

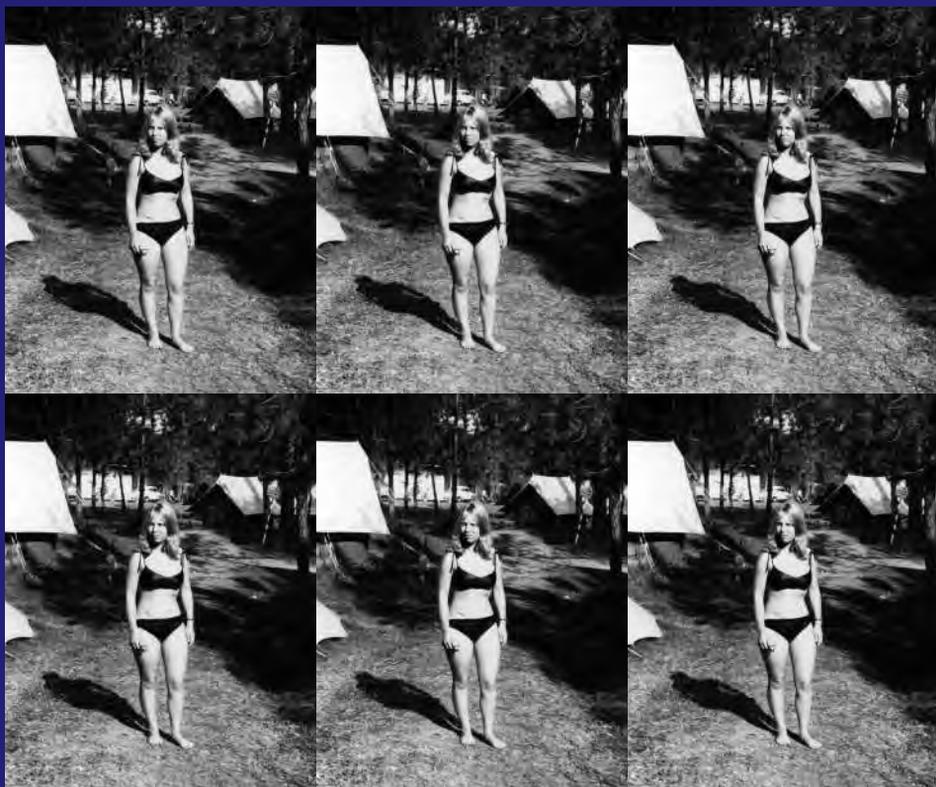
reimagining
ireland

VOLUME 4

Paddy Lyons and Alison O'Malley-Younger (eds)

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN

FRESH PERSPECTIVES ON IRISH LITERATURE



ireimagining land

FRESH PERSPECTIVES ON IRISH LITERATURE

Once a country of emigration and diaspora, in the 1990s Ireland began to attract immigration from other parts of the world: a new citizenry. By the first decade of the twenty-first century, the ratio between GDP and population placed Ireland among the wealthiest nations in the world. The Peace Agreements of the mid-1990s and the advent of power-sharing in Northern Ireland have enabled Ireland's story to change still further. No longer locked into troubles from the past, the Celtic Tiger can now leap in new directions.

These shifts in culture have given Irish literature the opportunity to look afresh at its own past and, thereby, new perspectives have also opened for Irish Studies. The contributors to this volume explore these new openings; the essays examine writings from both now and the past in the new frames afforded by new times.

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No Country for Old Men

Reimagining Ireland

Volume 4

Edited by Dr Eamon Maher
Institute of Technology, Tallaght



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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Irish Literature



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for

Flavia Swann

because she brings out the best in everyone

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Introduction

PADDY LYONS AND ALISON O'MALLEY-YOUNGER

That is no country for old men. The young
In one another's arms, birds in the trees
– Those dying generations – at their song,
The salmon-falls, the mackerel-crowded seas,
Fish, flesh, or fowl, commend all summer long
Whatever is begotten, born, and dies.
Caught in that sensual music all neglect
Monuments of unaging intellect.

