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# Gothic and Noir: the Genres of the Irish Contemporary Fiction of “Containment”

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## Abstract

This article argues that the trauma of sexual abuse, particularly child abuse, was represented as early as 1965 in John McGahern's *The Dark*, but was only recognized as a major theme in Irish fiction with the publication of Anne Enright's *The Gathering* in 2007. Both works, together with Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, display the kind of avant-garde aesthetics that critics generally associate with the representation of trauma. However, other recent Irish novels have represented the trauma of sexual abuse and of institutional containment through tropes and themes proper to two traditional genres, gothic and crime fiction. Such is the case for Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, and John Banville's Benjamin Black novels.

Keywords: Patrick McCabe's *The Butcher Boy*, Dermot Bolger's *A Second Life*, Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, John McGahern's *The Dark*, Anne Enright's *The Gathering*, Benjamin Black, child abuse in literature, gothic, trauma studies, noir fiction.

## Résumé

*John McGahern fut un des premiers romanciers irlandais à représenter le traumatisme de l'abus sexuel, survenu particulièrement dans l'enfance, dès la publication de *The Dark* en 1965 ; mais que ce ne fut qu'avec *The Gathering* de Anne Enright (2007) que ce thème fut reconnu comme majeur dans la fiction contemporaine, comme le montre aussi le roman de Eimear McBride *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*. Or la critique a souvent soutenu l'idée que la représentation du traumatisme dans la littérature passe nécessairement par des formes avant-gardistes. Cet article vise à montrer que, contrairement à cette théorie, plusieurs œuvres romanesques évoquant les scandales sexuels ainsi que la maltraitance institutionnelle, dénoncés en Irlande à partir des années 1990, empruntent leurs procédés à des genres traditionnels, comme la littérature gothique et le roman noir. C'est le cas de *The Butcher Boy* de Patrick McCabe, de *The Secret Scripture* de Sebastian Barry, ainsi que des romans de Benjamin Black écrits par John Banville.*

*Mots clés : *The Butcher Boy*, *A Second Life*, *The Secret Scripture*, *The Dark*, *The Gathering*, Benjamin Black, abus sexuels dans la fiction, littérature gothique, roman noir, études sur le traumatisme.*

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In 2010, writing about Anne Enright's *The Gathering*<sup>1</sup>, Liam Harte expressed his amazement in front of what he called "the continuing proliferation of first-hand accounts of child physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, within Irish families as well as within the state's network of industrial schools", as well as "the plethora of recent films, plays, art works, and autobiographies that anatomize Irish childhoods from plural perspectives"<sup>2</sup>. To a certain extent, Harte was providing an answer to Declan Kiberd's own regrets as to the relative absence, in his opinion, of literary responses to the social changes entailed by the prosperity of the Celtic Tiger<sup>3</sup>. As a matter of fact Harte's remark casts light on the reason why Irish artists and writers may have, at least to a certain extent, left aside the portrayal of the effects of the economic boom: they seem to have been far more eager to respond in their own way to the scandals of clerical abuse that broke out in the years 2000. The four official reports published between 2009 – when the Ryan report was made public – and 2011 with the Cloyne report, set in relief the fact that it was not just isolated individuals, but the whole of Irish society who had to suffer the devastating and long-lasting consequences of several decades of generalized child abuse or child neglect, most especially at the hand of clerical orders, with the complicity of the State. The reports were appalling not only because of what they revealed of the nature of the crimes, but most of all because of the sheer scale on which they were committed. The slogan used by the "One in Four" association in the introduction to their newsletter is quite revealing in this regard, claiming: "We want Ireland to move from a society where one in four is sexually abused, to a society where nobody is abused"<sup>4</sup>. Such widely-spread and long-lasting victimization was bound to take on the dimension of a collective trauma, to be compared in its consequences to a war, a natural disaster, a revolution or a dictatorship. Artists with their heightened sensitivity were prone to perceive those effects more clearly, more acutely and more readily than politicians, journalists, critics or even sociologists. In this regard, their role in society is comparable to that of whistle-blowers. Enright's 2007 *The Gathering* is a case in point, and it has often been analyzed through the critical lens of trauma studies. Liam Harte for instance in the chapter mentioned above presents the novel as "an attempt to replicate the damaged psyche of the trauma survivor"<sup>5</sup>; he goes on to argue that *The Gathering* is "the most searing fictional representation to date of the devastating effects of the trauma of child sexual abuse in Ireland on identity, agency, and relationships, and of the corresponding, profoundly difficult need

