, then he moved into the house with her. They didn't marry; just lived together. The priest came down and gave off yards to her. She just listened and shut the door after him. Then the priest came back, Jimmy met him and put his arm across the doorway and wouldn't let him in. Told him it was none of his business. *A lot of the neighbours didn't speak to them.* (DEANE, 1996, p. 163, *emphasis added*)

What this excerpt shows in closer detail is that the haunting which culminated in that exorcism was in its inception fraught with and triggered by double-dealing: Claire Falkener left Danno Bredin, to whom she was married and who was away most of the time, to live with Jimmy Grenaghan. As rumour had it, Claire waited and waited for Jimmy Grenaghan to tell her he was in love, but he only watched her and never said anything. Besides, the reader is told that the Falkener family did not encourage Claire's involvement with him. They said Jimmy "walked in fear of his own shadow and his smile (...) was a smile at nothing; it was an apology for being in the world" (DEANE, 1996, p. 162), and added to their harsh and eloquent description of his ordinary existence that a cringer like Jimmy was not wanted in any family, in an expression of great derision towards his figure. Naturally, "in the heel of the hunt, Claire tired of waiting, was courted by another man, Danno Bredin, and married him" (DEANE, 1996, p. 162). Bredin, as opposed to Jimmy, was far from being a cringer or anything of the sort. He was in the Merchant Navy and was constantly away from home on duty. Claire and Bredin had three children, a boy and two girls.

As for Jimmy, he got up the nerve to leave his mammy and go off to England, looking for work, where he stayed for several years.<sup>37</sup> When Jimmy eventually came back to Derry, the local people said he had become a different man, and that he was no longer shy. He was a qualified tradesman now and found a job in the local foundry upon his return. As they said, "he even looked different, walked different, dressed well, talked with confidence. England had transformed him, done him a world of good" (DEANE, 1996, p. 163). To a great extent, there are strong postcolonial echoes here in that it is suggested that Jimmy was only able to flourish as a man because of his time in England, which then implies that such an achievement would never be possible in Ireland. Indeed, there are marked elements of Deane's work as a critic here as well, especially

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<sup>37</sup> "To everybody's surprise, Jimmy Grenaghan went off to England, looking for work. Nobody thought he could ever get up the nerve to buy a ticket and leave his mammy. But he did, and he stayed away for several years." (DEANE, 1996, p. 162)

his trenchant attempt to question the ontological status of the Irish stereotype found in his political pamphlets, notably “Civilians and Barbarians”, and in the preface to *Nationalism, Colonialism and Literature*.

With the reports of Bredin’s death, Jimmy and Claire went to live together and, as a consequence, they were ostracised by the other members of the community. The fact that Jimmy and Claire moved in together was seen as an ultimate immoral act of betrayal by their community, to the point that people would refuse to speak to the couple as a clear sign of objection to their decision. The narrator recalls Liam telling that “it was worse for her, living in the street all day long. He, at least, had his work to go to as foreman of the foundry. So not many could turn a word in his mouth there” (DEANE, 1996, p. 163). Of interest in this passage is the close connection between silencing and betrayal, which constitutes the central element that allows one to establish or reconstruct the profound connections between “Haunted, December 1953” and other vignettes more directly related to the history of the narrator’s family. Indeed, even though the story narrated here is considerably different from the account the narrator makes of his family, the profound thematic connections between them are strong and clear: they are stories about people haunted by silencing and betrayal.

After Jimmy and Claire had been living together for some time, Bredin returned, dispelling the rumours about his death in the ship wreckage. As the narrator recalls, Bredin “had been injured in the shipping disaster and had a permanent limp and looked sick. He had been pensioned off” (DEANE, 1996, p. 163). However, when Bredin returned, “limp and all, [and] the cuckoo, Jimmy, was in the nest” (DEANE, 1996, p. 163), Claire rejected her former husband under the claim that theirs had never been a marriage, blaming the failure of their relationship on Bredin’s being away from home most of the time. She also accused him of having had “relations with other women, [that] she knew it for a fact” (DEANE, 1996, p. 163), and bearing in mind that the narrative in the vignette does not give any evidence of Bredin’s involvement with other women, one can only think that Claire must have been deliberately pulling the wool over her ex-husband’s eyes all along.

In the face of these events, Bredin, instead of going to law for the house, “rented a bedroom in the house opposite them and sat in it, day after day, at the window, looking at his own house, his own children, across the way” (DEANE, 1996, p. 163). Indeed, Bredin’s mounting obsession with Jimmy and Claire is suggested and reinforced by the elliptic syntax of the excerpt, which not only recreates the rhythms of

oral speech as Liam tells the story, but also bespeaks a nagging compulsion on Bredin's part to mentally live a life that was no longer his own. In fact, the reader is told that, until the day Bredin died, he "spoke to no one. He never went out, just sat there, a face at the window, looking at what had become of his life" (DEANE, 1996, p. 163-164), in an image of silence and isolation that is redolent of the narrator's mother in several other passages of the novel, and that once again hint at the deep thematic connections between the events in this vignette and the haunted life of the narrator's parents:

*The street – Wellington Street it was – had an uneasy air about it. People didn't like passing between those two houses – even Claire, who started to leave the house by the back, down the lane and on to the Lecky Road so that she wouldn't see the shrivelling face of her husband watching her. Jimmy ignored him, even made a point of it by standing in the doorway smoking a cigarette after dinner and looking up and down the street, letting Bredin see he could not care less. (DEANE, 1996, p. 164, *emphasis added*).*

The extent to which Jimmy cared about Bredin's continuing presence at the window opposite their houses is as open to speculation as is the nature of this rumour itself, given that Jimmy's gestures of indifference may not necessarily be accompanied by nonchalance on his part. Besides, the uneasy air of Wellington Street, and the image of emotions and feelings resonating in the setting, are markedly reminiscent of other vignettes in their aesthetic and thematic potentialities, thus reaffirming the profound links between apparently disconnected parts of Deane's novel.

Bredin then falls ill, lingers for a while, and eventually dies. The narrator recalls that Bredin's relatives stoutly refused to tolerate Claire and her children's presence amongst the mourners in his funeral. As the hearse carrying Bredin's body moves off, his whole family "spat on the closed door of Claire and Jimmy's house [and] Bredin's mother stood outside the door and cursed all within it, long and bitter, for having ruined her son's life" (DEANE, 1996, p. 164). The whole funeral was a terrible business, the narrator remembers, and he says that in her anger, Bredin's mother vociferated that Jimmy and Claire,

*might never have luck in this life, nor peace in the next. That they be blackened with misery, seed, breed and generation from this day forward. That they might never have a house where they could live that was not cursed. That they might see his face every day and night until the end of their days; her voice weak and shrill, chanting its sentences in the air to the closed door, the curtained windows, the hole in the glass of one of them, until she was finally pulled away. (DEANE, 1996, p. 164).*

Her cursing, however, is merely a desperate discursive expression of her thirst for vengeance, uttered in a moment of emotional unrest. Her appeal to a supernatural power to inflict evil and misfortune on Jimmy and Claire is, at best, an innocuous wish that only serves to add fuel to the fire of rumour that permeates this story and that reverberates in other episodes of the novel. As such, it does not take too long to produce its effects. The narrator remembers Liam telling him that “all was quiet for a while. But then the neighbours said they began to hear strange noises coming from the house, like thunder rolling and rattling” (DEANE, 1996, p. 164). Indeed, the suspense created by the contrast between quietness and the presence of strange noises escalates in the following passage as the air of uneasiness is intensified:

The children cried. They said they couldn't open the front door to go out at times, because it felt like someone was holding it shut. Claire aged, and always looked frightened. She went to the priest, but he said he could do nothing for her until she left Jimmy. Then Jimmy himself went to the house one day from work. He had been telling people they were trying to sell it, although everyone knew it couldn't be sold. Who would want it? (DEANE, 1996, p. 164).

This scene paints an image of incarceration and massive suffering that not only marks a critical point in the narration of Jimmy and Claire's story, thus preparing the reader for the outcome of the yarn, but also contains an air of mystery and consequent sense of dubiety that haunts the narrator's memories and dictates the pace of the narrative of his and his family's history too. The effects of this haunting on Claire's body are visible, just as his mother's body shows the physical manifestations of her own haunted existence. Besides, the condition that the priest imposes on Claire to help her works as constant reminder of the nature of her haunting.