— W.B. YEATS, 'Sailing to Byzantium'

'Sailing to Byzantium' looked forward to a departure overseas, to emigration. From the mid-nineteenth century, and well into the twentieth century, away was all too frequently the direction in life taken by Irish citizens, most often to assure for their families some economic prosperity; and often too, away was the direction taken by Ireland's writers – Joyce, O'Casey and Beckett, for instance – seeking access to freedom and to experience not readily available at home. Taken literally, Yeats's poem is no guide to the mood of those times: there is little to suggest sensual music was in much abundance in the Ireland of the late 1920s. Times were hard, then, and for the young who stayed, it could seem as if geriatrics ruled; as if the young were doomed to be – in Anthony Cronin's notorious and erstwhile censored phrase – 'Dead as Doornails under Dev'.

But by the late twentieth century, all was changing. By the 1980s, Ireland was the European country with the largest percentage of citizens under the age of twenty-five, and their music was being heard: Ireland had a thriving new musical culture, and was – in the words of the singer Dana – 'spiritual home to the Eurovision Song Contest.' By the 1990s

the economy was prospering, heading for the boom which would come to be known as 'the Celtic Tiger'; and the flow of emigration had given way to waves of migration, returnees coming back from abroad to take up work in a new Ireland, soon to be followed by waves of new immigrants from other lands.

Explanations are various. By the late years of the twentieth century, the developed world was shifting away from its old economic base in heavy industry, a shift which for many countries would be and still is painful and disruptive. Ireland, however had – relatively speaking – been bypassed by the Industrial Revolution of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, its economy remaining significantly agricultural, and hence out of step with the progress of wealth. In the late twentieth century this would prove advantageous: Ireland had less industrial baggage to offload, and could readily move to the forefront under new post-Fordean economics. Irish confidence became apparent under the Presidency of Mary Robinson, whose generous emphasis on inclusiveness – inclusion of the world-wide Irish diaspora, and inclusion of new immigrants – gave a boost to Ireland's position on the world stage, and thereby too to Irish writers.

Further progressive change was to take place with the initiation of peace processes in Northern Ireland, bringing a new climate to a part of the island which had for decades been bedeviled by sectarian 'Troubles'. Under the leadership of Bertie Ahern, government by coalition had already become the norm in the Republic; when the St Andrew's Agreement of 2006 brought about a power-sharing Assembly for Northern Ireland in Stormont, this so astonished the international media that world leaders and American presidential candidates would jostle to claim for themselves some association with the achievement of this new harmony. In short, Ireland no longer appeared to be ruled by the old quarrels of old men, and is exemplary now for showing how it's possible to move forwards socially and politically as well as economically. For Ireland's writers, here is a new situation calling for response; and for those who study Ireland's culture, here is a radically new position from which to view the past.

In the year that 'Sailing to Byzantium' was written (1926), it must have seemed to Yeats that a quasi-mythical world of wonderful promise had been fully superseded by profiteering gombeens at their greasy

till, whose rise he had deplored in 'September 1913', where he famously stated 'Romantic Ireland's dead and gone'. With 'Sailing to Byzantium', his imagination turned to escape from the world of the real – the natural world – away from the world which privileges youth over age – and in the manner of high modernism he celebrated instead a distant realm of art and poetry, at once imaginary and symbolic. The magnitude of his feelings of loss is betrayed through the desire to be absorbed by the eternal – and hence imaginary – 'monuments of unageing intellect'. Yeats thus voiced a yearning for, and a lament over an 'imagined Ireland', an Ireland of the mind, as he sought a divorce from the crises and turmoil which beset the country at the beginning of the twentieth century, as it was moving from subaltern colonial status towards full independence. Writers before and since Yeats have done the same, producing laments, eulogies, elegies and *liebstdots*, which have envisaged Ireland in guises ranging from ailing Aislings to de Valera's fantasy of a land where comely maidens danced at the crossroads. Yet, as the broad title of this series indicates, if Ireland can be imagined, it can also be re-imagined. It is now time, as Richard Kearney has argued, 'to open Irish minds to life as it [is] lived in the present that is unencumbered by nostalgic abstractions from the past or millennial abstractions about the future. Ireland [has] come of age. The moment for critical stocktaking [has] arrived' (Kearney, 1988: 261).