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1. Anne Enright, *The Gathering*, London, Jonathan Cape, 2007.

2. Liam Harte, *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987-2007*, Oxford, Wiley-Blackwell, 2014, p. 22.

3. Declan Kiberd, *The Irish Writer and the World*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, p. 278.

4. [<http://www.oneinfour.ie/>] (Last accessed November 7 2017).

5. Liam Harte, *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel 1987-2007*, *op. cit.*, p. 223.

to counteract silence and forgetting through disclosure". Sarah C. Gardam supports that opinion and reads the novel as "an exploration of sexual trauma" and simultaneously as "an investigation of the inevitable human trauma of the split subject"<sup>6</sup>". In Carol Dell'Amico's words, "Enright's embedding of traumatic personal and national histories in the testimonial mode constitutes the basis of the novel's exploration of history's forms, nature and uses"<sup>7</sup>".

However, Enright was actually not the first Irish writer to tackle the difficult issue of child abuse. As early as 1965, John McGahern already told the same story of sexual trauma in *The Dark*<sup>8</sup>. But the novel was written at a time when readers and critics were not prepared to understand it as such. As a result, the immediate consequences for the book and its author were censorship and banishment. Enright's novel and the critical readings it has entailed have now made it possible to re-consider *The Dark* not just as an existential quest, as it has often been defined, but as a trauma narrative raising the same issues as *The Gathering*. The first of those issues is the necessity for writers to devise a narrative mode liable to convey the disorientation, the dislocation of personal identity, and the blurring of the truth engendered by the trauma of child abuse. The other feature of the representation of sexual abuse is the attention it draws to the body in its most repulsive, or rather abject representations.

The search for a proper stylistic expression of the trauma of sexual abuse and of the representation of the abject, initiated in its time by McGahern but only clearly recognized by the critics in *The Gathering*, paved the way for such a novel as Eimear McBride's *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, published in 2013. Through the experimental form she uses, McBride explores even further the limits of readability in its effort to render the workings of a damaged psyche. According to Dominick La Capra, "the literary (or even art in general) is a prime, if not the privileged, place for giving voice to trauma"<sup>9</sup>". However, as the very essence of trauma lies in the fact that it cannot be directly represented, artists need to display strategies not straightforwardly referential that can prove appropriate, explaining why, to quote Roger Luckhurst, "The trauma aesthetic is uncompromisingly avant-garde: experimental, fragmented, refusing the consolations of beautiful forms, and suspicious of familiar representational and narrative conventions"<sup>10</sup>".

The avant-garde nature of John McGahern's writings, which many critics initially failed to distinguish when they labelled him a realist, or even parochial

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6. Sarah C. Gardam, "Default(ing) to the Oldest Scar: A Psychoanalytical Investigation of Subjectivity in Anne Enright's *The Gathering*", *Études irlandaises* n° 34.1, Printemps 2009, p. 100.

7. Carol Dell'Amico, "Anne Enright's *The Gathering*: Trauma, Testimony, Memory", *New Hibernian Review*, vol.14, n° 3, Autumn 2010, p. 59-73.

8. John McGahern, *The Dark*, London, Faber & Faber, 1965.

9. Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University, 2001, p. 190.