Sometime later, Jimmy and Claire were killed under mysterious circumstances, which thereby perpetuated the rumours<sup>38</sup> that their families were cursed. As the narrator remembers hearing from Liam, Jimmy had been at the front door as usual,

smoking a cigarette and staring at the blank window of the house opposite where Bredin had lived. *It was said that*, as he flicked the cigarette into the

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<sup>38</sup> *People said* no one from those families should ever get married. They should be allowed to die out. That was the only way to appease the ghost. Even if they didn't marry, those that remained would always have the presence in their houses. They should emigrate. They boys should become monks, the girls nuns. Anything to stop the revenge. Anything. (DEANE, 1996, p. 165, *emphasis added*).

gutter and turned to go in, he hesitated and shouted something – a curse, Bredin’s name, something like that – at the blank window. Then he went in. Next morning *he was found* at the foot of the stairs, his neck broken. The police said it was an accident. Six months later, Claire died in her bed, a look of terror on her face, but not a mark on her body. (DEANE, 1996, p. 165, *emphasis added*).

Suspense is created in this excerpt by the short sentences that are used to describe the last moments of Jimmy and Claire, as well as by the gap left between his going in and his being found dead, with his neck broken. The emphasis on what happened, and not exactly on when and how it did, reinforce the suggestion that an event of supernatural proportions has occurred, and which the police could only explain on the grounds of circumstances or chance by saying that it had been an accident. Besides, the syntax of the passage highlights the indeterminacy of who saw the couple dead, thus presenting the fact and at the same time withholding a thorough explanation to it. This resulting undecidedness is aggravated by the mixture of truth and untruth inherent to rumour, and that the passive structure of the phrase “it was said” captures in its indeterminacy. At the end of this vignette, the narrator recalls his brother concluding the story with “if you believe all that shite” (DEANE, 1996, p. 165), thus leaving the old yarn about the exorcism open to conjecture, since Liam’s words imply that no concrete evidence of what really happened can ever be provided in this case.

Of particular relevance, though, is that the torments of Jimmy and Claire, and supposedly of all their descendants in “Haunted, December 1953” are closely associated with betrayal and misunderstanding, which provides the strongest thematic link between this episode and the other parts of the novel more directly related to his family’s past. This vignette has close connections with “Eddie, November 1947”, for example, in which the narrator remembers Dan, Tom, and John, his uncles on his mother’s side, dropping by to help his father fix the boiler which had burst that winter. Indeed, “Eddie, November 1947” is the first episode in which Eddie’s name is mentioned, and also when the circumstances of his disappearance are casually interrogated. The narrator recalls that, as his uncles worked,

they talked, *telling story upon story, and I knelt on a chair at the table, rocking it back and forth, listening*. They had stories of gamblers, drinkers, hard men, con men, champion bricklayers, boxing matches, footballers, policemen, priests, hauntings, exorcisms, political killings. There were great events they returned to over and over, like the night of the big shoot-out at the distillery between the

IRA and the police, when Uncle Eddie disappeared. That was in April, 1922. (DEANE, 1996, p. 9, *emphasis added*)

The narrator also highlights that his uncles would dwell on the story of Eddie's disappearance, making random speculations about his whereabouts, wondering whether he had left for Chicago, Melbourne, or had been killed in the shoot-out at the distillery,<sup>39</sup> described in "Fire, June 1949". Irrespective of whether Eddie had left Ireland or been killed in that shoot-out, "certainly he had never returned, although [the boy's] father would not speak of it at all" (DEANE, 1996, p. 9). His father's silence about Eddie's disappearance is trenchant, and only reinforces the suspense around the event upon which the conflict of *Reading in the Dark* is centred: the uncovering of the circumstances that led to Eddie's execution as an informer by the IRA members during the Troubles of the Anglo-Irish War of Independence.

The narrator recalls his uncles would insist on this story for a while, "as if waiting for [his father] to respond or intervene to say something decisive. But he never did" (DEANE, 1996, p. 9-10), much to the boy's frustration and disappointment. As the narrator recalls, his father, at the mention of Eddie's potential whereabouts, would "either get up and go out to get some coal, or else he'd turn the conversation as fast as he could" (DEANE, 1996, p. 9-10), in an obvious attempt to dodge this discussion. Indeed, that his father would not elicit the answers the boy's uncles tried to obtain ruins the narrator's expectations of having access to his father's version of Eddie's story. Moreover, the narrator's father is reluctant to tell what he knows about the circumstances of Eddie's death, which not only reveals that this is a painful episode in his life, but also anticipates the withholding of a decisive or definite closure to the family's tale of haunting and grieving at the end of the novel.

As the narrator recalls, "I wanted him to make the story his own and cut in on their talk. But he always took a back seat in the conversation, especially on that topic" (DEANE, 1996, p. 10). His father's silence is of relevance not only because it helps to keep the mystery about Eddie's disappearance unsolved, but also because it suggests the seriousness of the issues surrounding his brother's death. Eddie's involvement with the IRA is mentioned in passing in this episode, and this hints at the potentially political

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<sup>39</sup> He had been seen years later in Chicago, said one.

In Melbourne, said another.

No, said Dan, he had died in the shoot-out, falling into the exploding vats of whiskey when the roof collapsed. (DEANE, 1996, p. 9)

implications of Eddie's disappearance that will become more explicit as the novel progresses.

It is in "Lundy Burns, December 1952" that the plot and circumstances of Eddie's death are unveiled to the boy by his grandfather. "It was the eighteenth of December" (DEANE, 1996, p. 124), the narrator recalls, and the "Lundy (...) would soon be burning in effigy from the stone pillar above the city walls, on the hill opposite" (DEANE, 1996, p. 124). Indeed, the whole vignette is just another instance of how the troubled historical relationship between Ireland and Britain emerges within the context of other stories and personal histories in *Reading in the Dark*. These historical tensions are brought to notice through the narrator's recollections, which shows that the Benjaminian idea of memory as a quintessentially epic faculty is fully at work within Deane's novel. Indeed, it is due to their close connections with representation that memory and remembrance create the conditions for metaphorical juxtapositions of facts and stories that initially do not belong together, but that, when reconstructed from this perspective, reveal profound associations. As the narrator recalls,

The pillar was topped by a statue of Governor Walker, the defender of the city in the siege of 1689; Lundy, the traitor, swung always on the hero's pillar, a hanged giant, exploding in flame to the roll of drums from the massed bands below, out of sight behind the walls, although their banners poked up and fluttered in the stone-wet dark. We would watch for the moment when Lundy's crotch exploded in a burst of rockets that streaked away in several directions at once. Then the flames climbed on him with sudden avarice. Christmas felt close from then. (DEANE, 1996, p. 124-125).

The scene described in this passage is the annual celebration of Londonderry's Lundy's Day, when the treachery and cowardice of Robert Lundy is commemorated by the Apprentice Boys of Derry with the burning of Lundy's in effigy. The story goes that Robert Lundy was the commander of Protestant troops "who tried to open the gates of the city to the Catholic enemy" (DEANE, 1996, p. 33) during the Siege of Londonderry between April and July, 1689, when Jacobite forces besieged the city and met with the resistance of the Williamite forces that fought to defend that Protestant stronghold. The siege was officially over when the Royal Navy intervened and managed to deliver large amounts of food to the starving Protestant forces. Lundy, the traitor, exposed the inhabitants of the city, with his act of treason, to a 105-day ordeal that became over time "a central part of the unionist folklore" (CONNOLLY, 2002, p. 150), thus fuelling the

already heated debates and disputes between Catholics and Protestants, and the political ideologies they subscribe to, thus complicating their relationship even further.

Another explicit reference in *Reading in the Dark* to the everlasting rift between unionists and nationalists fuelled by the outcome of the Williamite Wars appears in “Fire, June 1949”, when the narrator recalls that Derry,

was a city of bonfires. The Protestants had more than we had. They had the twelfth of July, when they celebrated the triumph of Protestant Armies at the Battle of Boyne in 1690; then they had the twelfth of August when they celebrated the liberation of the city from a besieging Catholic army in 1689; then they had the burning of Lundy’s effigy on the eighteenth of December. (...) We had only the fifteenth of August bonfires; it was a church festival but we made it into a political one as well, to answer the fires of the twelfth. *But our celebrations were not official, like the Protestant ones* (DEANE, 1996, p. 33, *emphasis added*).