This volume attempts a critical stock-take of Ireland's culture as it is re-imagined in the wake of the Celtic Tiger – an Ireland which has given proof that women too can be good and effective presidents of the nation, and where women are no longer corralled into dancing at crossroads, and minding hearth and homeland – an Ireland in which traditions are often transitional or transnational, and where identity can be evolutionary as well as revolutionary. As Fintan O'Toole has pointed out, 'Ireland is not one story any more' (O'Toole in Boss and Westarp, 1998: 171). It can be said that the Celtic Tiger has been leaping in new directions, and reaching new perspectives. The essays in this volume address and interrogate these fresh and still-changing stories of Ireland – taking into account that political and ideological backdrops have changed the country from a famine-ravished but invariably idealized rural idyll, to Ireland's emergence as one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Ireland has moved from a

third world culture to a first world country, and the politics of peace are transforming the landscape of possibilities, which Seamus Heaney suggests are best 'appropriated by those with a vision of the future rather than those who sing battle hymns to the past' (*Irish Times*, 10 April 1998). As Chris Morash observes: 'If Irish cultural debate is to move forward, a new vocabulary must be found' (Morash, 1991: 122).

Under the heading 'New Readings' we gather a range of reconsiderations of the writings of the past. Some of the writings addressed here have not been studied previously, or have not been considered deserving of study before now: Irish women's fiction from the era of the first world war – fiction that interestingly crosses sectarian divides – comes under the spotlight, as too does science fiction, a youthful and speculative literary genre, whose appeal for Irish writers has not before been widely noticed. The obsessive dimensions of the Gothic are revisited through post-colonial perspectives. Gender issues are re-opened, and Eilís Dillon, who is best remembered for her translations from Irish and for her children's fiction, can here emerge as an adult novelist, a serious and challenging investigator of family structures. A further hidden human geography is uncovered, whereby gays were marginalised in times when terrorism took centre stage, thus inviting questions as to how far those spaces still remain to be remapped. With the healing of sectarian wounds well underway, Brian Friel need no longer be positioned as purely a champion of Catholic Ireland, and his exposé of the Catholic pseudo-aristocracy can come into the light. Irish Classics too are reconsidered – the European dimension is enlarged through a demonstration of Joyce's rediscovery and scrupulous redeployment of ancient arts of memorialisation; and it is at last possible to identify the dark side of Flann O'Brien's comedy.

Along with Irish writing from both North and South, 'New Territories' also addresses new and distinguished writing from the Irish diaspora: Colum McCann's fiction has already brought into focus the Slavic world, and here it is considered in its further turn to the world of Romany; Martin McDonagh's plays are relocated within larger theatrical tendencies that link as much to Brecht and Pirandello as to Synge and the rich past of Irish drama. The new ground for Northern writers is examined as it is scrutinised in the fiction of David Park, as it is spoken about in a

hitherto unpublished interview with the novelist Glenn Patterson, and as it is reconfigured by poets who have emerged in the decade following the beginnings of the peace process. The re-emergence of history as a strand in the Irish novel is considered in relation to Roddy Doyle and Dermot Bolger; as too are the ways whereby the novels of Deirdre Madden have registered the world of visual art and visual artists. Rewritings and re-adaptations of Shakespeare by the present generation of Irish playwrights, both North and South, provide a further barometer for writing in a time of change.

The contributors to this volume are from Ireland, North and South, from the Irish diaspora in Britain and in Scotland, and from Europe and from the United States. Many of their essays originated from the international conferences of the North East Irish Culture Network (NEICN) held annually at the University of Sunderland; others result from co-operation and partnership between NEICN and the Irish Studies work now thriving at the University of Glasgow. Both Sunderland and Glasgow have long been home to large and settled Irish diaspora communities, and it is a special satisfaction to us that from these communities outside the island of Ireland we can foster study in response to what is best and new in Ireland's continually developing culture.

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PART ONE

New Territories

Learning How to Live: David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*

TOM HERRON

The tragedies of the past have left a deep and profoundly regrettable legacy of suffering. We must never forget those who have died or been injured, and their families. But we can best honour them through a fresh start, in which we firmly dedicate ourselves to the achievement of reconciliation, tolerance, and mutual trust, and to the protection and vindication of the human rights of all.

