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The Ghost as a Metaphor for Memory in the Irish Literary Psyche

Abstract: According to traditional belief, a ghost is an apparition; it is thought to be the spirit or the soul of a dead person haunting the living. In literature, however, I would like to argue that the ghost becomes a metaphor for memory, or as Tabitha King suggests, “the ghost is almost always a metaphor for the weight of the past”. This idea, then, is particularly apt with regard to the Irish literary psyche. Due to Ireland’s battle with the repercussions of a colonial past, its history of emigration, as well as bearing in mind the recent abuse scandals that have come to light concerning the Catholic Church, the struggle with the past is a theme deeply ingrained in Irish culture. In turn, remembering as a means to construct a sense of self via narrative lies at the heart of Irish literature. Anne Enright’s 2007 novel *The Gathering* serves as only one example of the ghost as a metaphor for memory in contemporary Irish literature. The narrator, Veronica, part of the new Ireland and still profiting from the wealth of the Celtic Tiger years, is haunted by the memory of her dead brother Liam; the murky family past is set against Veronica’s neat and middle-class existence, her brother’s tragic fate manipulating the narrator’s present. In the novel, meaning derives only from the context of Liam’s death. Using Enright’s novel as a prime case study as well as briefly discussing other examples of contemporary Irish literature such as Frank McCourt’s memoir *Angela’s Ashes* (1996) and Donal Ryan’s recent success *The Spinning Heart* (2013), this talk will attempt to address the key question of how the idea of the ghost as a metaphor for memory informs Irish literature specifically. My findings will be supported by literary theories connecting the concepts of memory and identity construction, incorporating ideas developed by Esther Peeren (*The Spectral Metaphor*) and Nicola King (*Memory, Narrative, Identity*).

Introduction

Although Ireland is full of stories about fairies, ghosts, and all sorts of spiritual beings, a host of these, for further reference, neatly assembled and colourfully described in William Butler Yeats’s famous anthology of 1888 *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry*, I want to approach the topic from a different angle. I would like to suggest that the ghost becomes a metaphor for memory; it is also a metaphor for things hidden and buried, for memories that haunt Irish life and culture today and that are therefore expressed and present in art and in contemporary literature. The kind of ghost I want to talk about is metaphorical. The basis for my paper has incidentally been provided by Tabitha King, who

suggests that “in literature, the ghost is almost always a metaphor for the weight of the past”, an idea that is exceptionally appropriate in an Irish context and occurred to me a few years ago while reading Anne Enright’s work *The Gathering* (2007), the book that will be central to this paper. I bought Enright’s novel at Dublin Airport where I had a few hours to spare before I headed home to Germany. Reflecting on this memory now I think it is a very fitting one as the airport itself is a place of transition and of movement; it is today the departure point for many an Irish emigrant and emigration is an issue that lies at the heart of the things that haunt Ireland. Emigration is one of the ghosts that haunts the Emerald Isle – Catholicism, colonialism, poverty are the other ghosts that still influence contemporary Irish literature. They are engrained in the Irish literary psyche, and memory as represented in Irish fiction is where we can dissect them best. I have picked three works of Irish contemporary literature that I would like to use to underline this idea and I will move chronologically, starting with *Angela’s Ashes – A Memoir* (Frank McCourt, 1996), to *The Gathering* (Anne Enright 2007) and lastly, I briefly want to touch upon Donal Ryan’s work *The Spinning Heart* (2013).

1. *Angela’s Ashes – A Memoir* by Frank McCourt

When one takes the ghost to be a metaphor for memory, questions that arise are: how memory functions, how it is constructed and deconstructed in narrative, and how it contributes toward building up notions of identity? With his portrayal of a childhood in a Limerick rampant with poverty, priests and powerlessness, McCourt succeeds in capturing a distinct Irish identity that has broader repercussions than for merely his own person. He does so by making use of certain techniques that Nicola King explores in her work *Memory, Narrative, Identity* (2000). King argues that identity is rehearsed multiple times in a narrative which is aiming at recovering the self that existed before; so memory really is a rehearsal of different truths; an autobiography or memoir is therefore a “paradoxical knowing and not knowing” (2). Ultimately, this means that an author writes from a perspective removed from the setting of his or her narrative; in the case of *Angela’s Ashes*, the author reconstructs memory to a certain end that I will address in the next paragraph.