The unofficial status of the Catholic celebrations that is suggested by this excerpt accentuates their relegation to second-class citizenship in the years prior to the outbreak of the Troubles (1968-1998) in Northern Ireland. Besides, that a church festival was made into a political one, as the narrator mentions, reinforces the highly politically charged nature of the sectarianism that is incorporated into Deane’s fiction through the personal memories of the protagonist. Indeed, the narrator’s account, structured on his remembrance as it is, allows for both himself and the reader to explore the deep relationships between the past and the present, which a casuistic view of history as the succession of events chronologically organised would not permit. To put it differently, the account provided by Deane’s narrator is similar to the method the Benjaminian historian uses to investigate the connections between the past and the present. In both cases, they try to reconstruct, in their examination of the fragments of the lived experience which survive in the mediated form of the *Erfahrung*, the intimate relationship of facts, events, and lived experiences that at first glance do not seem to have any obvious connection, but that hold the potential for deep analogies and metaphorical associations..

Curiously enough, and importantly for the aesthetic purposes of Deane’s novel, hardly anything is actually known about Lundy’s filiation, and much of his history, especially that of his escape from Derry in the face of danger, is shrouded in mystery and myth. Indeed, “modern accounts suggest that he was at worst a faint-hearted, and possibly only realistic, in his assessment of Derry’s prospects” (CONNOLLY, 2002, p.

346), even though this has not sufficed to dispel the contradicting stories concerning his whereabouts. However, as Connolly explains, what is known for sure is that the name “Lundy” “survives in unionist rhetoric as a synonym for ‘traitor’” (2002, p. 346) and, not surprisingly, still constitutes today an ultimate insult in the Northern Irish context.

That the boy is told about the motivations behind Eddie’s assassination as the effigy of Lundy, the traitor, burns outside, creates a powerful symbolic connection between them, in that the idea of betrayal brings Deane’s fictional character and the historical character of Lundy analogously together, in another episode where history emerges out of the fictional narrative in *Reading in the Dark* as an epic force. As the narrator recalls his grandfather’s story,

Eddie was dead, he told me as the drums rolled and rolled again. He had been executed as an informer. An informer. And I had thought that Eddie had got away. But my father knew; that’s what he knew. That his brother was an informer. Did he know Eddie was dead, that he had been executed? There was a soft swish of rockets and a far-off shout. You’re going to tell me, I said inwardly, addressing my absent father, you’re going to tell me, after all these years, and I know already. Yes. All right. But why is my mother so upset? She knew. And she knew my father knew. He must have told her. What’s so new and terrible in here? Now I know my father’s secret, but what’s my mother’s? What has it to do with my father’s? Grandfather lay back for a moment. He wasn’t going to confess to any damn priest, he said. But he’d told my mother. And now he’d tell me. For she would never tell my father or me, and it had to be told. He wished he could tell my father the whole story. What story? I was standing, almost shouting at him. What story? He shut his eyes and he told me, told me. He, Grandfather, had ordered the execution. But he was wrong. Eddie had been set up. He had not been an informer at all. He told me who the real informer was. (DEANE, 1996, p. 126).

Eddie, the narrator’s uncle, whose mysterious disappearance had been the subject of a good deal of conjecture, had been executed as an informer. The silence of the narrator’s father on the subject is then shown to come from the shame of having such a despicable type of person in the family. Once again, history emerges in the fictional narrative of *Reading in the Dark*, since throughout the years, informers played a decisive role in suffocating Irish upsurges by providing the British intelligentsia with “secret” information to combat the rebels, thus acquiring a marred reputation in Irish society. In other words, the informer embodies high treason, and to have one in the family was – and to a certain extent still is – a huge source of embarrassment in Ireland. However, what the boy’s father does not know is that his brother had been set up and that he had never been an informer. His grandfather’s words are fraught with guilt and shame, and

his profane confession at once clarifies and complicates the chain of events of which his grandson can only have a second-hand experience in the end.

In “Fire, June 1949” the narrator recalls the distillery shoot-out during which many people thought his uncle Eddie had been killed. As he remembers,

We were told never to play in the park at night, for Daddy Watt’s ghost haunted it, looking for revenge for the distillery fire that had ruined him. *Those who saw him said* he was just a black shape that moved like a shadow around the park, but that the shape had a mouth that opened and showed a red fire raging within. ... Sometimes when passing [the ruins of the distillery], I would hear the terrified squealing of pigs from the slaughterhouse. They sounded so human I imagined they were going to break into words, screaming for mercy. And the noise would echo in the hollow distillery, wailing through the collapsed floors, clinging to the blackened brick inside. *I had heard* that people ran from their houses as the shooting started and the police cordon tightened. The crowd in the street, at the top of the Bogside, started singing rebel songs, but the police fired over their heads and the crowd scattered. (DEANE, 1996, p. 35, *emphasis added*)

As he retells the rumours about Daddy Watt’s ghost, which was said to haunt the ruins of the distillery, the narrator amalgamates the shadowy atmosphere of that place – reinforced as it is by the effects of rumour as a form of passing on information and, in the case of Deane’s novel, as a narrative technique – and the shadowy presence of the past in his parents’ lives as both a vestige and a threatening influence that must be silenced. This interpretation is reinforced not only because of the essentially metaphorical associations that his narrative structured on memories enables, but also by the revelation of the links between the ruined distillery and the shooting in which Uncle Eddie was believed to have been killed. Indeed, the metaphorical associations that this excerpt – and in fact the whole “Fire, June 1949” – invokes heighten, once again, the political overtones of the narrator’s account. This is so because the references to the shooting and to the singing of rebel songs help to place the events remembered by the narrator around 1921/1922, which evokes the trauma of the Troubles caused by the Anglo-Irish War of Independence and the Civil War. “The IRA gunmen, on the roof or at the top-floor windows [of the distillery], fired single shots, each one like a match flare against the sky. They were outgunned, surrounded, lost” (DEANE, 1996, p. 36), the narrator recalls. The account that follows is a description of how an explosion shook the building and set it afire, as the culmination of the riotous events being addressed.

The narrator describes the distillery in ruins as “a burnt space in the heart of the neighbourhood” (DEANE, 1996, p. 36), which signals to the existence of an open

wound, a scar that ties the landscape into the narrative and ultimately makes that landmark resonate with the unsettled issues haunting his family. Here the political and historical sources of their trauma are made more explicit. The metaphor that is created once again fuses the private and the public realms, in such a way that the former echoes in the latter and vice-versa. Indeed, here Deane's novel reinforces one more time the relationship between the individual consciousness and the outer world by drawing the reader's attention to the violent and barbarous elements that validate such an association. Besides, the narrator recalls that he would hear the terrified squealing of pigs and that he had heard about these events, which underlines the predominantly oral aspect of his experiences: they are largely constituted by the stories he (over)hears and/or is told, and which, as such, are subject to alterations in the telling. To put it differently, what the narrator ultimately transmits is not a set of first-hand experiences that Benjaminian would call *Erlebnis*. Instead, Deane's protagonist narrates a mediated form of lived experience, in Benjaminian terms an *Erfahrung*, which, since it is possible only in its *Medium*, that is, the language in which it is narrated, can sustain different interpretations and bring to notice the deepest similarities between the represented version of the past that is narrated and the present in which the narration takes place.

But it is in "Father, February 1953" that the boy's father tells him and Liam about what he thought was the true story about Eddie's disappearance. His father said that Eddie had never been killed in the distillery shoot-out, as Uncle Dan had implied in the conversation in "Eddie, November 1947". Eddie, the boy's father says, "was an informer. His own people killed him" (DEANE, 1996, p. 133). As the narrator recalls his father's reactions upon revealing to his sons that secret he had kept for years,

He had said it, and felt calm as death. Liam said nothing. The sentence disappeared into the church, then reappeared inside my head. We had to say something. Liam asked what happened then, if he wasn't killed? I could have embraced him for asking but I wanted to stop him too. For once, I knew more than he did. Than either of them did. It was like being a father to both of them, knowing more. *I looked straight in my father's face, and it was hard to see him squint with the effort of telling us his heavy, untrue story.* I wanted to touch his cheek with my hand to relax the muscle that appeared on it and touch the greying bristles that were visible in the curious light. His chin was down as though he were tucking a violin under it (DEANE, 1996, p. 133, *emphasis added*).