— *The Agreement*, 10 April 1998

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) into the Canadian Indian residential schools scandal that opened in Ottawa in June 2008 is the most recent example of a modern form of inquiry that, in its most famous incarnation, came to characterize South Africa's formal transition from the period of apartheid to what is often described – heroically if, perhaps, somewhat prematurely – as the New South Africa or, even, the Rainbow Nation. On the opening day of the Canadian inquiry, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation asked how it was possible to construct an adequate 'truth' concerning events that occurred up to half a century earlier. Further to this, it asked: even if the 'truth' of what 'really' happened is somehow achieved, then does reconciliation inevitably follow? Since the first TRC – set up in Zimbabwe in 1984 to investigate the Matabeleland massacres by Zanu PF forces – the possibility of reconciliation produced by such truth-finding inquiries has been encouraged through special measures, such as the granting of indemnity against prosecution dependent on full disclosure, the emphasis on inquisitorial rather than adversarial modes of inquiry, and, perhaps most importantly,

the adoption of legal protocols that are in important ways, extra-judicial: TRCs are not Courts of Law; there is no prosecution, there is no defence. In this sense they must be distinguished from those trials of individuals that have followed major wars and massacres, such as those held at Nuremberg (1945–46) or The Hague (into the Rwandan genocide, and the war crimes perpetrated during the breakup of former Yugoslavia).

So, in Bolivia, in South Africa, in Chile, in Algeria and many other countries,¹ TRCs have played an important, if not unproblematic, role in the establishment of new ‘official’ truths and, leading on from that, the forging of those processes of ‘forgiveness’ and ‘healing’ that are frequently cited as prerequisites for the development of sustainable post-conflict civil society. As yet, however, there has been no TRC to inquire into the events of the Northern Ireland conflict (1966–1998).² To some extent this is surprising given the ways in which the peace process in the North – torturous, labyrinthine, and incomplete as it has been – is held up in some quarters as an example to other societies in conflict. But one only has to look at long-standing failures of truth-recovery (the farcical testimony given to Lord Saville’s new Bloody Sunday Inquiry by former British paratroopers, many of whom seem to have suffered catastrophic levels of amnesia concerning their actions in Derry on the afternoon of 30 January 1972; the persistent denial by the British Government of the well-documented collusion that occurred for more than two decades between the security forces and loyalist paramilitaries; the continuing silence of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (PIRA) on the fate of the ‘disappeared’: those people abducted and murdered and whose bodies have never been recovered) to see the difficulty that all parties to the conflict might have in coming to a full truth concerning their past actions (both heroic and less commendable).

This is not to say that ‘truth’ and ‘reconciliation’ are somehow absent from Northern Ireland. Indeed, a veritable industry comprising academics,

- 1 For discussion on lessons that might be learned from TRCs in other parts of the world, see Hamber 1998.
- 2 I follow David McKittrick’s dating of the beginning of the ‘Troubles’ to 1966: (McKittrick, 2000).

social workers, cross-community activists, business development officers, church outreach workers, civil servants, advertising executives, artists and art administrators, counsellors, politicians, and many others, has developed in the North devoted to the understanding of conflict and its immediate resolution, and to initiatives promoting 'peace and recci' as the panolpy of processes at all levels of the social formation has come to be popularly known. A very recent development, occuring only one week before the publication of David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*³ was former First Minister Ian Paisley's announcement of the creation of a four-member panel of victims' commissioners and the allocation of £33 million for the 'victims' sector' over the next three years. This is the culmination of many initiatives in which the hurt caused to victims of the conflict has begun to be addressed. Such a turn to the victims – evidenced also in the new Bloody Sunday Inquiry, the Stevens Enquiry, the Eames/Bradley Commission (the Consultative Group on the Past), the Police Service of Northern Ireland's Historical Enquiries Team, the Irish Government's Remembrance Commission, the work of the Police Ombudsman, and the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims' Remains; as well as in smaller-scale campaigns, such as those fought by the sisters of Robert McCartney, the family and supporters of Pat Finucane, and the families of the victims of the Omagh bombings – is, no doubt, a manifestation of how far Northern Ireland has come since the PIRA ceasefire of August 1994 and the Good Friday Agreement of April 1998. It is perhaps only when violence has ended that trauma suffered and perpetrated can begin to be more fully comprehended. But at a moment in which the demands of reconciliation and cross-party agreement are paramount, there is a severe danger that the 'truth recovery' avowedly at the heart of each of these initiatives is in peril due to the political, economic and social imperatives of post-Agreement Northern Ireland.