McCourt’s account is made possible only through memories. The function of memory is to give the narrator access to the past; it also inevitably means that he can manipulate it. With regard to *Angela’s Ashes*, McCourt revisits the past and reconstructs a sense of Irishness. We can only guess to what end he does this – it may be a reconciliation with the past, or an act of reconciliation with his

mother Angela, whose ghost haunts the narrative as well as both of the author's later books *'Tis* (1999) and *Teacher Man* (2005). But we can, for example, address how the author conjures this particular idea of Irishness by looking at the book's opening passage:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. (McCourt 9)

This quotation is an apt illustration of the narrator's memory of his childhood and it is concerned with the narrator's central memory of his childhood: the poverty, that his childhood was a miserable childhood, that the misery of his childhood is somehow very much linked to and rooted in its Irishness, and what makes his experiences even worse is that the Catholic religion of his youth has a particularly repressive strain.

Unsurprisingly, McCourt's memoir has been called an "epic of woe" by the *New York Times*. McCourt constructs a particular Irish identity via his narrative and ponders the question of Irishness in general: At the onset of his memoir, McCourt's parents still live as emigrants in Brooklyn; throughout the book, he refers to episodes of his mother's begging and to the family's poverty, but at the same time he recounts happy memories of his father telling stories about the great Irish heroes, such as Cuchulain. So the three central themes haunting McCourt's memoir can be seen to reflect a collective Irish past, bringing into focus the Famine years of the 1840s, Ireland's long history of emigration, as well as its bleak brand of Catholicism. All of these themes are at the heart of McCourt's memoir; and McCourt uses them in order to create an identity, which becomes very much an Irish identity, at least from the narrator's point of view. And now from here I would like to move on to Anne Enright, whose work *The Gathering* is informed by the same question of Irishness, Irish identity in literature, whether there is such a thing and if so, how it is characterised, and the ghosts that haunt the Irish literary landscape.

2. *The Gathering* – Anne Enright

Anne Enright lets her main character address the question of Irishness on a meta-fictional level. Veronica, the narrator of the novel muses:

There is always a drunk. There is always someone who has been interfered with, as a child. There is always a colossal success, with several houses in various countries to which no one is ever invited. (Enright 185)

In the *London Review of Books* Eleanor Birne writes that Enright, as a novelist coming out of an Irish tradition, is aware of the predictability of her family situation and I would suggest that her knowing intervention is a pre-emptive measure against those who may be too rash in judging her to be merely another purveyor of Irish sob stories. *The Gathering*, the Booker Prize winning novel by Anne Enright who is Ireland's first Laureate for Fiction, is exemplary of the ghost as a metaphor for memory. Here, the narrator Veronica, as part of the "New Ireland" and still profiting from the Celtic Tiger years, organises the wake for her brother Liam, who committed suicide. At the heart of the novel lies the theme of abuse, the issue of lives tainted by large families and, in the long run, Catholicism and its repercussions. Veronica goes back and forth in reflecting on her brother's life and death and the event that seems to have triggered Liam's suicide; this particular moment in time that she is unsure of whether and how exactly it happened. She is, essentially, an unreliable narrator and conjures up a story about her grandmother which becomes the frame of the novel and the frame of another untold story about her brother. Veronica is haunted by her brother; by certain memories, all entangled with a collective Irish memory. Anne Enright writes:

I know, as I write about these three things: the jacket, the stones, and my brother's nakedness underneath his clothes, that they require me to deal in facts. It is time to put an end to the shifting stories and the waking dreams. It is time to call an end to romance and just say what happened in Ada's house, the year that I was eight and Liam was barely nine. (Enright 142)

In order to deal in facts, Enright's narrator therefore digs deep into her past and reflects on a memory of a certain event in 1968 that, as she claims herself, may or may not have happened:

'It was as if Mr Nugent's penis, which was sticking straight out of his flies, had grown strangely, and flowered at the tip to produce the large and unwieldy shape of a boy, that boy being my brother Liam.' (Enright 144)

This scene occurs just over halfway through the book and links Enright's narrative method of hinting at events and of going back and forth while tracing an uncertain memory to a model of memory which originates with Freud, an idea that offers insight with regard to the topic of this paper. Nicola King elaborates on this notion and explains that with regard to a "potentially traumatic but 'un-registered' original event, only the occurrence of a second scene can endow the first one with a pathogenic force" (Laplanche and Pontalis qtd. in King 4). This idea is clearly displayed in Anne Enright's work. Here, the narrator's brother dies, which signifies the second scene, and in Veronica's mind this occurrence brings to

light this prior, past scene of 1968, the vague memory of her brother being abused by her grandmother's friend. Hence, memory becomes a process of continuous revision in the light of later knowledge and experience (King 4) and as Benjamin writes "Memory is really the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been" (Benjamin qtd. in King 4).