10. Roger Luckhurst, *The Trauma Question*, London, Routledge, 2008, p. 81.

novelist<sup>11</sup>, has now widely been acknowledged by such commentators as Eamon Maher, Dermot McCarthy, Stanley Van der Ziel, or Richard Robinson<sup>12</sup>. This experimental aesthetics is also recognizable in *The Gathering*, but it was decidedly taken one step further by Eimear McBride when she resorted to a broken-up, a-grammatical, dislocated syntax all along the narrative of *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*<sup>13</sup>. The three narratives have indeed in common their avoidance of “familiar representational and narrative conventions”, as well as their confessional mode.

However, contrary to the theory of trauma narrative as being necessarily avant-garde, the point of this chapter is to analyze Irish narratives of sexual abuse which rely on well-established, traditional tropes and themes. They involve two recognized genres in particular: gothic literature and noir literature. It is my contention that the reason for this affinity between the reality of clerical abuse and its literary representations through gothic or crime fiction lies in the expression used by James M. Smith in the title of his much-acclaimed 2007 book, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*<sup>14</sup>. As a matter of fact, Smith had already used the word “containment” in an article published in 2001 entitled “Remembering Ireland's architecture of containment: ‘telling’ stories in *The Butcher Boy* and *States of Fear*”<sup>15</sup>. In that earlier article Smith argued that the changes happening in the 1990s and epitomized by the election of Mary Robinson ushered in a new Ireland ready to confront its past and to renegotiate its identity through a new openness to a plurality of stories. Foremost among those stories, according to Smith, were those of institutional abuse, which had so far remained secret through the combined efforts of Church and state. In Smith's own words, the function of those stories was to “excavate the nation's architecture of containment”<sup>16</sup>. Now the awful connotations of the verb “to excavate” bring to mind the appalling discovery made in 2014 of an unmarked graveyard lying behind a former home run by the Roman Catholic Church, where almost 800 children died between 1925 and 1961. The graveyard was discovered in the former grounds of one of Ireland's “mother-and-baby homes” run by the Bon Secours order of nuns. One minister at the time declared: “How can we show in Ireland that we have matured as a society if we cannot call out these horrific

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11. See in particular Rüdiger Imhof, *Contemporary Irish Writers*, Tübingen, Günter Naar Verlag, 1990.

12. Eamon Maher, *John McGahern, From the Local to the Universal*, Dublin, The Liffey Press, 2003; Dermot McCarthy, *John McGahern and the Art of Memory*, London and Bern, Peter Lang, 2010; Stanley Van der Ziel, *John McGahern and the Imagination of Tradition*, Cork, Cork University Press, 2016; Richard Robinson, *John McGahern and Modernism*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016.

13. Eimear McBride, *A Girl is a Half-Formed Thing*, London, Faber & Faber, 2013.

14. James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*, Notre Dame (Ind.), University of Notre Dame Press, 2007.

15. James M. Smith, “Remembering Ireland's architecture of containment: ‘telling’ stories in *The Butcher Boy* and ‘States of Fear’”, *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies*, Fall-Winter, 2001.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 111-130.

acts of the past for what they were? They were wilful and deliberate neglect of children, who were the most vulnerable of all... The only way we can address that injustice is to tell their story, to determine the truth<sup>17</sup>.”

