Ruins and Cultural Memory in Literary Representations of Ireland, 1916–1945

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This candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to others.

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<u>Abstract</u>

This thesis analyses forms of ruin within literary representations of Ireland between 1916 and 1945. I examine how novels, short stories, and life writing set during these years use ruin as a source of active reflection on Irish history and culture. The texts in question can be understood as resistant contributions to Irish cultural memory – a term I use to denote the diverse social sites within which remembrance of the past is practiced and developed. I focus on the work of J. G. Farrell (*Troubles*), Elizabeth Bowen (*The Last September*, *Bowen's Court*), William Trevor (*Fools of Fortune*, *The Story of Lucy Gault*), Sebastian Barry (*The Secret Scripture*), Seán Ó Faoláin ('Midsummer Night Madness', 'A Broken World'), and Máirtín Ó Cadhain (*Cré na Cille*), arguing that each author mobilises ruin to intervene in problematic narratives of the past. The history in question is firstly Ireland's revolutionary period and the fate of the Anglo-Irish 'Big House' during this time; secondly, the insular and damaged conditions within post-independence statehood; and finally, the pressures placed upon the Free State's nationalistic insularity by the global ruin of World War II.

I coin the term 'radical decay' to describe how fragmentation, damage, and degeneration are deployed in order to resist ingrained cultural values and perceptions of history. Ruins are records of the past characterised by absences and flux, which result in semiotic ambiguity. The writers discussed here embrace this ambiguity to unsettle historical meaning, and so resist calcified practices and manipulative agendas within Irish heritage. Ruin appears as a heterogeneous substance within these texts. It is present in the narratives regarding damaged buildings, including the torched Big Houses of

the Ascendancy, as a decaying asylum within the Free State, and in sites of abandonment or neglect in a destitute rural landscape. Ruin is also portrayed as a textual and personal condition. Using radical decay as a conceptual foundation for my analysis, I will show how each form of ruin is represented in Irish literature to provoke resistant renegotiations of cultural memory.

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<u>Introduction</u>

1. Opening: The Work of 'Radical Decay'

'Ruin' is an intriguing but troubling term. It offers daunting scope for deviation. Even ruin's most basic definition – the concept of a broken, useless structure – is animated by ambiguity. As Dorothy Bell comments, a ruin is unique and recognisable, *sui generis*, and at the same time highly variable:

> Ruins are not like any other building. It is impossible to define them by type (they might have once been castles, or crofts), or by age (they could be thousands of years old, or collapsing at this very moment). What they have in common is a form that owes as much to decay as to the original design.[1]

The contradictions Bell illuminates may mean that the idea of ruin is too volatile, too historically contingent, to enclose in a general definition. Yet as the following analysis will show, the unique role of ruins within cultural memory emerges from recognisable traits, in particular the contested owing between design and decay that Bell identifies – and which proves dominant in the interpretations of 'ruin' awaiting discussion here.

Bell's work addresses ruined buildings specifically, and their ambiguous architectural characteristics. However, her definition is of use when considering the more varied forms of ruin revealed within the project which follows. These are in particular spatial, personal, and textual ruins.

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[1] Dorothy Bell, 'The Value of Ruins: Present Definitions and Methods of Perception', in *Values and Criteria in Heritage Conservation: Proceedings of the International Conference of ICOMOS, ICCROM, Fondazione Romulado Del Bianco: Florence, March 2nd-4th 2007*, ed. by Andrzej Tomaszewski (Florence: Edizioni Polistampa, 2008), pp. 261–71 (p. 261).

Fundamental to each instance is the duality of presence and absence: a state in which positive construction exists in confrontation with its antithesis, damage. This is key to these ruins' conceptual potency. An 'original design' is still discernible, but has undergone change and so cannot be known fully. This partial liberation from original meaning has creative possibilities which exist in tension with the access to historical memory that takes place through the remains. For although ruins, as Bell observes, are defined by their decay, they are also a communication, one potentially richer and more dynamic than the original undamaged form. Fragmentation, especially when characterised by the uninhibited process of transition caused by decay, unfixes the apprehension of meaning. More specifically, stylisations of ruin which contribute to Irish cultural memory are a means by which to disrupt how the nation understands itself historically. While some ruinous structures are conscripted to adduce the worldview of dominant cultural authorities, the instability and ambivalence of decay as a source of historical knowledge allows others to be read in dynamic, even revolutionary ways. This makes the narrativisation of ruins a valuable means by which to interpret and develop Irish cultural memory, forming the loci for challenges to established ways of reading the often traumatic events that took place in the first half of the twentieth century, and saw the Irish nation built.

This thesis is a study of the connection between ruins and cultural memory in a selection of Irish writing which reflects thematically upon the years 1916 and 1945. It examines the work of J.G. Farrell, Elizabeth Bowen, William Trevor, Sebastian Barry, Seán Ó Faoláin, and Máirtín Ó Cadhain. I examine how these writers draw upon forms of ruin when fictionalising the

Irish past, arguing that these forms are not designed merely to illustrate history, but to provoke interventions in its accepted narrative. I suggest that each text mobilises the semiotic ambiguity of ruin in order to attempt new, subversive understandings of Ireland's history and national identity. These interventions contest predominant agendas encoded within heritage, working to unsettle calcified practices of remembrance, and the complex power structures underlying their construction. To describe these authors' project of resistance, I coin the term 'radical decay', which refers to the use of fragmentation and transition to unfix a space's meaning, allowing the narrative of history that can be read from it to transgress rigid boundaries of interpretation.