Imagining the existence of a TRC for Northern Ireland, *The Truth Commissioner* is tightly but uncannily indexed (the novel's action is located in a strangely disoriented present) into the truth recovery initiatives set

3 4 February 2008.

out above. By focalizing so much of the narrative through the eponymous truth commissioner, Henry Stanfield, the novel voices for much of its duration a weary scepticism towards the claims and rhetorics of such commissions. At the same time – by giving such prominence to the testimony of the family of one of the disappeared – the novel displays an acute sensitivity to the need of victims’ families to find the truth of what happened to their loved ones. To a greater extent than any other work of fiction produced in the North of Ireland in recent years, *The Truth Commissioner* is an extraordinarily timely intervention at a moment when the past, in the words of Seamus Deane ‘is at the mercy of the present moment’ (Deane, 1991: xxi). For those who assert the necessity of looking forward to a bright and, no doubt, better future, Park’s novel is an uncomfortable reminder that the past cannot be escaped. Amid, or rather, as we shall see, below, the photo-op smiles and the blandishments of the New Northern Ireland, there is a hidden reservoir of injustice that makes intense demands upon the present. And where official channels of recognition are blocked, other alternative and minor forms of remembering come into force: the annual commemoration parade, vigils, campaign groups, and, in the realm of the arts, the work of poets, film-makers, muralists, and novelists. In bringing to light aspects of the past that find no voice in the present – more than that, that are ruthlessly silenced in the present – artists and other advocates of memory, not only re-imagine what has been forgotten, but also imagine a present and a future that would accommodate that past in all its glory and shame. I want to argue in this essay that *The Truth Commissioner*, for all its sense of disappointment and loss, is such a work. At the same time I want to examine the ways in which the novel’s scepticism is itself overcome – albeit cautiously – by a certain optimism, suggesting that some form of truth leading, perhaps, to some form of reconciliation may *just* be possible in the ‘new’ Northern Ireland. The fact that this reconciliation occurs only in the realm of fiction, and has not substantially been matched in the social formation of the North (more segregated now than at any time since the foundation of the statelet in 1921) guards against blithe celebration of reconciliation and healing. This is especially the case bearing in mind that the novel’s suggestion of the possibility of transformation is the result not of legal, state-engendered

process, but occurs through an entirely unpredictable haecceity of circumstances. This makes for – as several reviewers of the novel attest – an enjoyable, even satisfying sense of readerly resolution. However, the fact that just beyond the borders of the book, in the social formation on which the novel draws and to which it is addressed – albeit in visionary terms (the likelihood of a TRC for Northern Ireland is precisely nil) – there is so little evidence of ground-root societal reconciliation, of genuine social rapprochement, ensures that *The Truth Commissioner* remains an unsettling, provoking text that brushes abrasively against the highly polished grain of contemporary Northern Ireland politics.

The novel's resonant title is, in fact, the designation offered personally by British Prime Minister Brown to Henry Stanfield who, for some considerable time, seems to occupy center-stage of the novel. 'Corroded with scepticism',⁴ Stanfield is closely aligned to the novel's omniscient narrative voice, and this, coupled with the fact that he is the carrier of the rather grand title, and the fact that he is the officer of state to whom all other protagonists are called to account, encourages an initially powerful identification with the character that takes the form of a strange transference, in that both character and reader are drawn for analogous reasons into the rhetorically and hermeneutically suggestive phrase – 'Truth Commissioner':

he has to admit that it was the job's title that first prompted his acceptance. 'Truth Commissioner' has a nice ring to it and its accompanying salary is almost as generous as its scope. ... The job title has a magisterial ring to it but also a rather totalitarian, industrial edge, and he enjoys this juxtaposition of ideas. But what he enjoys most is thinking of the book that will surely come out of it and already he's batting ideas around for a title – *The Whole Truth ... Nothing But the Truth* ... perhaps even *The Freedom of Truth*. (Park, 2008: 18–19)⁵

The novel's present-time schema begins in South Africa, where Stanfield and his team of younger colleagues are based to learn lessons from

4 The phrase is from J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (Coetzee, 1999; 102), a novel with which *The Truth Commissioner* is in close dialogue.