The perplexity of the narrator in this scene is only matched by the situational irony that arises from his father being blithely unaware that the story he was painfully telling was

not really true. That his son knows more than he does creates a situation in which this irony is emphasised, at the same time that it exposes the half-truths that sustain the central conflict of the novel and allows for history to be incorporated into the aesthetic realm of Deane's fictional narrative. In fact, the whole vignette raises in the reader the expectations that the truth about Eddie's story will eventually be revealed, and that the narrator's father will finally make Eddie's story his own as the boy so eagerly wished in "Eddie, November 1947". However, this expectation is raised only to be cruelly frustrated, since his father's painful revelation does not let out any secrets or information that finally dispel the rumours about Uncle Eddie's disappearance. Indeed, the impact of passages like that from "Father, February 1953" ultimately reinforces the idea that, rather than exemplary or accessory, history is in Deane's novel an important compositional element, an external element that is incorporated into the immanence of the narrative in the way the novelist manipulates his literary language and discourse. To put it differently, the tensions, disputes and conflicts of Irish history, as well as the struggle of the individual to negotiate these tensions, are inscribed in the content of *Reading in the Dark*, as much as they are in its linguistic structure. This idea becomes more evident in the narrator's description of Eddie's assassination.

Eddie must have known he was in trouble. He had known more than anyone else who was directly involved. He had somehow got away. Who else could have told the police? My grandfather? One of the senior men? Impossible. Had Eddie told anyone else? No. They must all have had their alibis, their confidence, their suspicions. Did they beat him? Tie him up? Burn him with cigarettes? Keep hitting him on the head with a limp, heavy book? That was a way of banging someone around but keeping him conscious. Was that one of the books I had seen on those shelves? Even so, Eddie couldn't have confessed, not when he was innocent and not when he knew that someone else, *maybe* one of his interrogators, was the real informer. So they took him out of the farmhouse and they moved across the countryside to Grianan, reaching it when dark had fallen. They put him in the secret passage inside the walls, rolled the stone across the entrance and sat there on the grass floor, smoking and discussing what they would do. Then, *maybe*, Grandfather took out a revolver and handed it to Larry and told him to go in and do it. And Larry crawled down the passageway to the space where Eddie sat on the wishing-chair, and he hunkered before Eddie and he looked at him and, *maybe*, said something, *maybe*, told him to say his prayers and then he shot him, several times, or *maybe* just once, and the fort boomed as though it were hollow. How did the others hear it, sitting or standing out there on the grassy floor of the fort? *Maybe* they heard Eddie's voice before the shot. Did they leave his body there overnight? Did Larry make him kneel and shoot him in the brainstem from behind? Did Larry tell him it was all right, he could go now and let him go on ahead and then shoot Eddie as he bent down to crawl out the passage? *No one would ever know*

because that was the night Larry met the devil-woman and stopped talking (DEANE, 1996, p. 185, *emphasis added*).

The highly inquisitive and reticent tone of the narrator's account in this scene not only bespeaks perplexity, but also indicates the impossibility of ever dispelling the mystery surrounding the circumstances of Eddie's death. Indeed, the narrative tension in this excerpt is increasingly heightened by way the narrator undermines the certainty of his own propositions, and also by how his account culminates in the conclusion that no one would ever know what had truly happened to Eddie that night. As the narrator remembers, Larry, Eddie's assassin and the only one who could speak the 'truth' about how the narrator's uncle was killed, was incapacitated to do so after having allegedly met a devil-woman who robbed him of his ability to speak, thus rendering Larry's immediate experience of executing Eddie incommunicable. This is the version of Larry's story that the narrator remembers hearing from Crazy Joe:

'So, he's on his way home, swinging along quite happily, in the last evening of his bachelorhood, the embers of his chastity finally beginning to die down. There's a woman on the road ahead him. She turns round at the noise of his steps; she's dawdling along and gives him a smile that puts the heart across him, for she's the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. She asks if he would walk into town with her for she's afraid of the dark. In ten or twenty yards, she's linked his arm and in half a mile, after pressing against him and sweet-talking him, they're in a field, and she's lying under him, and he's pulling at his shirt and trousers, and she's in the black grass pulling him down when – wham! She's gone!'

'How do you mean, gone?'

'Gone, for God's sake, and he was left like a man doing press-ups and the smell under him was like burnt toffee and there was smoke around his crotch. Gone' (DEANE, 1996, p. 87)

Indeed, Crazy Joe's description of Larry's alleged encounter with the devil represents another turn-of-the-screw moment into Deane's novel, and the outcome of this meeting silenced its victim, the one who lived through that immediate experience, due to the trauma it provokes. At the same time, it guarantees that history becomes intertwined with myth and folklore in such a way that an ultimate account of it is rendered impossible.

The same motif of silence and incommunicability is reinscribed in "Katie's Story, October 1950", when the narrator remembers his aunt Katie telling him about Brigid, who, after going through a series of reportedly supernatural experiences while looking after the siblings Francis and Frances, went completely strange in the head and

stopped talking altogether. Kate tells him that “people used to bless themselves when [Brigid] appeared and hurry away. Until the day she died she never spoke again, would never leave her room, would never have a mirror near her” (DEANE, 1996, p. 70). Indeed, the narrator’s account of Brigid’s situation shows that she was sealed in her silence just as his mother was, first metaphorically and then literally due to the stroke that impaired her speaking capacities. What is more, the way Brigid is described can also be read, in the context of Deane’s novel, as an extended metaphor for the mystery and secrecy which make fiction and history coeval, thus giving *Reading in the Dark* its coherence and strength.

Of interest in “Katie’s Story, October 1950”, then, is how such an apparently random and disconnected episode maintains a profound thematic relationship to the plot of Deane’s novel, and how her story works towards reinforcing the uncertainty and mystery that dictate the conditions of the narrator’s probe into his family’s past. Brigid is shocked into silence by the shock and trauma inflicted on her by that allegedly supernatural experience she has been through. Brigid was haunted, just as Larry, Eddie’s executor was, and also as was the narrator’s mother, and all of them retreated into silence as a consequence of their individual first-hand experiences. Silence is therefore tied to secrecy and mystery, which only evinces the characters’ desperate attempts to hide the source of their trauma. Besides, their retreat into silence blurs the lines between history and folk tale, since the secrecy with which their trauma is surrounded fuels persistent rumours that are highly unlikely to be dispelled. In many respects, the situation of these characters is indeed analogous to that of the soldiers who returned from the battlefield in silence and upon which Benjamin commented in his “Experience and Poverty”. In both Benjamin’s essay and Deane’s novel, these people are not silent because they have nothing to tell. It is indeed quite the contrary. Their silence results from the fact that the shock<sup>40</sup> of their experiences is so profound that they cannot be converted into narratable or communicable ones – that is, into a form of *Erfahrung*.

In addition, the novel’s use of folklore as in “people with green eyes were close to the fairies, *we were told*; they were just there for a little while, looking for a human child they could take away” (DEANE, 1996, p. 7, *emphasis added*), and the boy’s childish meditations on theological matters like “hell was a deep place. You fell into it,

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<sup>40</sup> *Schockerlebnis*

turning over and over in mid-air until the blackness sucked you into a great whirlpool of flames and you disappeared forever” (DEANE, 1996, p. 7) restate the motif of disappearance as they reveal the boy’s puerile excitement with these strange destinations the world of fairies or hell represented to him.<sup>41</sup> At the same time, these stories create other layers of metaphorical association between the events that befall his family, especially Uncle Eddie, and their community. This in turn not only links the novel with the oral tradition of Gaelic storytelling but also strengthens its air of suspense and indefiniteness. To a certain extent, this also hints at the inconclusiveness at the end of *Reading in the Dark* when, with his father’s death, and his mother having her ability to speak permanently impaired, no open and conclusive conversation about their history can ever occur.

Indeed, the “ghostly presences and haunting within the novel [suggest that] the past is never over and done with, [and that] it necessarily lingers on to trouble the present” (HAND, 1996, p. 250). In *Reading in the Dark*, this idea could be taken a step further when one thinks that the past only troubles the present because, as the narrator investigates it, he discovers that there are more connections between what was and what still is than any of the members of his family are willing to admit. Indeed, these stories of ghosts, exorcisms and political killing are important since they render the narrator’s painful reality of betrayal, secrecy and uneasy silence palatable or at least indirectly communicable. In other words, these stories ultimately forge imaginary worlds within which the painful reality of actually lived experience can acquire some indirect meaning and therefore be both apprehended and transmitted. The Benjaminian idea of history as *Geschichte* is of relevance at this point because it shows that, in Deane’s novel, there is an intricate juxtaposition between history and story that manifests itself in the language within which they exist. As Peach argues, *Reading in the Dark* reveals an “overwhelming sense of pain that develops throughout the text, and which is never finally exorcised” (2004, p. 47), but simply passed on to the next generation, sometimes suggesting that history is likely to repeat itself as the past constitutes a silent yet haunting presence in their lives. As this sense of pain is rescued by remembrance and passed on in the form of different narratives, the similarities between the past and the present are made all the more evident for the interpreter who can see in the narrator’s act of remembrance the deep associations between them.