In suggesting a productive relationship between ruins and Irish cultural memory, the definition of 'cultural memory' itself must be considered. Throughout this project, I use this term to delineate the sites within Irish society in which remembrance of the past takes place. These are locations where memory – a relation to and knowledge of the past – can be expressed. Such sites can exist in physical space, for instance monuments, and indeed ruins; but they may also be social practices, or intellectual resources including archives and artistic works. The locations of cultural memory play a narrativising role in the construction of Ireland's past by recounting and reframing the materials which signify history. As Oona Frawley comments, cultural memory 'must rely not only on symbols, repositories, museums, places, and so on, but on narratives about these things, whether in oral,

written, symbolic, visual, or myriad other forms'.[2] The social sites of Irish cultural memory are therefore characterised by a discursive representation of historical knowledge. In this project, I will focus on the narrativising work conducted by literary texts, each of which seeks to create resistant remembrance through images of ruin.

This proposal regarding the loci which constitute cultural memory draws upon Pierre Nora's description of *lieux de mémoire* ('places of memory'). Nora defines a *lieu de mémoire* as 'any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community'.[3] These entities, in which 'memory crystallizes and secretes itself',[4] are the 'ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness'.[5] Nora's wider argument – that *lieux de mémoire* are refuges, brought into being by society's abandonment of memory in favour of 'understanding itself historically' instead[6] – is not necessarily germane to the study of memory and its

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[2] Oona Frawley, 'Toward a Theory of Cultural Memory in an Irish Postcolonial Context', in *Memory Ireland*, ed. by Oona Frawley, 4 vols (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011–14), I: History and Modernity (2011), 11–34 (p. 24).

[3] Pierre Nora, 'Preface to the English Language Edition', in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. by Pierre Nora, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–98), I: Conflicts and Divisions (1996), xv–xxiv (p. xvii).

[4] Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–24 (p. 17).

[5] Pierre Nora, 'General Introduction: Between Memory and History', in *Realms of Memory: Rethinking the French Past*, ed. by Pierre Nora, trans. by Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996–98), I: Conflicts and Divisions (1996), 1–20 (p. 12).

[6] Ibid., p. 14.

contestation in an Irish context.[7] Nevertheless, the concept of *lieux de mémoire* remains useful. Nora's identification of a relationship between 'places' (material or otherwise) and 'memorial consciousness' facilitates the definition of cultural memory set out above. The work of radical decay can be characterised as the literary narrativisation of ruins in order to produce sites in which Ireland's 'memorial consciousness' can be acknowledged, and revised.

The chapters which follow use close analysis to reveal how the authors I have selected present radical decay as an active resource for re-encountering Ireland's past. The texts in question contain narrative regarding Irish history and society, ranging from the First World War to the beginning of the twenty-first century. The works themselves were published across this period, with the earliest text I consider published in 1929, and the most recent in 2008. Their arrangement within this thesis reflects a broadly chronological movement forward through Irish history; this order is based upon the time period each text *addresses*, rather than when it was composed. The history at issue is firstly the collapse and arson of Big Houses during Ireland's revolutionary period; secondly, the insular and damaged conditions of Ireland's post-independence statehood; and finally, the pressures placed upon this nationalistic insularity by the global ruin of World War II. After

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[7] Nora's claim is predicated upon the concept of an inviolable distinction – and contest – between 'memory' and 'history', which has been questioned by later critics. Barbara A. Misztal examines the history of these two concepts' supposed opposition, concluding that: 'owing to the cultural embeddedness of both concepts, the relationship between memory and history has never been intransigent, and thus consequently continued to develop over time.' (Barbara A. Misztal, 'Memory and History', in *Memory Ireland*, ed. by Oona Frawley, 4 vols (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011–14), I: History and Modernity (2011), 3–17 (p. 17)). Although this thesis does not seek a conflation of memory and history, Nora's ironclad separation of the two is not relied upon.

providing a more detailed summary of the texts involved, this introduction turns to a consideration of the properties of ruin itself, setting out the theoretical territory used throughout the thesis to place ruin within wider critical discourse regarding cultural memory.

Chapter 1 discusses J. G. Farrell's *Troubles* (1970), Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929), and Seán Ó Faoláin's short story 'Midsummer Night Madness' (1932). I analyse how these three texts narrate the violent ending of colonial rule through the trope of the Anglo-Irish Big House, demonstrating that radical decay occurs within each to question the established iconography and perception of this site. For Farrell, I argue that the central hotel's decay and eventual destruction are a means by which to challenge historiography regarding in particular the troubles of 1919 to 1921, disrupting the security of any stable metanarrative within Farrell's own present by creating a self-reflective (and partially ruined) contribution to historical fiction. In moving to *The Last September*, I identify a more ambivalent rendition of the opportunities for perceptual change found within radical decay. Ruin appears within this text as a means to problematise wilful ignorance and the entrenched perspectives of colonialism; but the narrator also portrays the Big House's shell in order to create a monument to Anglo-Irish spatial dominion, which survives the cultural dispossession of revolution and denies reinterpretation. Lastly, this chapter considers 'Midsummer Night Madness', demonstrating how this story works to interrogate Irish nationalism and its understanding of Ascendancy history. While other criticism has suggested that Ó Faoláin's story romanticises Republican actions during the War of Independence, I show how the complexity of ruin

as a signifier unsettles simplistic narratives of the relationship between coloniser and colonised.

Chapter 2 investigates William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune* (1983) and *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2002). As in Chapter 1, these texts can be read as contributions to the genre of Big House literature. However, I contend Trevor's work is an opportunity to revise this trope and its historical scope – and in doing so bring nuance to how the Protestant Ascendancy's post-independence experience is historicised. The two novels I select make use of discrepant forms of ruin which provide a means of articulating long-lasting and socially complex trauma. In relation to *Fools of Fortune*, I examine how portrayal of the destruction and unchanging remains of a Big House, as well as personal ruin in the form of alcoholism, madness, and suicide, work to contest the absence within cultural memory of Anglo-Irish suffering. *The Story of Lucy Gault* pursues this revision of post-independence landscapes further. Instead of a charting the ruin of a centralised Big House, Trevor articulates marginalised and cross-cultural experiences of spatial and mental fragmentation, challenging the prejudices of heritage and working to provoke empathic historical revision.