5 All subsequent pages reference to the novel are to this edition.

participants in the South African TRC. Any sense of idealism within the workings of that body, and the transferability of its procedures and ethos to Ireland, is immediately shattered by Stanfield:

three weeks of ... suffocating, endless meetings with the smugly condescending ANC and their carefully chosen supporters; detailed study of legal documentation and lengthy reports; long pointless journeys on dusty roads to the townships to talk to those who had participated in the Truth and Reconciliation process and the interminable lectures on the need for *ubuntu*, the African philosophy of humanism. (Park: 10)

Once in Belfast – the city is rendered entirely and unremittingly in unfavourable terms by Park, as, indeed, is Northern Ireland as a whole: ‘He will spend the next two years living in a city that he considers much the same way as he might think of a piece of dirt that he hoped he had shaken off his shoe’ (Park: 20) – Stanfield’s attention is only tangentially on the job in hand. He occupies his evenings with Kristal, a high-class and enigmatic escort and spends much of his time worrying about the state of his relationship with his estranged daughter, Emma. His depth of cynicism for the process over which he presides is disturbing, but it is a disposition shared by the novel’s other protagonists who are introduced abruptly into the narrative. Park’s selection of four middle-aged men is suggestive that the novel is in large part a satire on aging, desire, and loss. All four protagonists – Stanfield, Francis Gilroy, James Fenton, and Michael Madden – are in the grip of anxieties that may be described as generically male, as having little to do with the central scandal of the novel. One-time senior PIRA leader, Francis Gilroy is now installed in the power-sharing government as Minister of Children and Culture. Nicknamed ‘the lemonade man’ (after C&C, Cantrell and Cochrane, local producers of fizzy drinks), Gilroy secretly reads Philip Larkin in order to raise his cultural capital: ‘needs to read some books. On the quiet. Try to crack it. Understand what it’s all about’ (Park: 72–73). He is a hypochondriac and expends much energy worrying about his position in the movement and about the forthcoming wedding of his daughter to Justin, an English advertising executive. Retired RUC officer, James

Fenton is struggling to come to terms with, among other things, what has happened to the police force of which he was proud:

Like all his generation he has accepted the pension and the pay-off deals that were too generous to be refused, even though it stuck in his throat to have to acknowledge that he was considered part of the corporate embarrassment, part of a past that had to be quietly replaced. (Park: 127)

Michael Madden, now ensconced as an illegal immigrant in Florida, with Ramona his beautiful partner who is expecting their first child, tries desperately to forget his past in Belfast as, again, a PIRA volunteer.

Much of the pleasure of the novel lies in its perspicacity concerning the fate and fears of men. By allotting each character his own substantial portion of text, *The Truth Commissioner* ranges far beyond what might be termed a 'Troubles' or 'post-Troubles' novel. The book reads, initially, as a series of short stories, as each character's narrative is abruptly curtailed, and replaced by an entirely different character, location, and set of concerns. These men are mourning their own lives: Stanfield, for his multiple infidelities and 'lost' daughter; Gilroy, for the toll the political struggle has had on him and his family (even though the family members seem to be coping not at all badly with the hardships they had to endure); Fenton, for the child he and his wife Miriam never had, and for the young boy he betrayed; and Michael who, as a man of a younger generation, seems to mourn for his future, so full of fear is he that the intrusion of his past will destroy everything he has built in his new life. The men's fear and disappointment is sublimated into quite desperate activity: Gilroy's attempts to acculturate himself to poetry and the arts in the midst of a hectic life as government minister; Fenton's lonely efforts for the orphanage in Romania; Stanfield's compulsive womanizing; Madden's attempts to keep his head down, while fostering ambitions, in the United States. It is part of the powerful logic of the novel – in contradistinction to the melancholic disappointment of the 'real' – that such performances of normality can be exposed as precisely that: performances, pretences, deceptions. More by accident than design, the 'secret' shared by these men will be brought to the light through the workings of the maligned Truth

and Reconciliation Commission. And it is surely no coincidence that these male performances are exposed by the promptings of two women: the mother and the sister of one of the ‘disappeared’ whose death and place of burial are among the first to be considered by the Commission: this is ‘case number one hundred and seven, the case of Connor Walshe’ (Park: 316).