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<sup>41</sup> “These strange destinations excited me.” (DEANE, 1996, p. 7)

The narrator's connections with his community, with the stories that define it and his longing to remember and understand them, ultimately exceed the limits of the personal sphere and enter the public realm. As he faces the ghosts his family cannot exorcise, he has to contend with memories, whether his or not, that are intrinsically associated with the political tensions that have shaped his and his family's most intimate experiences. In other words, to narrate his life as he remembers it is also to narrate the memories of the fragments of Irish history the way he remembers having been told them. Considering this, *Reading in the Dark* is not detached from the world out of which it was written, in that Irish history becomes so intrinsic to the narrative of Deane's novel that it irrupts from within individual memory. Hence, the uneasiness of its plot, its twists and turns, is charged with the tragic history of Ireland in the twentieth-century, while it also captures the angst in the relationship that the Irish have with their often nightmarish history.<sup>42</sup> As Harte explains, "there is no singular text of self (...) that does not imbricate other narratives in its own [and] the complex relationship between language and identity lies at the heart of this discursive problematic" (2007, p. 5), and *Reading in the Dark* pushes this imbrication of other narratives to the limit of metaphorical association and addresses this conflict both in its formal and thematic levels.

Bearing all that in mind, it is safe to say that Deane's novel ultimately becomes an aesthetic rethinking of individual experiences, of the Irish historical and political scene, and of the economic, sectarian and cultural oppression in Derry in the 1940s and 1950s, at the same time that it casts a historical look at the traumas generated in the individual by the Anglo-Irish War of Independence and Civil War in the early 1920s. As such, it brings into "sharp, pristine focus concerns with power and authority" (HAND, 2011, p. 248), an idea that is perfectly captured in the narrator's categorical statement in "The Feud, February, 1950" that "freedom. In this place. Never was, never would be" (DEANE, 1996, p. 47), when he also uneasily wonders "[what] was it, anyway? Freedom to do what you should, that was another. Close enough to one another and far apart as well" (DEANE, 1996, p. 47). The paradox of being close yet apart, of knowing yet not being sure, encapsulates the conflicts and indeterminacy that permeate Deane's novel and captures the narrator's angst about his family's past that, in

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<sup>42</sup> As Stephen Dedalus in a conversation with Mr Deasy in Joyce's *Ulysses*, "History (...) is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake." (JOYCE, 2000, p. 42)

spite of his recollective efforts to rescue and interpret it, still remains considerably in the dark.

The narrator's individuality in *Reading in the Dark* is ultimately constituted from a combination of memory and imagination, from the shards of experience "frequently evident in his narratives, if not as those of the one who experienced it, then as those of the one who reports it" (BENJAMIN, 1968, p. 92). To put it differently, life and word are one and the same thing in *Reading in the Dark*, and the final experience (*Erfahrung*) transmitted by Deane's narrator is that the past can only be apprehended in its represented form, in the remaining fragments of lived experience that are woven in the web of stories and rumours which intrinsically connect the individual and his community. For Gagnebin, the importance of narration for the constitution of the subject has always been thought to be that of "recollection, of the redeeming of the past by words which, without that, would fade into silence and obliteration" (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 3, *my translation*).<sup>43</sup> Considering this, the protagonist's existence in *Reading in the Dark* is bound up in the telling of stories and histories that are ultimately an indirect way of trying to communicate what is too painful to be overtly communicated. In that respect, the Benjaminian idea of history as *Geschichte* is important to think of this narrative strategy in *Reading in the Dark*, because it helps to see that in Deane's novel, stories and rumours bring history to the narrator's attention, and they eventually fill the gaps that enlightened reason leaves open.

Nowhere in *Reading in the Dark* is this narrative technique more evident than in the novel's ingenious combination of storytelling and rumour to make matters of Irish history a built-in part of its structure. For Gagnebin, narration is also important because,

If we can then read the stories that humanity tells itself as the stream that constitutes memory, and therefore, its identity, it does not mean that the very narrative movement is not permeated, often surreptitiously, by forgetfulness, which would not be a mere flaw, a "blank" in memory, but also an activity that obliterates, renounces, disentangles, holds the boundlessness of memory against the necessary frontiers of death and inscribes it at the heart of the narrative. (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 3, *my translation*)<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> "... rememoração, da retomada salvadora pela palavra de um passado que, sem isso, desapareceria no silêncio e no esquecimento." (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 3)

<sup>44</sup> "Se podemos assim ler as histórias que a humanidade se conta a si mesma como o fluxo constitutivo da memória e, portanto, de sua identidade, nem por isso o próprio movimento da narração deixa de ser atravessado, de maneira geralmente mais subterrânea, pelo refluxo do esquecimento; esquecimento que seria não só uma falha, um "branco" de memória, mas também uma atividade que apaga, renuncia, recorta, opõe ao infinito da memória a finitude necessária da morte e a inscreve no âmago da narração." (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 3)

The narrator of *Reading in the Dark*, fascinated as he is by the textual nature of the reality that surrounds him and the potentially hidden meanings in the stories and rumours he had been told as a child, and that now he retells as he remembers them, throws into question the very narrative status that shapes his experiences. In the words of Derek Hand, there is in Deane's novel "a powerful and significant confluence between art and the act of interpretation, so that the kind of power struggles inherent in all acts of saying and writing are interrogated" (HAND, 2011, p. 251). However, the interrogation that is introduced does not advocate a dangerous scepticism about the nature of the events that happened that would ultimately deny their existence altogether. Rather, it casts doubts on the narrative accounts *a posteriori* of these events, and shows that, as a narrative account, they are always a form of representation that is open to debate and conjecture. Indeed, if there is no way to access the original and ultimate truth of a given lived experience, it is because this truth was eventually lost in the ceaseless metaphorical transpositions at the heart of the different discursive forms – stories, legends, rumours – which enabled these events to be passed on and remembered. To put it differently, there is no definite message to transmit. What is left is only a chain of metaphorical associations that, as such, require active reconstruction and interpretation on the reader's part.<sup>45</sup> Considering this, *Reading in the Dark*, interpretation and disclosure,

are an inextricable part of the journey towards self-definition and self-possession that the narrator is embarked upon. Burdened with the legacy of his parents' foreclosure of mourning, he is both obligated and compelled to become a historian of his own family in order to authenticate himself and settle his origin of being. Only knowledge, understanding, and articulation will enable him to do the necessary work of mourning and live without ghosts, thereby avoiding the catastrophic fate of his parents and so many others in his community who, because of denied memories of violence, exist in a state of living death (HARTE, 2014, p. 190).

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<sup>45</sup> These ideas are derived from the way Benjamin addresses the tension between narrative and forgetfulness in his essay "Franz Kafka: On the tenth anniversary of his death" (1934), as well as from Gagnebin's detailed commentary on this essay in "Walter Benjamin ou a história aberta" (1996). Indeed, Benjamin saw in Kafka's work a strong impetus towards forgetting, which is clearer in this passage: "What has been forgotten – and this insight affords us yet another avenue of access to Kafka's work – is never something purely individual. Everything forgotten mingles with what has been forgotten of the prehistoric world, forms countless, uncertain, changing compounds, yielding a constant flow of new, strange products. Oblivion is the container from which the inexhaustible intermediate world in Kafka's stories presses toward the light" (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 131).

The narrator's inquiry into their past makes this confluence between art, history, and the act of interpretation in *Reading in the Dark* more salient, and indicates that "nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost for history" (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 254), since all fragments of the past can potentially illuminate the present when they are freed from the constraints of chronology by recollection. The narrator's task in Deane's novel is analogous to that of the Benjaminian storyteller and historian, who, in an activity similar to that of the collector, another key figure in Benjamin's philosophy, redeems from oblivion the history of those whom the causal interpretation of history would leave behind. The most eloquent expression of this idea is in Benjamin's image of the "Angel of History" (*Der Engel der Geschichte*) in his thesis IX on the concept of history:

A Klee painting named "Angelus Novus" shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. *Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.* The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 257-258, *emphasis added*)

If history is, as Benjamin states, the accumulation of ruins, one can then argue that Deane's narrator, in turning his face towards his family's past, has to cope with the catastrophes that have afflicted their lives as a family and as members of a community deeply immersed in the barbarous historical and political conflicts in twentieth century Ireland. At the same time, in his recollective and interpretive efforts, Deane's narrator has to come to terms with the pile of debris that the fragmented memories of his past expose to him. His challenge then is to pull these memories out of the chain of events imposed by chronology and reconstruct the connections between his past and his present, so that the deep similarities between them can eventually clarify what still remains in the dark.