Chapter 3 turns from the Ascendancy in order to reveal the importance of ruin within literature which seeks to address wider experience within the Free State. I show how two texts considered here, Ó Faoláin's short story 'A Broken World' (1937) and Sebastian Barry's novel *The Secret Scripture* (2008), both draw attention to decay in order to challenge the pastoral idealism of postcolonial Irish nationalism, and indicate its repressive cultural manipulations. In contrast to the violent arson stalking Big Houses in

Chapters 1 and 2, 'A Broken World' is characterised by slower and more silent forms of atrophy which represent a state of social paralysis. I attend to how their representation is used attack saccharine ideas of the rural and its potential as a force of social unity, and to reveal the continuance of imperial power structures which are reinforced by the authority of the Church. The second part of this chapter examines *The Secret Scripture*, in which Barry also attempts to confront a coercive relationship between landscape as a 'place of memory' and power within the Free State, specifically in regard to the routine practice of institutionalisation. In contrast to the entropic vision of ruin within 'A Broken World', fragmentation becomes a source of productive resistance through which banished cultural identities, exiled from public consciousness by prescribed practices of heritage, can be articulated.

Finally, Chapter 4 considers two texts in relation to World War II. I study how the vista of international ruin produced during 'the Emergency' inspires a vacillation between engagement and retreat in Irish culture. I examine Máirtín Ó Cadhain's novel *Cré na Cille* (1949), followed by the war writing of Bowen, in particular *Bowen's Court* (1942). Ó Cadhain does not feature the degeneration of any built landscape (the novel's setting, roughly six feet underground in a Connemara graveyard, offers little scope for this). Instead, I read Ó Cadhain's experimental Irish-language text as an extended example of radical decay at the level of form. I discuss how the disordered, fragmentary narrative of *Cré na Cille* facilitates dissenting voices which are, to an extent, capable of disrupting the isolationism and 'wilful blindness' directed towards the war in Éamon de Valera's Ireland. In *Bowen's Court*, historical escapism, and the aid of radical decay in its disruption, take place

on a more personal level. The memoir uses Ireland's neutrality to create a landscape of stability and nostalgia, detached from the physical and perspectival danger of wartime London. Yet, as I demonstrate, the prevalence of ruins in the text works against Bowen's own desired escapism, facilitating subtle connections between Bowen's past and present which inhibit the exploitation of Anglo-Irish history as a source of psychological protection.

The rest of this introduction will set out the primary critical resources which assist in understanding the resistant possibilities offered by the use of ruin as a historical signifier. I seek to demonstrate how the representation of ruin fulfils the critical task set out by Walter Benjamin: 'to brush history against the grain.'[8] I will begin by considering the 'grain' in question, examining how hegemonic manipulations of Irish memory necessitate the need for resistance. Definitions of heritage, and its role as a process used to construct potentially coercive narratives of the past, are vital here. I use the recent discussion of an 'authorised heritage discourse' by Laurajane Smith to develop an approach which establishes how the governing 'grain' of historical perception operates within Ireland.

With this context established, I turn to the contested site of the ruin itself, discussing how the rival arguments made by Christopher Woodward and Albert Speer allow us to consider how and whether sites of fragmentation result in an ideologically liberated relationship with history. This analysis leads to the highly significant work of Benjamin himself, whose demonstration of how transience affects meaning can be used to articulate a

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[8] Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1955; repr. New York: Schocken Books, 2007), pp. 253–64 (p. 257).

form of ruin in which the perception of cultural memory is liberated – but also threatened. I also consider Jacques Derrida's vision of ruin here. Lastly, I use the work of Benjamin and Mikhail Bakhtin to illuminate how the complex relationship between decay and original design can exist as both a human condition, and at the level of textual form; a concept which allows my thesis to show the possibilities of Ireland's literature as a source of divergent remembrance.

The authors I study differ, at times sharply, in background and perspective. The diverse nature of this selection is increased by the fact that ruin itself is a versatile, heterogeneous substance which requires an appropriately far-reaching set of theoretical resources. This polyvalence is in fact crucial to the work of radical decay, in which fragmentation is redefined and employed in individual, dynamic forms so as to resist how established practices in cultural memory manipulate the materials of history. However, within this thesis, the path I chart through this diverse territory is determined by a governing criterion. The texts I have chosen are brought into strategic proximity with the aim of revealing that it is not sufficient to treat ruins as isolated images, which appear occasionally and at random within Irish historical fiction. Instead, I will demonstrate that ruin – the state in which a structure's original design is also compromised by damage – resurfaces as a repeated and intertextual motif. Furthermore, this motif is employed with a shared social purpose: using tension between presence and absence to render historical communication ambiguous, and so resist hegemonic narratives of Ireland's past. In short, they are chosen in order to develop this project's contribution to the work of cultural memory: the concept of radical decay.

2. Heritage and Hegemonic Practice in Irish Culture

The ruins represented within this project are, in most cases, fictional. But their significance for cultural memory lies in a connection to historical reality, namely that Ireland's environment is populated extensively by abandoned and decaying buildings. James Howley describes how travelling 'even a short distance in Ireland' reveals that the country 'enjoys a superabundance of ruined buildings'.[9] A similar state was described by Elizabeth Bowen in 1942:

> It will have been seen that this is a country of ruins. Lordly or humble, military or domestic, standing up with furious gauntness, like Kilcolman, or shelving weakly into the soil, ruins feature the landscape – uplands or river valleys – and make a ghostly extra quarter to towns. They give clearings in woods, reaches of mountain or sudden turns of a road a meaning and pre-inhabited air. [...] Only major or recent ruins keep their human stories; from others the story quickly evaporates. Some ruins show gashes of violence, others simply the dull slant of decline.[10]

Bowen claims that ruins are not only prevalent, but constitute Ireland's very national identity: it 'is a country of ruins'. She also establishes the complex role these sites of fragmentation can be made to play in the formation of cultural memory, or in her phrase, 'human stories'. In her words, ruins take on

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[9] James Howley, *The Follies and Garden Buildings of Ireland* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 6.