In his recommendation that a TRC be established in Northern Ireland, Sir Kenneth Bloomfield suggested that the fate of the disappeared be given priority in any truth-finding process. ‘There is, first of all,’ Bloomfield wrote in 1998, ‘the poignant category of the “disappeared”. ... I would voice a fervent appeal, on behalf of those whose loved ones have disappeared without trace, that those who can offer information about their fate and where bodies may lie should now do so’ (Bloomfield, 1998: 38). He continued:

Many of the relatives have faced up long ago to the probability that a loved one has been killed, but it is one of the most fundamental of human instincts to seek certain knowledge of the fate of a husband or wife, son or daughter, brother or sister. Common humanity cries out for this modest act of mercy. (Bloomfield: 38)

Like decommissioning and collusion, the fate of the disappeared has cast a long shadow over much of the optimism following the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent improvements in so many aspects of life in Northern Ireland. Ten years after the Agreement itself, and nine years after the setting up of the Independent Commission for the Location of Victims’ Remains, and following calls from, among others, former First Minister Ian Paisley and the President of Sinn Féin, Gerry Adams for those with information relating to the disappeared to make it known to the PSNI or An Garda Síochána, the remains of several of the missing are still unrecovered. In imagining Connor Walshe as among these unsolved cases Park’s novel returns us with the uncomfortable but powerful return of the repressed to the darkest, and only belatedly acknowledged, days of the conflict.

In death Connor Walshe *comes to* exert a power that in life he was never able to yield. I stress ‘comes to’ because one of the most remarkable

insights of Park's novel is that this dead boy becomes spectral, and takes on the ethical force that specters possess, only once the institutions of State allow such a becoming-spectral. Connor Walshe only begins his presencing, his haunting once the TRC begins its operations: there is absolutely no evidence presented to us that he exerts any influence (in the form of memory, of guilt, of mourning, of contrition) on the men who will eventually, and against all their wishes, be haunted by him in the most devastating manner. Scarcely invested with an identity in life, the fifteen-year-old police informant meets his end in a farmhouse in South Armagh sometime in the mid-1980s. Abducted, interrogated, executed and then secretly disposed of by the PIRA, Walshe remains, until the inauguration of the TRC, simply one of those more than three thousand victims of the northern conflict. But just as the ghost of Michael Furey materializes almost out of nowhere in a palpable and, for Gabriel Conroy, an overwhelming presence at the close of James Joyce's 'The Dead', Connor Walshe returns as a revenant to unsettle the calm surface of the world of the living just as the angel in St John's Gospel returns to trouble the waters of Bethesda. The strand of images linking each protagonist in which water is invested with restorative and, indeed, curative properties is inaugurated in the novel's Biblical epigraph:

Now there is at Jerusalem by the sheep market a pool, which is called in the Hebrew tongue Bethesda having five porches.

In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water.

For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. (St John 5, 2-4; cited Park: vii)

Not that the four protagonists within the novel are aware of the potentially transformative, even redemptive, effects of Connor Walshe's apparition. Even after being summoned to appear before the Commission, each does everything in his power to avoid reckoning with Walshe. But when, in a remarkable *coup de théâtre juridique*, counsel for Walshe's mother and sister produces a tape-recording of the boy's interrogation just prior to his death, a supplement beyond the already-degraded protocols of

the Commission and beyond the obfuscatory tactics of the men comes into play:

[Fenton] hears the voice of Connor Walshe. And then he's transported once again, despite the resistance of his will, to all the places he heard that voice, the voice that is instantly recognizable, and there's the same pleading, the familiar edge of desperation that he heard in it the very first time, but this time there's no pretence of bravery, no attempt at bravado or aggression. The voice fills the chamber with its whimpering, broken stammer of words and it flows down through the rows of seats and laps round Michael Madden like the water laps and slurps round the jetty at the lake. (Park: 327)

Fenton, Madden and Gilroy have had earlier glimpses of the young man in whose death they, with varying degrees of involvement, participated. Fenton sees his ghostly face materializing out of the mist, 'swooping towards him out of the darkness' (Park: 177), and senses a correspondence between the dead Walshe and Florian, the gifted young boy who befriends him at the Romanian orphanage. Madden half-senses his presence in the child allegedly abused by his local Catholic priest. Gilroy, who for most of the novel succeeds in avoiding being directly implicated with the boy's murder, finally revisits the scene of his death as he sits with Sweeney, his most-trusted advisor, under the stained-glass windows of Clonard Monastery:

'Connor Walshe. After all this time. Who would have thought it?'

'You remember him, Francis?'

'Of course,' Gilroy says as he rubs a finger across his bottom lip. (Park: 271)

And even Stanfield senses that Walshe is somehow imbricated with his own anxieties concerning his relationship with his daughter: 'How can he be tied now to a boy whose photograph he's never seen? How can his desire to see his only child be meshed with some other long-dead boy from a Belfast back street?' (Park: 67).