As matter of fact, the "retentive yet oblivious word [that] constitutes the subject language in which the "things" are there just because they are not there as such, but said

in the absence [of what it addresses]” (GAGNEBIN, 1999, p. 5, *my translation*)<sup>46</sup> stresses, in *Reading in the Dark*, not only the ghostly permanence of the character’s past into their present, but also the redemptive effort in the narrator’s attempt to disinter memories that others simply want to disremember. In his inquest, Deane’s narrator “brush[es] history against the grain” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 257) as he remembers the conflicting versions for Uncle Eddie’s disappearance generated by attempts to explain it that could not transcend the indefiniteness of the rumour. Deane’s narrator also brushes history against the grain because in his memories there is a complex juxtaposition of his family’s history with the history of political conflict in Ireland, especially the Troubles at the beginning of the twentieth century. In this sense, the narrator’s memories not only rescue his and his family’s past from obliteration, but also bear witness to the atrocities that characterised the political and ideological disputes of seminal historical episodes like the Anglo-Irish War of Independence, and the subsequent Irish Civil War, and Catholic/Protestant rift in the incubating period of the 1968-1998 Troubles.

Indeed, “the haunting nature of the phantom of repressed history is evident throughout the novel, as is its capacity to breed obsessions and even a kind of madness” (HARTE, 2014, p. 189). History is therefore profoundly imbricated in the narrator’s memories, and due to that, it becomes an intrinsic element of Deane’s literary composition. Hence, it is safe to say that *Reading in the Dark* demands a reading of its juxtapositions between fiction and history that considers, first and foremost, the way these matters are negotiated at the heart of the novel’s language. At the same time, *Reading in the Dark* stands as an individual attempt on the protagonist’s part to make sense of his world by taking charge of interpretation, rather than allowing himself to be interpreted by others. The narrator’s attempt to be in control of interpretation takes on particular relevance in the novel in that the more he tries to attain the ultimate truth about his and his family’s past and history, “the more he finds that there can be no single authoritative narrative of what really happened, only endlessly recomposable fragments, versions, interpretations” (HARTE, 2014, p. 191). It falls to him then to pick up the pieces of their past and convert them into another narrative that will allow him to express what had been suppressed and then give voice to those who would otherwise be forgotten by official historiography.

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<sup>46</sup> “... dupla trama da palavra rememoradora e esquecida... constitui o sujeito [por meio de uma] linguagem onde as “coisas” só estão presentes porque não estão aí enquanto tais, mas ditas em sua ausência.” (GAGNEBIN, 2007, p. 5)

If “there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one” (BENJAMIN, 2007, p. 254), then, in *Reading in the Dark*, this agreement is manifest in the maintenance of communal silence about the barbarity of the past that the narrator systematically tries to break through remembrance and retelling. In a way, this seems to be a fundamental piece of experience that is transmitted in the book: that some things are best forgotten, and that, especially in Ireland, there is no history without a twist. That is why one needs to resist forgetfulness and take charge of the interpretation of the represented versions of the past that are inherited and preserved in collective memory. Indeed, the compositional logic of Deane’s novel works towards laying these historical twists bare, in such a way that, in *Reading in the Dark*, the individual and collective memory are coeval to the same extent that fictional narrative and of history are. For that reason, Deane’s narrator is a storyteller who is also the historian of his family’s and of his country’s past, and the irresolution of his tale at the end of the book indicates not only that his account is caught between recollection and obliteration, but also that the narrative of Ireland’s traumatic past is still very much open to speculation. Deane’s narrator leaves the story and the history of family and community unresolved, withholding a complete explanation or final closure to his tale, just as the Benjaminian narrator would do. In the end, the final experience (*Erfahrung*) that Deane’s narrator transmits is that the excruciating effects of political and religious sectarianism are still a ghostly presence in both individual and collective memory in Ireland, thus consolidating the aesthetic and political dimensions of *Reading in the Dark*, and showing that one cannot be separated from the other.

## 6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

I'd say yes, though, to a sorrow  
Or a guilt, however searing,  
If I felt with its arrival

That the first star of truth  
Would even sham appearing.

(‘Truth Nearing’ – Seamus Deane)

All things considered, one can say that, in *Reading in the Dark*, Deane is capable of “(...) interrogating himself and his own artistic and critical processes, [truly opening up] his version of the modern Irish hero to critique (...) in a manner that complicates rather than liberates the individual” (HAND, 2011, p. 252). This interrogation becomes all the more eloquent and incisive because Deane’s novel inserts the unresolved quandaries of the protagonist’s subjectivity into the context of the wider social, political, historical, and economic changes that occurred in Ireland in the past century. The individual emerges as a complicated entity in *Reading in the Dark* because the novel captures his/her inner contradictions and frustrations in the narrator’s solitary struggle to apprehend the outer world of history and politics in his consciousness. In other words, Deane’s novel encapsulates in its constant interrogation of its own literary *Medium*, the always tense and delicate relationship between the individual consciousness and the reality in which it is immersed. Hence, when considered in its artistic and historical scope, Deane’s novel affords a rare glimpse of the sophisticated relationship between literature and history that is found in the work of Irish novelists, playwrights, and poets of the highest intellectual and creative calibre.

Indeed, a careful analysis of *Reading in the Dark*’s fictive strategy reveals that Deane’s novel trades an immediate heroic and ideological identification between self and nation, on the one hand, and the belief that the latter would unconditionally determine the former, on the other, for an aesthetic and historical (re)construction of both instances within its literary realm. Deane’s novel thus captures the frequently turbulent relationship between the private and the public spheres in the Irish historical context of political and ideological dispute. In fact, the greatest merit of *Reading in the Dark* is that, instead of providing a conclusion to the investigation of the family’s history conducted by the narrator as he recollects and retells his own and his family’s

past throughout the book, Deane's novel withholds the closure that its plot repeatedly hints at and to a certain extent even promises. By doing so, *Reading in the Dark* reaffirms the open-endedness of its plot and subject matter as the novel plunges the reader into a narrative universe of supernatural stories, rumours, and accounts of political assassination, in which the ultimate truth about the events lies inaccessibly beneath the conflicting discourses through which lived experience is mediated and passed on to the next generations.

Bearing that in mind, the reader is invited to read into the darkness of the protagonist's fragments of remembered life and history, and is also ultimately challenged to reconstruct the similarities between the narrator's past and present in order to interpret the ways the former still haunts the latter. Indeed, the narrator in *Reading in the Dark*, and in this case also the reader of Deane's novel, stand a chance of reconstructing the deep connections between what they are told because they can unite entirely dissimilar and discrepant ideas or elements through metaphorical associations enabled by remembrance, which is central to *Reading in the Dark* and only possible within language. Indeed, there is a serious and complex ethics of memory at work in *Reading in the Dark*, which allows for associations between individual stories (and histories) and the national history of political resistance to the effects of the English colonisation to be made in the analytical and interpretative process.

However, it must be emphasised that this association is never direct in Deane's novel, for the fictional narrative in *Reading in the Dark* never succumbs to the temptation of adopting any sort of deterministic paradigm that would eventually oversimplify the questions underlying its text by either subordinating the plight of the individual to that of the nation or conceiving of the protagonist's torments and suffering as a shallow allegory of Ireland's political turmoil, for instance. In fact, Deane's artistic choices reveal that, both as artist and critic, he must have been well aware of this risk, since the narrative of *Reading in the Dark* works systematically towards undermining the certainties that it at times seems to create. What is more, the persistence of the book in denying a definite explanation for the questions it raises reinforces once again the vital importance of Deane's conscious use of memory and remembrance as fictive strategies. Indeed, this procedure constantly reaffirms the hesitancy and uncertainty of his novel, and with that, it eliminates the risk of reductionist interpretations of its aesthetic, historical, and political content.