[10] Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 15.

a performative role, with their material condition ('gashes') given the ability to 'show' the past acts of violence which led to their broken state. Their condition can result in the apprehension of 'meaning' and an ability to perceive the past (the ruins are known to be 'pre-inhabited'). This recognition is, however, not guaranteed, for in many instances 'mansions, town houses, farmhouses, cottages have often been left to die – and very few people know the story of the bitter necessity.'[11] Bowen portrays Ireland as a landscape in which ruin is associated with the perception of a meaningful historical narrative, but indicates that this perception is variable, and potentially impossible. Throughout this project, I aim to explore the relationship between the encounter with ruin and the apprehension of 'human stories' from Irish history. The relation proves to be a contested one.

An individual's interpretation of what a ruin means is beset by mediation. This can be understood better by using the concept of heritage as a social practice. The term 'heritage' is applied to a wide range of behaviours.[12] To furnish a working definition here, I draw upon G. J. Ashworth, Brian Graham, and J. E. Tunbridge, who state that

> heritage can be seen as a resource which provides a quarry of possible raw materials from which a deliberate selection can occur, albeit one constrained

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[11] Ibid., p. 16.

[12] Peter Larkham claims that the term has come to mean 'all things to all people', while David Lowenthal remarks that 'heritage today all but defies definition. Overuse reduces the term to cant.' (Peter Larkham, 'Heritage as Planned and Conserved', in *Heritage, Tourism and Society*, ed. by David Herbert (London: Pinter, 1997), pp. 85–116 (p. 85); David Lowenthal, *The Heritage Crusade and Spoils of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 94). For a more specific summary of the diverse cultural occurrences to which the term 'heritage' has been applied, see Brian Graham, Greg Ashworth, and John Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage* ([London]: Arnold, 2000; repr. London: Routledge, 2016), pp. 1–3.

by chance survival through time (either physically or in
terms of a fallible and selective human memory).[13]

This process of 'selection' from the relics and 'raw materials' of the past to create heritage is characterised by its performance by actors *in the present*, and is thus is defined by Ashworth et al. as 'the contemporary use of the past'.[14] In light of these precepts, for the purposes of this thesis I define heritage as the process by which the 'raw materials' of Ireland's past are chosen, then used as meaningful signifiers in constructed narratives which support present-day agendas.[15] Radical decay describes a method developed in response to prevailing, hegemonic processes of selection and construction within Irish culture. By using ruins as 'raw materials' which create a variable perception of the past, this movement provides a means by which nationalistic, isolationist, or wilfully blind agendas in heritage can receive challenge.

My work takes place in the wake of a long-running critical debate regarding the impact of heritage process – a debate which has had a tendency to become polarised. Critiques of 'the heritage industry'[16] frequently address not only the level of commercialisation involved in its practices (the status of

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[13] G. J. Ashworth, Brian Graham and J. E. Tunbridge, *Pluralising Pasts: Heritage, Identity and Place in Multicultural Societies* (London: Pluto Press, 2007), p. 40.

[14] Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage*, p. 2.

[15] While the 'present-day' nature of heritage is often accepted, its precise meaning can be interpreted too restrictively. As David C. Harvey argues, many studies of heritage 'have failed fully to explore the historical scope that the concept really implies, and have rather been too preoccupied with certain manifestations of heritage's recent trajectory.' (David C. Harvey, 'Heritage Pasts and Heritage Presents: Temporality, Meaning and the Scope of Heritage Studies', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 7.4 (2001), 319–38 (p. 320)). My study refers to a broader historical scope of 'present-day' perspectives and experiences, rather than those of the year 2019.

[16] This influential phrase was coined by Robert Hewison, in *The Heritage Industry: Britain in a Culture of Decline* (London: Methuen, 1987).

'industry'), but also the apparent factual inaccuracy of the narratives which this system has produced. Andrew Jackson comments that 'historians […] have often distanced themselves ideologically from the distorting and selective tendencies of the heritage industry in its representations of the past.'[17] Academic criticism, given impetus by work during the 1980s by Robert Hewison and Patrick Wright, received a fierce rebuttal with Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994), in which Samuel took issue with the 'metropolitan intelligentsia' who engage in a favourite sport of 'heritage-baiting'.[18] Instead, Samuels endorses the role heritage plays in 'animating the inanimate'[19] by fostering 'popular memory' rather than written history.[20] Now that the dust has settled on a rather bitter feud, it is important to seek a less binary perspective, which takes into account the complex systems of power involved in national and personal memory with a minimum of generalisation. Heritage practices – and the agendas behind them – are varied. As Graham et al. pointed out in 2000, 'the present creates the heritage it requires and manages it for a range of contemporary purposes […] this can be done well or badly, for the benefit, or at the cost, of few or many.'[21] The path of analysis sketched above reveals that heritage in Ireland is characterised by both coercion and resistance.

In order to explore this contested process, a more nuanced

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[17] Andrew Jackson, 'Local and Regional History as Heritage: The Heritage Process and Conceptualising the Purpose and Practice of Local Historians', *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 14.4 (2008), 362–79 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527250802155877> (p. 371).

[18] Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (London: Verso, 1994; repr. 2012), p. 260.

[19] Ibid., p. 113.

[20] Ibid., p. 6.

[21] Graham, Ashworth, and Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage*, p. 2.

theoretical model of heritage is required. A useful foundation for this has been provided by Laurajane Smith, whose book *Uses of Heritage* (2006) is one of the most significant texts on the idea of the contemporary heritage industry, covering primarily English, though also in places Australian and American, heritage. Throughout *Uses of Heritage*, Smith proposes the idea of an 'authorized heritage discourse' (AHD). This describes heritage practice

> which is reliant on the power/knowledge claims of technical and aesthetic experts, and institutionalized in state cultural agencies and amenity societies. This discourse takes its cue from the grand narratives of nation and class on the one hand, and technical expertise and aesthetic judgement on the other. The 'authorized heritage discourse' privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement, social consensus and nation building.[22]

Smith's analysis sets out how cultural representations of the past are developed according to the ideologies and methods of specific social authorities, such as 'state cultural agencies', and 'technical and aesthetic experts'. Transforming the raw materials of history into a fixed, monumental space, together with the use of hierarchical orders of 'expertise' in determining control over the space's treatment and determination, results in 'grand narratives' which are difficult to challenge.