What is striking in the language used to refer to those revelations is that, although meant to describe facts which were all too real, both Smith’s and the minister’s words are also typical of the lexical field of gothic literature – whether meant as a historical tradition<sup>18</sup> or a mode of writing<sup>19</sup>; thus the stories which “excavate” the past may remind us of all sorts of horror tales, including the most famous Irish one: Dracula, the undead creature who in order to survive has to carry along through all his travels forty coffins filled with earth<sup>20</sup>. Likewise, the word “horrific” employed by the minister to describe the burying of hundreds of dead neglected children sounds like an echo of the vocabulary of “horror” proper to the literature of terror. The emphasis placed by Smith on the architecture of institutional abuse is also in keeping with the central role played by a certain kind of landscapes, settings and buildings in Gothic tales, which often revolve around innocent young women locked up in attics, dungeons or ruined castles, sometimes even buried alive or forgotten in lonesome graveyards. According to specialist Chris Baldick, gothic combines “a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration<sup>21</sup>”. Writing about Patrick McCabe’s *The Butcher Boy* in the article mentioned above, James M. Smith demonstrates that the architecture of containment proper to institutional abuse in post-independence Ireland led to the same kind of disintegration, in this case the gradual descent into madness of the novel’s protagonist Francie Brady. However, in my opinion, if Smith does call McCabe’s novel “dark and satiric”<sup>22</sup>, he overlooks the novel’s narrative strategy and stylistic devices, limiting it to a mere testimony meant to “indict” and to “expose” the architecture of containment. Smith goes as far as comparing the fictional Francie Brady to a real-existing case-study, a boy called Brendan O’Donnell; he even draws a parallel between *The Butcher Boy* and the documentary film “States of Fear”.

Contrary to this reading of the novel as a realistic example of institutional abuse, I would like to pinpoint how McCabe’s novel precisely departs from the

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17. *The Telegraph*, “Ireland considers inquiry into mass grave of children at Catholic Church home”, 4 June 2014, [<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/ireland/10875876/Ireland-considers-inquiry-into-mass-grave-of-children-at-Catholic-Church-home.html>] (Last accessed November 7 2017).

18. As Fred Botting or David Punter would have it.

19. In the sense used by Christina Morin and Niall Gillespie in *Irish Gothics: Genres, Forms, Modes, and Traditions, 1760-1890*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.

20. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897). Chapter XVIII “Dr Seward’s Diary”.

21. Chris Baldick, *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2009, p. xix.

22. James M. Smith, *Ireland’s Magdalen Laundries...*, *op. cit.*, p. 125.

codes of realist fiction and resorts to the generic features of gothic literature in order to arouse in the reader's imagination the same type of terror and anxiety produced in their own times by such tales as *The Monk*, *Uncle Silas*, "The Fall of the House of Usher", *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*. Although one of the earliest depictions of child-abuse in contemporary Irish fiction, after John McGahern's *The Dark*, Patrick McCabe's 1992 *The Butcher Boy* is perhaps one of the most unsettling of them all, subverting as it does all sorts of narrative conventions. The opening lines of the novel confront the reader with a voice whose origin cannot easily be placed: "When I was a young lad twenty or thirty or forty years ago I lived in a small town where they were all after me on account of what I done on Mrs Nugent<sup>23</sup>." To a certain extent, the narrator's apparent inability to situate himself in time echoes the fate of so many protagonists of gothic tales who have likewise lost their bearings and for whom time has ceased to flow naturally. A case in point is Jonathan Harker who anxiously confides in his diary that he has become unable to distinguish between night and day or to tell how much time has elapsed since his imprisonment in Dracula's castle. The opening line of *The Butcher Boy* also suggests the character's paranoid streak, as he claims to have been pursued by everybody – "they were all after me" –. This reads like another echo of the plight of many gothic protagonists who rightfully or not feel they are persecuted by evil forces, such as Charles Maturin's Melmoth, or Reverend Jennings in Sheridan Le Fanu's story "Green Tea". However one of the most disturbing questions raised by the narrative strategy devised by McCabe is to decide whether Francie embodies what French critic Joël Malrieux calls "the phenomenon<sup>24</sup>", or if he plays the role of the victim of the traditional gothic tale.

Indeed on the one hand, Francie's ability to modulate his voice and to impersonate the various characters he comes across, whether real or imaginary, suggests an uncanny capacity to morph into whatever shape he chooses, and even to take possession of other people's bodies, the way vampires and other monstrous creatures do. The most monstrous aspect of his character is of course the horrific murder he commits when he kills Mrs Nugent with a butcher's knife usually meant to slaughter pigs, then rips her stomach open and guts her innards the way you do with a slaughtered animal. On the other hand, we also discover that Francie was brought up in a dysfunctional family, by a father who was himself an orphan, who took to drinking and finally abandoned his family. As to Francie's mother, after years of depression, she ended up committing suicide. Even though an orphan, Francie is let down by the village community, and by the state and church institutions supposed to look after such vulnerable individuals as

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23. Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy*, London, Picador, 1992, p. 1.