Deane's narrative method, and its capacity to drag the reader into his novel are exemplified in "Reading in the Dark, October 1948", one of the first vignettes in the novel. In it, the reader learns about the narrator's memories of a day at school when his English teacher read out an essay, written by a country boy. The essay described the simple rituals of the country boy's everyday life, and the narrator remembers that his teacher praised that text as writing which was good because it told the truth. Of greater interest in this vignette, though, is the passage in which the narrator recalls the first book he ever read in his life, a novel called *The Shan Van Vocht*, about the great rebellion of 1798, and how he would lie in bed reading it until his brother Liam made him turn off the lights. He would "switch off the light, get back in bed, and lie there, the book still open, re-imagining all [he] had read, the various ways the plot might unravel, the novel opening into endless possibilities in the dark" (DEANE, 1996, p. 20). Indeed, when analysed in connection with the other vignettes in *Reading in the Dark*, this passage not only reinforces the metaphorical connotations of the title of Deane's novel, but also reaffirms the inconclusiveness of the narrator's inquiry into his family's history, and the consequent open-endedness of the novel.

The reconfiguration in Deane's novel of the lived experiences of its characters within a literary language that hovers in the in-between of remembrance and imagination, of rumours and storytelling, accentuates the indefinite aspects of what the narrator remembers and tells. At the same time, this reconfiguration of these immediate experiences into a form of narratable experience that Deane's narrator passes on opens what he tells up to critical scrutiny, and the analysis of this textual dynamics finally reveals that fiction and history are drawn together in the protagonist's telling. Indeed, part of the strength of *Reading in the Dark* is that it holds the past up for inspection in the protagonist's recollective efforts. At the same time, Deane's novel, through the narrator's desire to uncover the secrets that the others strive to maintain in the silence of forgetfulness, overturns the stereotype of the Irish as being incapable of critical reasoning. In other words, Deane's narrator struggles with the conflicting versions of his family's life that arises from and within his memories, which is an ultimate rebellious act of critical interpretation. Indeed, he attempts to reconstruct, from his own perspective or through his own reading, the deep connections between his family's history and that of his community and country.

Indeed, Irish history in *Reading in the Dark* is given a highly personal twist and acquires strong familial connotations, and thus it finds its way into Deane's literary

work as the product of an anonymous narrative act. What his novel does, with the twists and turns of its plot, and its staunch refusal to provide a final resolution to the tensions it creates, is to show that there is no history in Ireland without a twist, especially in Northern Ireland, where sectarian violence still persists. Moreover, Deane's novel stands as an aesthetic and historical statement that, to a certain extent, literature and history in Ireland are essentially one and the same thing. History is twisted. Fiction is twisted. In many respects, then, *Reading in the Dark* throws its reader into the narrator's memories, and the universe of hesitancy, misunderstanding, half-truths, and confusion that they represent, to show that anyone who happens to be in search of the ultimate truth is only permitted to know that it cannot be unveiled after all.

In the end, Deane's novel shows that to tell a story *is* to tell history, and this becomes especially clear when the Benjaminian concept of history as *Geschichte*, which refers both to the record and study of the past events and to the idea of real or fictitious narrative, is taken into consideration for the analysis. This concept of history as *Geschichte* deconstructs the opposition between story and history, and allows the latter to be pulled out of the causative relations between the events established by more positivist forms of historicism and be held up for inspection from a present perspective that promises no resolution or definite settlement to the conflicts that arise in the process. *Reading in the Dark* contains in its form and structural organisation, with its emphasis on silence and secrecy, the paradoxes of contemporary Ireland. The paradoxes in Deane's book all resonate with the paradoxes of the Ireland of the late twentieth century. This is a politically and geographically divided nation still trying to find a compromise between the long-standing sectarian conflicts around the country – especially in Northern Ireland – and the promise of reconciliation brought by the Good Friday Agreement. What is more, this is an Ireland marked by a general effort to disremember the atrocities of its turbulent past as the country momentarily thrived due to the economic boom generated by the Celtic Tiger. Indeed, just as in the plot of Deane's novel, these historical conflicts remain unsolved, and if anything, their current status only invites further scrutiny and serious reflection.

It should be mentioned at this point that, even though *Reading in the Dark* has received considerable attention from critics and reviewers, as demonstrated earlier in this study, there are several potential research topics concerning Deane's artistic and critical works alike. This is so because his poetry, when compared to his only novel to date and his work as a literary critic, has gone largely unnoticed by critics and especially

literary researchers and scholars, to the point that there are no monographic studies dealing with his poetry. Indeed, the variety of his writings, ranging from political pamphlets to works of literary criticism, prose and poetry, provides extensive material for scholars particularly interested in Irish literature and culture, as well as for researchers of narrative, poetry, and literary theory in general. In addition, scholars with an interest in the always tense and complicated relationship between literature and history will find numerous research opportunities in Deane's artistic and critical work alike.

On the subject of Deane's poetry, it should be pointed out that the poems in *Gradual Wars*, *Rumours*, and *History Lessons* encapsulate with great poignancy the historical and political tensions of the Troubles in Northern Ireland from 1968 to 1998, in that they offer an essentially lyrical response to a reality fraught with violence and barbarity which the speaker struggles to negotiate aesthetically. Indeed, a comprehensive study of Deane's lyrical diction in his poems remains to be undertaken. In many respects, the poems from *Gradual Wars*, *Rumours*, and *History Lessons* share profound formal and thematic concerns, which would allow any scholar to either explore each of the books individually, or to look into them as parts of a larger body of poetic works that try to accommodate into poetic language the barbarity of sectarian violence, especially in Northern Ireland.

What is more, the relationship between Deane's poetry and his prose as far as thematic ideas and motifs are concerned is another research topic that remains to be investigated in his artistic *oeuvre*. Indeed, it is perfectly possible to identify the persistence of similar thematic concerns in his works that shows Deane's never-ending reflections on questions of language, memory, representation, literary creation, history, and death, in an always sophisticated juxtaposition of aesthetic, historical, and political concerns. From this perspective, *Reading in the Dark* can be read in comparison with *Gradual Wars*, *Rumours*, and *History Lessons*, in such a way that the influence of the poet in the work of the novelist from the point of view of literary representation would constitute not only a huge contribution to the field of Irish studies, but also a significant contribution to the realm of literary theory and criticism as a whole. In fact, a good starting point would be to analyse the parallels between Deane's novel and *Rumours*, which out of the three Deane's poetry books, is the one that bears closest resemblance to *Reading in the Dark* in terms of uncertainty and indefiniteness as motifs and themes.

As Deane explains in *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature 1880-1980*, “Irish writers were obliged to find some way of dealing with history, a category which includes language, landscape, and the various ideologies of the recovered past which grew out of them” (1985, p. 14), and one might add, the experience, the *Erfahrung*, in the Benjaminian sense of the word, that is passed on from one generation to the next. Hence, to negotiate these questions in their fictional work, writers had to find a way to aesthetically accommodate in their work this broader sense of history as *Geschichte*, so that these matters of language, landscape, and ideology could become an intrinsic compositional element of their novels, poems, and plays. Implicit in Deane’s statement is the idea that, once writers were actually able to deal with history, as he proposes, it would then be the reader’s task to reconstruct the intrinsic relations between literature and history from within the fictional realm of those works.

Indeed, the analysis of the fictional technique of *Reading in the Dark* in parallel with the historical context out of which the novel was written, and with which it establishes an indirect yet vivid dialogue, reveals that Deane’s fiction has not only an aesthetic but also an ethical dimension to it. In other words, there is an ethics and politics of memory in *Reading in the Dark* that is philosophically akin to Benjamin’s thoughts on narrative, experience (*Erfahrung*) and history (*Geschichte*). This is so because, first of all, *Reading in the Dark* is not a book about the narrator’s memory’s alone. Rather, it is a novel about the narrator’s search for the seeds of his present in his past the way he remembers having lived and heard about it. As the narrator salvages this past essentially through remembrance, he envisages in it the seeds of his present, of his family’s, his community’s, and eventually Northern Ireland’s present too. In other words, his memories unfold in myriad possibilities and associations, and the deeper he delves into them, the deeper their similarities become.

As Deane’s narrator realises at the end, to find the “true” origin of that past proves impossible, since the only instruments the narrator has at his disposal are his memories and the shared inheritance of his community which he can access through remembrance. The ultimate discovery of the narrator is that his present is already prefigured in the past, as much as his past is already in his present, and that the similarities between them are therefore far more striking than one might wish to see or admit. In trying to understand the reasons why his family is haunted, Deane’s narrator

discovers that his past and his present are so deeply connected that the constraints of chronological time are not enough to separate them.