The result of this discursive framework, Smith argues, is the promulgation of a system of received values and practices which 'continually

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[22] Laurajane Smith, *Uses of Heritage* (London: Routledge, 2006; repr. 2009), p. 11.

legitimizes the experiences and worldviews of dominant narratives about nation, class, culture and ethnicity', privileging certain 'experiences and identities' over others.[23] This description of how 'dominant narratives' are exerted by a heritage discourse to influence the individual's relationship with the past reveals the need for a distinction between authorised heritage and 'cultural memory', the social locations in which historical signifiers are narrativised and remembrance is performed. In this thesis, I delineate authorised heritage as a form of cultural memory characterised by the representation of socially predominant values. The 'places of memory' which contribute to authorised heritage work not only to foster remembrance of the past, but also to control the present. The concept of an 'AHD' offers a means to understand the aims of literature which stylises ruins into radical decay. As a term, AHD allows us, for instance, to describe the systematic use of institutional space within the Free State, which is portrayed in *The Secret Scripture*. Barry depicts post-independence Ireland as characterised by what can be described as 'dominant narratives' of Catholic identity and pastoral idealism, secured by mass incarceration of individuals who might threaten this authorised idea of nationhood. And he deploys ruin as a means by which stories elided from cultural perception can be registered.

Identifying the existence of an authorised heritage discourse is not merely a restating of the 'heritage industry critique' against which Samuel railed. Indeed, Smith argues (without Samuel's antagonism) that, while such critique appears to stand in opposition to the AHD, it has also *reproduced* some of the discourse's work 'by constructing heritage visitors or users as

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[23] Ibid., p. 299.

passive consumers'.[24] Instead, Smith describes an 'authorized or dominant discourse against which a range of dissenting and subaltern discourses interact.'[25] She illustrates an example of this dissent by investigating the behaviour of visitors to industrial-era social history museums in England. These individuals used a 'hands on' relation with the objects displayed in order to create a commemorative link between 'people in the present with people in the past' which was characterised by solidarity, empathy, and the desire to learn historical lessons.[26] I will argue that the reassertion of subaltern authority over memory, illustrated by Smith, also takes place within the narrativisation of ruins discussed below. Smith's contribution to the debate over heritage is used within this project in order to identify instances in which authors illustrate the existence of hegemonic cultural practices – but also how writers such as Barry allow readers to become subversive agents within unauthorised spaces of memory.

3. Reconstruction and Elision

The agendas of those who practice authorised heritage in Ireland can be revealed by their treatment of ruin. Ruins which testify to and engage the viewer with undesirable history are changed or elided systematically. David Lowenthal identifies the prevailing desires which can underlie contemporary reinterpretations of the past:

> we alter the past to 'improve' it – exaggerating aspects

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[24] Ibid., p. 33.
[25] Ibid., p. 42
[26] Ibid., p. 233.

we find successful, virtuous, or beautiful, celebrating what we take pride in, playing down the ignoble, the ugly, the shameful. The memories of most individuals, the annals and monuments of all peoples highlight supposed glories; relics of failure are seldom saved and rarely memorialized. [...] If missing or scanty in actual remains, these desired traits abound in subsequent additions to the written record, to relics, and to works of emulation and commemoration.[27]

Lowenthal's argument is useful here, though it requires some tempering. His arguments regarding the effect of heritage place the receiver in a passive position, generalising about their desires; he feels able to presume that 'most individuals' share the same desire to use memory as a source of glory and pride. His reference to 'relics of failure' also requires adjustment when applied to Ireland's historical context; it is notable, for example, that although the Irish rebellion of 1798 failed to overcome British and loyalist forces, the uprising has a prominent place in Irish national memory, with 'a staggering volume of commemorative activities' seen at its bicentenary in 1998.[28] Nevertheless, Lowenthal's statement regarding how societies 'improve' the past on these terms can shed light on the sensitive place of ruin within Irish culture. Lowenthal makes two statements which aid in identifying how heritage practices, motivated by idealism, navigate the existence of ruin. Firstly, he indicates that when the raw materials of history do not represent an advantageous narrative they can be altered, with the 'desired traits'

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[27] David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 332.

[28] Guy Beiner, 'A Short History of Irish Memory in the Long Twentieth Century', in *The Cambridge History of Ireland*, ed. by Thomas Bartlett, 4 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), IV: 1880 to the Present, 708–25 (p. 720).

supplemented. Secondly, he argues that materials which signify undesirable messages regarding the past – 'relics of failure' – are ignored, 'rarely memorialized'. Both these strategies can be seen in how dominant constructions of Ireland's national identity require sources of threat to be either controlled by, or removed from, public memory. Identifying these responses to ruin offers vital context for understanding the divergent practice of radical decay.

Sites of national esteem in Ireland reveal how Irish heritage performs the embellishment of material space in order to sustain nationalistic historical narratives. An example of this emerged in Dublin in 2005 in regard to the bullet holes that riddle the facade of General Post Office on O'Connell Street (Figure 1). Until this point, these holes were considered 'tangible evidence of the Easter Rising', and the GPO's 'palpable link' with the event.[29] The authenticity of these suspiciously round holes (as historian Pat Liddy notes, British rifles would have caused 'splinter' damage)[30] was not questioned until, during restoration, a representative of *An Post* indicated that they were more likely weather erosion.[31] The prospect was met by dismay within the tourism industry, given the bullet holes' staple part in guided commentary

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[29] Ramona Usher, 'Dublin and Its Georgian Legacy: The Battle for Iconoclasm', in *Architecture and Armed Conflict: The Politics of Destruction*, ed. by JoAnne Mancini and Keith Bresnahan (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 116–28.