24. Joël Malrieux, *Le Fantastique*, Paris, Hachette, 1992.



himself. They place him in a reformatory school, which Francie calls “the house of a hundred windows<sup>25</sup>”. The obvious exaggeration regarding the number of windows, besides calling forth the boy’s distorted view of reality, draws attention to the threatening aspect of the building itself, a typical trope of many gothic narratives whose plot revolves around such fearful locations, such as Count Dracula’s castle, or Uncle Silas’s mansion where Le Fanu’s female narrator is also trapped. The phrase also calls to mind the correspondence between the architectural design of an institutional building and its repressive, corrective, even destructive function, evidenced by Michel Foucault in *Surveiller et Punir*<sup>26</sup>. Not only is Francie locked up in that institution like the typical prisoner of gothic tales, but once inside he is also assaulted by a paedophile priest, himself reminiscent of the lecherous clerical figures who populate gothic narratives.

However, despite Francie’s obvious sufferings, McCabe makes the persecuted become a persecutor, suggesting how even though himself a victim of abject treatment, the boy comes to incarnate the part of itself that society finds revolting and seeks to eliminate. Through the definition she gives of abjection in *Power of Horror*<sup>27</sup>, Julia Kristeva reminds us that all societies rely on a number of purifying rituals<sup>28</sup>: likewise, Francie, because he comes from a poor, damaged family, embodies the archaism, unruliness, disorder and uncleanness that a modernising Ireland wants to repress through a process of abjection. McCabe’s butcher boy is also a reincarnation of the gothicised child of 19<sup>th</sup> century Victorian literature, the uncanny or monstrous child. According to Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben in their introduction to *Neo-Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, the monstrous child becomes even more prevalent in neo-Victorian fiction, and “does so as the after-image of horrific historical traumas (for example slavery, child prostitution and racism)<sup>29</sup>”. In the case of Ireland, it is quite obvious that the traumatic past of which Francie is the after-image is institutional child abuse, the memory of which was repressed but keeps reappearing in a nightmarish fashion.

Dermot Bolger, who in his first novel *The Journey Home* described his youthful protagonists as the “children of limbo<sup>30</sup>”, also revives and re-appropriates some of the tropes of gothic fiction in his novel *A Second Life*, a first version of which was published in 1993 in the wake of the revelations regarding the Mother

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25. Patrick McCabe, *The Butcher Boy*, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

26. Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et Punir*, Paris, Gallimard, 1975.

27. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection*, transl. by Leon S. Roudiez, New York, Columbia University Press, 1982.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 90-113.

29. Marie-Luise Kohlke and Christian Gutleben, eds, *Neo-Victorian Gothic: Horror, Violence and Degeneration in the Re-Imagined Nineteenth Century*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2012, p. 13.