Notably, this model of memory links Enright's narrative to the post-Freudian concept of *Nachtraeglichkeit* [sic], or 'afterwardness', an idea developed further by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Nicholls and which serves as a tool for the analysis of narrative and in relation to the past. Mainly, this idea denotes that if in doubt, our mind supplements details of events that lie in the past, thus problematising the truth status of the event, which in the case of this novel is the event of Liam being abused as a child. Williams writes: "The child hears or sees something, but the material is only gradually inserted into a narrative or coherent picture as it is actively reworked in memory – a reinterpretation and reinscription of the scene taking place over time in the developed subject" (qtd. in King 18).

In Enright's novel, this concept of *Nachtraeglichkeit* [sic] becomes a successful narrative device as Veronica reflects on the truth status of her brother's abuse and as she constantly questions and reassesses her own memory of the event. With the help of this psychologically coloured narrative device, by digging over the same ground again and again, Enright sets in motion a process of retranscription and active reworking that ultimately transfers the narrator's unreliable memory of abuse to a broader scale – to the excavation of a topic of cultural relevance and to matters deeply engrained in a collective memory, to the issue of abuse, taking the shape of her dead brother Liam and caused by members of the Irish clergy, the weight of this issue reinforced by governmental inquiries such as the Ryan Commission and the Murphy Report of 2009, both of which investigated the extent and effects of abused children in Catholic institutions.

To conclude, Eleanor Birne writes fittingly: "The skeletons are out of the closet. The bones are lined up. The words are on the page. With its resuscitations, *The Gathering* is a ghost story of sorts" (Birne 31). *The Gathering* is indeed "a grounded ghost story, and therefore a better one, made up of clues and facts and memories. It is a story of recollections and reimaginings and piercings together that aims to bring back the dead; to try and see what made them work; to try and see what did for them. Liam isn't coming back to haunt anybody, but the facts of his story haunt his sister. Ada; Nugent; Charlie; Liam. Veronica aside, the most compelling characters in this novel are all dead, brought back to life by the skill and the imagination of the family historian, the family imaginer (cf. Birne 31).

3. *The Spinning Heart* by Donal Ryan

This is the most recent of the works I would like to draw upon; released to widespread critical acclaim, *The Spinning Heart* is set in an Ireland that would be familiar to a reader of *The Gathering*, although with the marked difference that it is a rural novel in a country where the previous predominance of the rural as an ideal and an idyll has ebbed away. Ryan's debut seizes on the atmosphere prevalent during the Celtic Tiger and subsequent recession years. In Ryan's novel, the catalyst for the local community's present circumstances is the collapse of Pokey Byrne's building firm, after which Byrne flees the country leaving a so-called ghost estate in a state of semi-completion and his employees at a total loss. Ryan enlists a disparate group of twenty-one individuals to recount the psychic shock resulting from the wider economic turmoil. Each voice offers its own rendition of the boom and burst narrative.

Here, there seems to be no escape from Ireland's old ghosts; their old haunts may be transformed by the ruptures to the physical landscape wrought by the Celtic Tiger's reconfigurations of capital and values, but their targets remain as susceptible at the pressure points of the Irish psychology. There is a novelty in the poverty, repossessions and returning patterns of emigration, but they are themes that have been rehearsed *ad nauseam* and which leave the protagonist with a bitter aftertaste. The escape from these tired tropes of the Irish existence was transmuted into building edifices which lie empty in the ghost estates while their intended inhabitants return to escape's more familiar routes. In the novel, the ghost estate becomes symbolic for a tension between the old and the new Irelands and again, it is a novel that draws the reader's attention to Irish issues. There seems to be no escape from Ireland's old ghosts; despite the wealth of the Celtic Tiger years, Ireland seems to be in an ongoing rehearsal of the past due to its recent recession, which for many Irish seemed like the past coming to haunt them and which created a new kind of poverty, a new kind of emigration – the old ghosts seem to appear in different guises, the old country in a period of transition with an outcome just a little too familiar.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to return to the idea of the ghost as a metaphor for memory; I would like to conclude that this idea is especially appropriate in the context of Irish literature. Irish contemporary literature and especially the examples I have chosen are narrations whose central characters live from revisiting the past over and over again and by so doing they create an identity; Frank McCourt's

narrator seems to attempt to reconcile with the past, looking back from America. Veronica, Anne Enright's central character, is an inhabitant of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, whose comfortable middle-class life is unsettled by her brother Liam's suicide and the memory of childhood abuse. Donal Ryan's characters inhabit post-recession Ireland but live their own ghostly tales, with the image of the ghost estate bringing to light a new kind of poverty as well as emigration. All three novels are exemplary in making use of the dead, and of memories of the dead that haunt the narrations and build towards what may be a collective Irish memory.

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