[30] Jerome Reilly, '1916 Row Explodes as An Post Claims "There are No Bullet Holes in GPO Wall"', *Irish Independent*, 28 August 2005 <https://www.independent.ie/irish-news/1916-row-explodes-as-an-post-claims-there-are-no-bullet-holes-in-gpo-wall-26212121.html> [accessed 19 May 2019] (para. 23 of 34).

[31] An Post's Anna McHugh stated that 'it has always been understood in An Post that they were not bullet holes. Remember, the GPO was effectively destroyed in 1916 and was then rebuilt – not re-opening until 1929. Since then there's been climate changes, acid rain, pollution damage and simple weather erosion. There has been substantial renovation and rebuilding work on a number of occasions since 1929.' Quoted in Reilly (paras. 12–13 of 34).

regarding Dublin's heritage. This challenge to an 'irrefutable truth' within Irish culture [32] illustrates how the (supposed) inscription of history within the built environment is leveraged and re-framed in service of nationalistic heritage. The imposition of 'desired traits' upon the materials of history described by Lowenthal is on full display in this case. Thus Ramona Usher comments:

> the 'row' is indicative of the power that the GPO holds in the nationalist narrative of independence. The restoration of the building can be seen as the new state conserving the memory of that event, and compounded by the building's hegemonic architectural form and fabric.[33]

The situation also demonstrates the potentially fraught relationship which ruin poses when it forms a constituent ingredient in 'hegemonic architectural form and fabric.' When the marks in question are construed as bullet holes, they become a fixed monument, which offers viewers an unassailable connection to the narrative of imperial aggression and nationalistic endurance in the fight for independence. Recognised as the work of weather or pollution, the marks reveal that one of Dublin's 'iconic sites to remember the 1916 Rising',[34] part of Dublin city centre's 'standard tour',[35] is like all

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[32] Ibid., para 6 of 34.

[33] Usher, p. 119.

[34] Jithendran Kokkranikal, Yeon Sun Yang, Ray Powell, and Elizabeth Booth, 'Motivations in Battlefield Tourism: The Case of "1916 Easter Rising Rebellion", Dublin', in *Tourism and Culture in the Age of Innovation: Second International Conference IACuDiT, Athens 2015*, ed. by Vicky Katsoni and Anastasia Stratigea (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2015), pp. 321–30 (p. 325).

[35] Joseph Brady, 'Dublin at the Turn of the Century', in *Dublin Through Space and Time*, ed. by Joseph Brady and Anngret Simms (Dublin: Four Courts, 2001; repr. 2002), pp. 221–81 (p. 237).

buildings subject to non-agential decay. The 'subsequent additions' Lowenthal describes are visible here in discursive commentary – for instance Dublin's thriving tourism practices – which is imposed upon states of decay in order to manage their perception as historically meaningful.

Figure 1. A 'bullet hole' at the GPO (2008).
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This work of management is also manifested in the second practice suggested by Lowenthal: that of ensuring that structures which threaten cultural ideals are 'rarely memorialized'. With regard to ruin, this takes place at the level of definition itself. Throughout this thesis, I propose that ruin can be understood as space characterised by tension between an 'original design' and changes brought by forces of damage or decay. The result is a diverse form with dynamic semiotic possibilities. Elsewhere within culture, however, the term is applied far more conservatively, in ways which alter the perceived locations of historical meaning within space. Susan A. Crane argues that:

> we perceive a difference between a 'ruin' and a decrepit
> building, a distinction based on age and use: ruins,
> objects of historical interest, constitute a landscape,
> whereas decrepit buildings block landscaping. [...] The
> value of ruins as a 'visible past' has varied over the
> years, depending on what was needed from the
> production of history.[36]

This comment suggests that ruins are recognised by culture as signifiers of history – a 'visible past' which 'constitute[s] a landscape'. But ruins are considered distinct from other 'decrepit buildings', and are thus set aside from these undesirable spaces and made part of heritage. Lowenthal also catalogues this distinction by comparing a folly in the gardens of Hodnet Hall, a country house in Shropshire (Figure 2), with a crumbling, abandoned cement works in California. The folly, three-and-a-half Ionic columns salvaged from a demolished eighteenth century property nearby, is a ruin which 'enlivens a landscape'; the cement works are an example of 'unpleasing decay'.[37] Both are structures whose original design has undergone damage, but only one is a 'ruin', a monument deemed to be an object which holds the 'historical interest' denoted by Crane. The distinction is not natural but cultural, determined by values regarding a structure's past use, its aesthetic qualities, and the stories with which it is associated. The latter criterion is central here. Controlling what kind of ruin is judged to be of 'historical interest' – and thus which stories are memorialised within the landscapes of authorised heritage – is a way to control perception of the past.

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[36] Susan A. Crane, *Collecting and Historical Consciousness in Early Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 20.

[37] Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 162.

Figure 2. Hodnet Hall folly, a ruin enlivening the landscape (2010).
© Stephen Richards / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 2.0

This understanding of ruin's culturally determined role, and the capacity of this role to influence historiography, is supported by established understandings of how 'landscape' as a whole is a produced concept. Simon Schama's work regarding landscape is useful here, for it establishes how the conception of the natural in space is inseparable from cultural perception: it is 'the work of the mind', so much so that even wilderness is 'as much the product of culture's craving and culture's framing as any other imaginary garden'.[38] The process of framing can also be highly politicised,[39] and has been a continually contested process in Ireland. Patrick J. Duffy describes how 'the symbolism of colonial, nationalist, unionist or imperial inscriptions on the landscape has been a source of conflict, especially since the post-famine period'.[40] This conflict is acute not least because space plays a crucial role in securing narratives of Irish history and identity: in Catherine Nash's terms, 'the idea that there is only one true Irishness and that this depends on a stable

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[38] Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 7.