30. Dermot Bolger, *The Journey Home*, London, Penguin Books, 1991.

and Baby homes and the Magdalene Asylums, and that he “renewed”, as he puts it, in 2010. The title itself harks back to the theme of the double which looms so large in gothic literature. Indeed, the protagonist Sean, as an adopted child, has a double identity which returns to haunt him after he goes through a near-death experience as a consequence of a car-crash. Despite the deep coma he falls in, Sean survives the accident and therefore resurrects as it were from the dead. While unconscious, he is visited by the vision of a young man’s face, a sort of *Doppelgänger* returning from the distant past. Haunted by the image of that face, Sean undertakes a frenetic search through the archives of the Botanic Garden, where he was taken for walks as a child. He finally discovers that the face was probably that of a 19<sup>th</sup> century gardener living at the time of the Famine, of whom he may possibly be a reincarnation. The story is also double in the sense that Bolger alternates Sean’s narrative with that of his birth mother, who still thinks of him as Francis, has been living in England for almost thirty years, and who experiences a sort of telepathic warning of her son’s accident. According to Freud in his famous essay on the Uncanny<sup>31</sup>, the fear aroused by the reappearance of a familiar object under the traits of its unfamiliar double must be assigned to the return of what the unconscious has repressed. The traumatic truth that was thus repressed and silenced in Sean’s case revolves around the circumstances of his birth: how his mother was taken by force into a Mother and Child Home to deliver her baby, how it was taken away from her at birth and given out for adoption. Sean’s mother never told anyone, not even her husband and daughters, about the existence of that first child; when she sought information about her son’s fate, the Church administration denied her the right to know of his whereabouts. In the present time of the narrative, Sean has to dig into a series of family and state secrets when he decides to investigate his real origins. With a good deal of irony, Bolger highlights the clash between a postmodern, ultra-liberal Ireland, and its archaic history of gothic violence, terror and repression towards women and children, in a scene where Sean goes to visit the convent where his mother was locked up in the 1950s. Indeed, the convent has now been transformed into a high-profile school for girls, the ancient delivery ward has been rehabilitated into a brand new science laboratory, and the school boasts several national science awards and two women TDs as former students. The burial plot where the women who died in child birth and the stillborn children were buried had to be excavated and the bodies cremated so as to build a new extension for the school. Bolger thus suggests that the new Ireland was literally built upon the forgotten ruins and bones of those women and children who were abused and neglected

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31. Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII (1917-1919): *An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, p. 217-256.

in the past, and how the traces of their existence were erased as much as possible. That constitutes an example of what Paul Ricoeur in his book *Memory History Forgetting* calls "forgetting through the effacing of traces"<sup>32</sup>. Conversely, when Sean confronts the nuns with this now invisible past, they claim what Ricoeur calls "the right to forgetfulness". But Ricoeur argues that there is a thin line between amnesty and amnesia and that the injunction to forget is a sure way of depriving private and collective memory of "the necessary crisis of identity which makes a lucid re-appropriation of the past and of its traumatic significance possible"<sup>33</sup>.

Like McCabe and Bolger, Sebastian Barry in his 2008 novel *The Secret Scripture*<sup>34</sup> borrows the themes and tropes of gothic literature to emphasise the forced forgetfulness imposed by the Irish State and Church authorities. Presented as a manuscript discovered by chance under the floor boards of an ancient psychiatric hospital about to be renovated- yet another example of a building which comes to stand for a past that everyone wants to destroy and forget about- the protagonist Roseanne's written self-narrative of her life alternates with the medical and personal notes taken down by her psychiatrist Dr Grene. Barry thus reactivates a narrative device proper to several gothic tales, that of the allegedly "real" manuscript, used for example by Le Fanu in *The Purcell Papers*, Edgar Allan Poe in *Manuscript Found in a Bottle*, or by Stoker in *Dracula*, in order to enhance the prevailing importance of the archive. On the other hand, the device also draws attention to the sheer textuality of the past, which comes to us only in the shape of narratives, and is therefore always open to questioning, and denial, as suggested by the epilogue to Stoker's *Dracula* : "We were struck with the fact, that in all the mass of material of which the record is composed, there is hardly one authentic document; nothing but a mass of type-writing"<sup>35</sup>. Roseanne has been living in the hospital for an indefinite period of time. Incarcerated like so many gothic heroines for her alleged insanity, she embodies an Irish version of the madwoman in the attic, for the only reason that she gave birth to an illegitimate child. Like many gothic heroines too, it was a Catholic priest who first persecuted her and finally obtained to have her institutionalised. Like Sean's mother in Bolger's novel, her child was taken away from her and given out to adoptive parents. Dr Grene, who may embody the rational scientist in search of the truth and in this regard comparable to Dr Seward in *Dracula* or to Dr Hesselius in LeFanu's *In a Glass Darkly*, starts an inquiry on Roseanne's past. As he tries to retrace her

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32. Paul Ricoeur, *Memory History Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey & David Pellauer, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 2009, p. 418.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 460.

34. Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture*, London, Faber & Faber, 2008.

35. Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897), New York/London, Norton critical edition, 1997, p. 326.

story through documents and archives, he eventually discovers he is the very son that Roseanne had to abandon at birth. This melodramatic plot development, to which gothic fiction frequently resorts to as well, comes after Roseanne has reported several violent, horrific incidents in her life, equally proper to melodrama. She thus recalls the secret burial of an IRA soldier in the cemetery of which Roseanne's father was the keeper, or a fire started by the same father in a girls' orphanage while he was trying to burn rats to death, an incident which caused him to commit suicide by hanging. Roseanne's narrative repeatedly recurs to the traditional lexical field of the literature of terror, as in: "It was then the horror of horrors happened<sup>36</sup>", "I had never seen such terror<sup>37</sup>", "Terror rose in me from the cold flags of the floor<sup>38</sup>", "I was frightened, I was terrified of this house<sup>39</sup>." Through Roseanne's story, which spans over several decades, from the Irish War of Independence to the present, Barry suggests that it is Irish history itself, with its hidden crimes, horrible secrets and forgotten victims, which is the gothic nightmare *par excellence*, as is made obvious in the following phrases: "In a country of cupboards, every one with a skeleton in it, especially after the civil war, no one was exempt<sup>40</sup>", or "The savage fairy-tale of life in Ireland in the twenties and thirties<sup>41</sup>", or again: "the strange chapters of this country's bewildering story<sup>42</sup>".

Like McCabe, Bolger and Barry, John Banville has contributed to the writing of a chapter of the moral history of his country, to paraphrase James Joyce's famous claim<sup>43</sup>, and he too chose genre fiction to write it. Writing under the pen-name of Benjamin Black, but exposing the sham at the same time by having his real name printed on the book cover, Banville has so to speak been using his own *Doppelgänger* to indulge in crime fiction, creating the recurring character of Quirke, a pathologist turned sleuth. There is in fact a direct lineage between gothic and noir, as is evidenced by Edgar Allan Poe creating the character of Inspector Dupin, or Wilkie Collins mixing investigation and anguish in *The Moonstone*. However, John Banville declared in several interviews that it was his discovery of Georges Simenon which aroused his desire to experiment with crime fiction. On the other hand, one of his most recent publication under the name of Black is subtitled *A Philip Marlowe Novel*<sup>44</sup>, showing fiction's eerie capacity to resurrect characters abandoned by their dead creators. A number of critics

36. Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture*, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

38. *Ibid.*, p. 111.

39. *Ibid.*, p. 265.

40. *Ibid.*, p. 162.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 142.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 188.

43. James Joyce, Letter to Grant Richards, 20 May 1906; Stuart Gilbert, ed., *Letters*, Vol. 1, New York, Viking Press p. 63; Richard Ellmann, ed., *Selected Letters*, Faber 1975, p. 88-89.