Bearing all this in mind, the present study may be seen as an attempt to establish a critical method for reading Deane's novel which is derived from Benjamin's ideas on memory, experience, and history. This method is also largely shaped by Benjamin's notion of literary criticism, which reconstructs the connections between the work of art and its context through a meticulous analysis of the former's internal constituents. As Seligmann-Silva explains, for Benjamin, literary criticism "only existed as the capacity to articulate (...) the immanence of the work of art with the critical and historical reflection"<sup>47</sup> (2009, p. 51, *my translation*). Indeed, Seligmann-Silva clarifies that Benjamin's literary criticism reflects on the immanent elements of the literary work under analysis, and is, at the same time, self-reflexive, questioning the premises and the validity of the critical activity. At the same time, Benjamin's criticism never loses sight of the history of literary genres, and always seeks to think critically about the society in which the literary text was produced. Finally, Seligmann-Silva explains that the articulation between the aesthetic and ethical aspects of the literary work under scrutiny allows Benjamin to stand against the positivist model of historical evolution, to which he opposes his idea of history as *Geschichte*, which is also an accumulation of ruins and catastrophes.<sup>48</sup>

Benjamin's critical method is therefore adequate to a full-length critical and interpretive analysis of *Reading in the Dark* for two main reasons. Firstly, because the kind of reading proposed by Benjamin can offer deep insights into the innermost aspects of the individual consciousness; secondly, because this approach also shows how the self, immersed in its interiority, strives to make sense of the twists and turns of the complex historical context of secrecy and barbarity that it can only partially apprehend, thus making the relationship between fiction and history more evident. Indeed, such a critical method, influenced by Benjamin's philosophy and literary criticism, acquires special relevance for the analysis and interpretation of *Reading in the Dark* if one

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47 "só existia enquanto capacidade de se articular (...) a imanência da obra com a reflexão histórico-crítica" (2009, p. 51)

48 Seligmann-Silva explains the Benjaminian concept of literary criticism in great detail in *A atualidade de Walter Benjamin e de Theodor W. Adorno* (2009).

considers that Irish history still remains a cultural and intellectual battleground,<sup>49</sup> with which novelists, poets, and playwrights must come to terms. Hence, Deane's novel captures these antagonisms in its thematic and formal constitution, in such a way that it falls to the critical reader to reconstruct these relations between aesthetics and history, which haunt the book in the deepest, darkest, or "forgotten" level of the narrative. In this way, Deane's novel is at the same time a reading in the dark of the individual's memories and of Irish history which, in spite of the character's attempts to disremember the events by silencing them, irrupts in a haunting and menacing way, demanding to be fully negotiated.

Finally, the intersection between literature, memory, and history in Deane's *Reading in the Dark*, mentioned in the title of this study, can only be securely established when the critic looks closely into the fundamental element that allows these apparently distant categories to overlap. That element is the language that shapes the content of Deane's novel, and gives the book its organic aspect. The telling of stories upon stories in *Reading in the Dark*, all of which rely heavily on the existence of a shared memory through which they can be accessed and made sense, ultimately invokes Irish history and makes it an intrinsic part of the fictional narrative of book. Perhaps this is the ultimate experience (*Erfahrung*) that Deane's narrator transmits to his reader: that, in *Reading in the Dark*, literature and history converge as the result of an anonymous and multi-layered narrative act.

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<sup>49</sup> "Also, and perhaps fundamentally, this prevalence for history in novels – in whatever guise – demonstrates how Irish history became the site of cultural and intellectual conflict in these years" (HAND, 2011, p. 255).

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## 8. AN INTERVIEW WITH SEAMUS DEANE

Dear Professor Seamus Deane,

First of all, thank you immensely for your attention and availability to discuss *Reading in the Dark*.

After studying your novel and reading reviews and book chapters about it, I came to the conclusion that it relies heavily on memory as one of its central aesthetic elements. And it seems to me that this has made critics from all persuasions struggle to allocate *Reading in the Dark* within an autobiographical tradition which finds in Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* its quintessential example. The terminology used by such critics varies from autobiographical through semi-autobiographical to autobiographical fiction, which suggests, at least to me, that perhaps this is not the real point of this novel after all. This brings us to my query. Even though there might be autobiographical elements in *Reading in the Dark*, as there are in *A Portrait* and many other novels of the Bildungsroman tradition, it does not seem to me that these are the central concerns of your novel. For me, your use of memory and of a first person account of a family history is more an attempt to offer a personal view of history rather than to reconstruct supposedly real experiences as they would have actually happened. By giving history a personal twist, your novel questions the very possibility of ever attaining a definite interpretation or reconstruction of what has come to pass. Your use of rumours as a central motif in the narrative of *Reading in the Dark* is perhaps the clearest evidence of that. For me, the use of rumours in your novel encapsulates the uncertain origin of a given narrative, but also its inventive power - a tale never loses in the telling - , which is therefore akin to literature and literary discourse in its capacity to produce multiple meanings and evoke different interpretations. At the same time, the uncertain origin of rumours alludes to the endless possibilities of interpretation that the scene of the boy reading in the dark metaphorically suggests. Besides, rumours have an evasive nature, just as memories do. As such, neither of them can actually be fully trusted as the sites of ultimate and unquestionable truths. What I mean is that however autobiographical in intention your novel may be, it does not seem to me as a critic that this is the central element in it. Rather, I would say that your novel presents the reader

with the endless possibilities of narratable experience which Walter Benjamin would call *Erfahrung*. *Reading in the Dark* invites the reader to read its family history (and Irish history in turn) "against the grain", to quote Walter Benjamin's famous phrase. So, would you agree with this reading of mine?

You might like to know that I have already written two articles on *Reading in the Dark* that remain unpublished. In these articles I tried to develop these ideas more fully. I would be greatly honoured if you were interested in giving them a quick read and could offer me some feedback on my texts.

Also, I have seen on the Amazon.co.uk website that you have written another novel called *The Wizard*, and which was published by Vintage in 1999. However, I have searched high and low, but could not find a copy of it anywhere to purchase. Bearing that in mind, I would like to know whether you would happen to have a copy of it to sell me, as long as it is no trouble to you whatsoever. I would really like to read it and maybe write a doctorate thesis on the body of your fictional prose to date. Please let me know whether you could sell me a copy of it and how much would it cost me (book+shipping to Brazil). I would be glad to purchase *The Wizard*, read it, and write about it.

That is all for now, Professor Deane. I apologize for the long email and sincerely appreciate your time and attention. I am looking forward to your reply.

With very best wishes,  
Fernando Aparecido Poiana

Dear Fernando Poiana,

Thanks for your e-mail. First, to put to rest the 'rumours(!)' about the novel *The Wizard*. It does not exist. I agreed to write a novel of that title, but abandoned it after a time, although not before the publisher advertised it. It had some concerns in common with RID; the tale that has a 'magic' element concerning history and origins, a posed staging between scientific and mythical narratives, etc. First I got bored with it, then I got sick and I've been sick ever since; now and then I decide to finish it but am too worn out to do so; instead I read Stendhal, Flaubert, Sebald, Proust, Joyce, Scott Turow, the Scandinavian detective writers and a lot of political philosophy, most of it German--including Benjamin, of course and Blumenberg.

What you say is on the mark. I'm glad you noted the 'rumour' effect (I once published a volume of poems called *Rumours*; there are some connections between it and the novel--but I have only one copy of it!

Some readers were anxious about the generic purity of this thing – was it a novel, memoir, slanted autobiography or what? Those who knew or know me recognised some features of my family history and set off to hunt the rest of it down; others simply called it lies or fiction. All of which it is, although it's a sterile debate and makes me roil in stupefaction and regret I ever published it. I no more know what standpoint is permitted to one to know the truth than is permitted to know it can't be known.

Equally, especially in this country, there is no history without a twist. I'd be more a fan of Herodotus than of Thucydides, of Momigliano than, say, the dreadful Macaulay or the exquisitely partisan Michelet... But such names! Yes, history is twisted, fiction is twisted, they form a braided rope between them and we dangle on the end of it.

You could, if you like, send your essays on RID. I'll be entering hospital soon for another battle with boredom, so I likely won't be very prompt with my response. But thank you for this.

With every good wish,  
Seamus Deane.