In some senses the dénouement follows a conventional courtroom drama plot. Connor Walshe's disembodied voice operates in the chamber of the TRC almost as a *deus ex machina*, an unpredictable and uncontrollable final play that puts an end to uncertainty and to game-playing

of all four protagonists. The taped voice possesses an authority – again, an authority that it lacked while it was still alive – that comes from its abyssal appearance, its arrival from an other time, its materialization out of, and across, time to (following Derrida) ‘unhinge’ the present, to open it up, to superimpose upon the present (which is, anyway, only a simulacrum to avert anxiety) the non-contemporaneous presence of past injustice. The fact that the ‘voice’ (disembodied, distorted, and virtual though it is) is captured and transmitted on analogue tape, reminds us of Susan Sontag’s celebration of the photograph as bearer of authenticity, as ‘stencilled off the real’:

a photograph is not only an image (as a painting is an image), an interpretation of the real, it is also a trace, something directly stencilled off the real, like a footprint or a death mask ... a photograph is never less than the registering of an emanation (light waves reflected by objects) – a material vestige of its subject in a way that no painting can be. (Sontag, 1977: 154)

The same is true of the taped voice in which vibrating air produced by the body impacts against an electro-magnetic receiver. So, while the participants in the TRC are in the presence of spectrality at this moment, there is also the shocking and almost unbearable intrusion of the ‘real’:

The voice beats against the walls of the chamber like some moth trapped in a tremble of confusion and looking for release. Stanfield looks down on the listeners and sees their eyes drop to the floor as a kind of collective embarrassed shame settles on the room because they know they’re listening to the voice of a boy who’s about to die and they know that their presence intrudes even all these years later and that their places should be taken by a priest or his family, someone, anyone, who will put a hand on his shoulder and tell him that everything will be alright. They want the tape to stop. (Park: 328)

It is an intensely powerful moment of text. In Deleuzian terms it is a sort of plateau across which the novel’s rhizomatic strands, evasions, opinions, performances, fears, desires, and lies intersect in a moment of absolute clarity. Of course, the moment will pass; the novel will not condense this moment into its own truth. But it is remarkable nonetheless that here, in the derided, compromised chamber, the workings of which even its

presiding officer has precious little faith, a moment of potentiality is produced. It is spectral, yes. But it is also ethical. When Derrida exhorts us (as he most certainly *does*) to learn to live responsibly he stresses that such ethical living must include, indeed depends upon, an awareness of injustices past, present, and future:

The time of the learning to live, a time without a tutelary present, would amount to this ... : to learn to live with ghosts, in the upkeep, the conversation, the company, or the companionship, in the commerce without commerce of ghosts. To live otherwise, and better. No, not better, but more justly. (Derrida, 1994: xviii)

The voice of the ghost, the materialization of what is absolutely other – the trace of a long dead child – ushers in the truth, as they see it, of Madden and Fenton. This subaltern voice also implicates Gilroy, now elevated to among the highest in the land, the representative of Government:

There's nothing [Stanfield] can do now, it's out of his control, ... so slowly he rises and stands waiting until there's perfect silence and then with a curiously light and pleasing sense of recklessness, of flying close to the sun, he says in a loud and steady voice, 'The Commission for Truth and Reconciliation calls Francis Gilroy'. (Park: 346)

Notwithstanding our readerly attachment to Gilroy, this is a delicious, complex moment. It is a moment in which truth, if not attained (there are still inconsistencies between the versions of truth proclaimed by Madden, Fenton, and Gilroy), is at least approached, not least through the men's inadvertent corroboration. Hélène Cixous suggests that 'writing, in its noblest function, is the attempt to unerase, to unearth'; it is a movement 'toward what I call: the Truth' (Cixous, 1993: 9). And if we are suspicious of such fulsome assertions of a singular truth, then Michael Ignatieff's qualification of the concept is extremely apt in the context on what Truth and Reconciliation Commissions may produce by way of truth. If a single truth cannot be arrived at, he argues, then a version of events that 'reduce[s] the numbers of lies that can be circulated unchallenged in public discourse' (Ignatieff, 1996: 113) may well provide, at the very least, some redress to the injustice perpetrated years before.