44. John Banville, *The Black-eyed Blonde: A Philip Marlowe Novel*, London, Macamillan, 2014.

have remarked that Banville had already written about crime in his supposedly "serious" novels such as *The Book of Evidence*<sup>45</sup>. Yet Banville had also always displayed a strong reluctance to be labelled an "Irish" writer writing about Irish matters, contrary to what he started doing in the Benjamin Black novels. Situated in the Dublin of the 1950s, their plots quite obviously rely upon the 1990s revelations about the collusion of State and Church in institutional abuse. Of course it is impossible to decide whether Banville wanted to write crime fiction in the first place and discovered in such real documents as the Ryan and Murphy reports the right material he needed to spark his inspiration; or if he wanted to write about the scandals and chose the genre of crime fiction in order to do so. The fact remains that the features of noir fiction are especially well-suited to the recreation of the atmosphere of secrecy, degeneration and corruption that hovered about State and Church activities in 1950s Ireland. In the same way as Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammet or James M. Cain described Los Angeles as a vicious and savage urban jungle deprived of spiritual values, and the large city generally speaking as symbolic of sterile modernity, corruption, and death, Benjamin Black uses Dublin as the grimy, dark, gloomy backdrop to his character's investigations. The character of Quirke, a lonely, melancholy man who stands on the fringes of high society and is thus able to watch its customs and uncover its secrets, is typical of the marginalised, rough-tempered but honest and dedicated private eye, in the manner of Chandler's Philip Marlowe or Hammet's Sam Spade. Like them too Quirke figures a modern avatar of the avenging knight or of the frontier cow boy, whose quest for truth and justice is motivated by a troubled past. Indeed we discover in the course of the series of novels that Quirke himself was an orphan who grew up in several institutions, including an industrial school located by the sea-side, perhaps inspired by Letterfrack Industrial School in County Galway. Quirk's job as a pathologist leads him to literally make dead bodies reveal their secrets, another echo of the excavation of the past mentioned above. In the absence of reliable archives, documents or traces, proper to the criminal activities of the Catholic Church in the institutions it was running, the pathologist turned investigator has to gather and decipher all kinds of clues. The very name of his occupation also draws attention to the pathologies that he strives to bring to light, and which extend to the whole of society. Indeed Quirke like Marlowe or Spade is not only interested in solving a mysterious murder, but seeks to stand up against the political corruption of his country. The plots of Benjamin Black's novels always criss-cross the upper-class world made up of judges, wealthy industrials, high-profile politicians, with that of the catholic clergy with its typical lot of lecherous or dangerous-looking priests and tyrannical nuns, residing in isolated, enclosed ins-

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45. John Banville, *The Book of Evidence*, London, Secker and Warburg, 1989.

titutions. The unravelling of the mystery generally exposes crimes of child abuse, incest, or child trafficking, together with the imprisonment and the enslavement of women in the Magdalene asylums. However the resolution of the mystery at the end of the novels matters less than the creation of a heavy atmosphere of suspicion and danger, where evil, pain and death lurk everywhere. The denouement generally fails to cleanse the city of its corruption, as the political power of those who manipulate the strings backstage is not broken in the end, as is the case also in Dashiell Hammet's *Red Harvest*<sup>46</sup> for instance. The ubiquity of evil which permeates the world is reminiscent of the ethos and aesthetics of American southern Gothicism such as illustrated by William Faulkner, whose Temple Drake may have been an inspiration for Quirke's daughter Phoebe, especially in the episode of *Christine Falls*<sup>47</sup> where she is assaulted by a driver in the same way as Temple is in *Sanctuary*.

## Conclusion

As a conclusion, we may recall Terry Eagleton's argument to explain the amazing predominance of Irish gothic literature at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> and all through the 19<sup>th</sup> century: "Violent, criminal, priest-ridden, autocratic, full of mouldering ruins and religious fanaticism, it was a society ripe for Gothic treatment, having much of that literary paraphernalia conveniently to hand<sup>48</sup>." To that theory Eagleton added the extra implication that Irish gothic was mostly the work of Anglo-Irish members of the Protestant Ascendancy, assigning this trend to what he called "the political unconscious of Anglo-Irish society<sup>49</sup>". The 1990s revelations about institutional child abuse in Ireland revealed the same combination of violence and crime, covered up by a similar alliance of religious fanaticism and autocratic state power as in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and in the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. It gave rise in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries to a new wave of gothic and noir literature, all at the hands of Catholic writers this time, engaged in the same task of violently expressing the return of the repressed and using the same tropes and themes to do so as their predecessors.

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46. Dashiell Hammet, *Red Harvest*, New York, Albert A. Knopf Inc., 1929.

47. John Banville, *Christine Falls*, London, Picador, 2006.

48. Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliffe and the Great Hunger*, London/New York, Verso, 1995, p. 188.

49. *Ibid.*, p. 187.