[39] Wendy Joy Darby comments that 'the representation of landscape is not innocent of a politics. It is deeply embedded in relations of power and knowledge'. (Wendy Joy Darby, *Landscape and Identity: Geographies of Nation and Class in England* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), p. 9).

[40] Patrick J. Duffy, *Exploring the History and Heritage of Irish Landscapes* (Dublin: Four Courts, 2007), p. 195.

and secure relationship to place.'[41] In my thesis, I suggest that the writers discussed participate in this conflict regarding space and the memory it is used to provide. Unauthorised and 'unpleasing' forms of ruin are deployed in order to re-inscribe elided history into Ireland's landscape.

Cultural valuations of the rural, and the nationalistic narratives of memory which can be preserved within them, are a key site of this resistance. As Gerry Smyth comments, Irish nationalism has historically been supported by 'a typical pastoral myth in which an idealised rural population of peasants and fisherfolk were represented as the true holders of the national flame.'[42] The myth retained cultural predominance after independence was achieved. Oona Frawley describes how pastoral politics were

> infamously used as the foundations of the nation, and would exert a vice grip on Irish culture: for even if key figures like Synge and Yeats had mounted an assault on the rural imaginary, that assault was kept in check by a popular desire that chose to see only the glorification of the rural, and ignored, protested against, or marginalized much else.[43]

A 'glorification of the rural', integral to the foundation of Irish nationhood and the cultural values exerted in a 'vice grip' in the years which followed, is predicated upon exclusion and wilful ignorance. De Valera demarcated this as none else could, sketching out his infamously dreamed 'cosy homesteads',

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[41] Catherine Nash, 'Embodied Irishness: Gender, Sexuality and Irish Identities' in *In Search of Ireland: A Cultural Geography*, ed. by Brian Graham (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 108–27 (p. 109).

[42] Gerry Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation: Studies in the New Irish Fiction* (London: Pluto Press, 1997), p. 59.

[43] Oona Frawley, *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2005), p. 105.

replete with Irish-speaking 'sturdy children', 'athletic youths' and 'comely maidens' living in 'frugal comfort'.[44] In order to maintain this saccharine Celticism, a great deal had to be excluded, and Luke Gibbons summarises how the mythical 'organic community with an enclosed, continuous past' bore little relation to 'the actualities of life' in Ireland.[45] This narrative of Irish history also results in a legacy of ruins which cannot be accepted as historical signifiers within authorised landscapes. There is little room in an idyll for torched Big Houses which, in contrast to the celebrated role of such buildings in England,[46] are removed or left alone to decay (Figure 3). Nor do destitute farmhouses or the shells of Magdalene laundries fit easily into a romanticised cultural identity. The literature of radical decay turns attention to precisely these ruins, contesting their erasure within nostalgic discourse and exposing deep tensions in Irish cultural memory.

Figure 3. A ruin left to die: Ardtully, Co. Kerry, torched by the IRA in 1921 (2017). Photograph by Robert O'Byrne (www.theirishaesthete.com). Reproduced with permission.

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[44] Éamon de Valera, 'On Language and the Irish Nation', speech on Raidió Éireann, 17 May 1943, in *Speeches and Statements by Éamon De Valera: 1917–73*, ed. by Maurice Moynihan (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1980), p. 466.

[45] Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996), p. 169.

[46] See Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, pp. 158–61.

4. Fragmented Imaginations: The Ruin as Resistance

Theorisations of authorised heritage enable the nature of the prevailing 'grain' of Ireland's spatial politics to be exposed. It is important now to turn to criticism which can be used to ascertain a deeper understanding of how the portrayal of ruin is able to work against this grain. Reflections regarding the ruin's function as a historical signifier can assist in this investigation. In recent years, the subject has been brought forward in criticism by the work of art historian Christopher Woodward. *In Ruins* (2002) puts forward the argument that human perception is able to engage dynamically with damaged space. Woodward focuses on Virginia Water, Windsor Great Park, 'the largest artificial ruin in Britain': thirty-seven columns removed from the site of Leptis Magna, Libya (Figure 4), and set up in Surrey by royal architect Sir Jeffrey Wyatville in 1827. [47] Woodward contends that this incomplete fragment, stolen from an already fragmented Roman city, nevertheless brings the visitor into an intellectual relation to its materials' original life. The architect

> relies upon his audience to imagine what was missing: that is a rule of the game. A ruin is a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator; as they strolled between the colonnades his visitor would recall the Roman Forum, Ephesus, or Palmyra, each completing a picture of their own. [48]

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[47] Christopher Woodward, *In Ruins* (London: Vintage, 2002), p. 136.
[48] Ibid., p. 139.

Figure 4. A sham ruin: Leptis Magna relics, Virginia Water (2012).

© Alan Hunt / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 2.0 (www.geograph.org.uk/ photo/3050774)

This characterises the perception of ruin as a dialogical experience. When a structure's original design has been altered by absence, the viewer herself will enact an imaginative restoration. Woodward's description of spaces with a 'perverse fertility'[49] identifies a resource with which to confront the effort of authorised heritage to control landscape and its representation of history. By being given the autonomy to create 'a picture of their own', viewers engaging with ruin are able to 'recall' the past themselves, regardless of surrounding cultural frameworks of interpretation. Heritage, as I defined it at the outset, is the use of history's 'raw materials' for present-day purposes, and while its hegemonic expression seeks to unify social understanding of these materials, the 'game' identified by Woodward suggests that fragmented space inspires an inherently autonomous response in those to whom they are given access.

This independence, and the idea of a dialogical relationship with history, is crucial to the project of radical decay. However, it is important to

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[49] Ibid., p. 239.

note that the presence of a 'dialogue' between imagination and 'incomplete reality' may not offer an inherent resistance to coercive agendas. Authorised heritage can play a moderating role in any conversation. This can be discerned by looking more closely at the African columns at Virginia Water. Whilst the site does indeed consist of genuine relics from Leptis Magna, their erection in Surrey represents a significant cultural intervention in the 'raw materials' of history which have the potential to guide the viewer's imaginative experience. In this case, the site is designed to benefit Britain's imperial agenda. They are an instance of *spolia*: stone or artefacts repurposed in secondary contexts, particularly those taken forcibly.[50] Kacie M. Alaga argues that the relics' repossession was a deliberate effort to reproduce the connotations of the original Roman stonework for an ideological purpose. By using the columns, the British nation 'forged a tangible connection to the past and asserted itself as the legacy of the formidable Roman Empire.'[51] Her argument suggests that even if the 'dialogue' described by Woodward does take place, it is not necessarily conducted on equal terms. In other words, the sham ruin is an example of Benjamin's description of how 'the spoils are carried along in the procession', whilst 'empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers'. Benjamin argues that the 'cultural treasures' taken as spoils 'have an origin which he [the historical materialist] cannot contemplate without horror […] There is no document of civilisation which is not at the same time a document of barbarism'.[52] An individual can engage

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[50] Dale Kinney, 'Spolia in Medieval Art and Architecture', in *Grove Art Online*, *Oxford Art Online* <https://doi.org/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T2089402>.

[51] Kacie M. Alaga, 'Proclamation of Power: Interpreting Roman Spolia in Britain' (unpublished master's thesis, Savannah College of Art and Design, 2014), p. 3.

[52] Benjamin, *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, p. 256.

imaginatively with the past at a site like Virginia Water, but this act of empathy in itself can be co-opted by the presentation of ruins and used to enforce an ideological message.

The extreme political possibilities of harnessing our perception of ruins can be seen by examining the 'Theory of Ruin Value' set out by Albert Speer, ally and architect of Adolf Hitler.[53] This theory documents Hitler's fascination with the Roman Empire's architecture, the remains of which he had seen – lit up dramatically by Mussolini – when visiting Italy.[54] Hitler, according to Speer, believed that the Italian dictator had been able to use Rome's ruins to 'fire his nation with the idea of a modern empire' by usurping the remains of the old. Speer describes how Hitler expressed the desire for architecture able to 'transmit his time and its spirit to posterity', including during 'periods of weakness' when they would fall into disrepair.[55] While designing the Nuremberg Zeppelinfield, Speer presented a 'theory' of how this might be achieved by Nazism:

> Periods of weakness are bound to occur in the history
> of nations, he argued; but at their lowest ebb, their

[53] I am cognisant that, given Speer's ideological position, discussion of his ideals and their theoretical implications treads dangerous territory. Naomi Stead notes how the architect's work is now 'largely excluded from the architectural canon on the grounds that its problematic political program remains somehow inherent in its material'. (Naomi Stead, 'The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer', *Form/Work: An Interdisciplinary Journal of the Built Environment*, 6 (2003), 51–64 <https://naomistead.files.wordpress.com/2008/09/ stead_value_of_ruins_2003.pdf> [accessed 24 May 2019] (para. 2 of 25)). Nevertheless, in regards to ruins, Speer's theory is worth turning to in order to assess the very question of whether a political program can be maintained in a site – even when it might otherwise be dismissed as obsolete.

[54] Alex Scobie, *Hitler's State Architecture: The Impact of Classical Antiquity* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1990), p. 24.

[55] Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970; repr. 2003), pp. 96–97.

> architecture will speak to them of former power. […]
> The idea was that buildings of modern construction
> were poorly suited to form that 'bridge of tradition' to
> future generations which Hitler was calling for. It was
> hard to imagine that rusting heaps of rubble could
> communicate these heroic inspirations which Hitler
> admired in the monuments of the past. […] By using
> special materials and by applying certain principles of
> statics, we should be able to build structures which
> even in their state of decay, after hundreds or (such
> were our reckonings) thousands of years would more or
> less resemble Roman models.[56]

Speer expresses the ambition for creating a controlled, romanticised form of decay, which would form a 'bridge' between Nazism's 'heroic inspirations' and the apprehension of later viewers. It is potentially dangerous to erase the ideological specificity of Speer's words, yet the idea of ruin as a vessel to communicate 'national consciousness', regardless of time's progression or surrounding political change, has wider relevance. Speer's theory, and the colonial deployment of *spolia* at Virginia Water, both suggest that the autonomous dialogic work between 'incompleteness' and 'imagination' can be stabilised in order to encode ideological intent. This would restrict the presence of radical decay and its work 'against the grain' within Irish cultural memory; an idea which, as we shall see, appears in the work of Bowen and Ó Faoláin's work. In both *The Last September* and the two short stories of Ó Faoláin studied here, I argue that ruined Big Houses are represented to imply that colonial power structures continue to influence how Irish landscape and identity are perceived, even after the establishment of a Free State.

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[56] Ibid., p. 97.

Yet this is not the result revealed across this thesis as a whole. Elsewhere, coercive perceptions of historical meaning are challenged, rather than confirmed, by the formation of ruin. Speer's 'bridge' with Nazism, and the 'tangible connection' between Britain and Rome which Alaga identifies as a British ambition in Surrey, cannot be viewed as the full story. They depend upon the viewer responding as they are supposed to – which is not necessarily a given in ruins. Dale Kinney, discussing the use of *spolia*, argues that stabilising a remnant is ultimately impossible:

> *Spolia* are fragments, and as fragments they are indices of lost and irreparable wholes. These wholes present themselves to memory or imagination in unpredictable – concomitantly uncontrollable and also unrecoverable – variations. [...] *Spolia*, by definition products of plural intentions, are by their nature disruptive of unity and resistant to programmatic resolution.[57]

While *spoila* offers a particular form plurality which does not figure in the texts discussed below, Kinney's identification of the unpredictability of 'memory and imagination' in response to fragments has great relevance to ruins as a whole. Kinney emphasises the fragmentary status of *spolia*: 'indices', each providing reference points to 'lost and irreparable wholes' and thus instigating the 'dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination' Woodward describes.

Giving a sense of the lively possibilities that she argues can emerge as a result, Kinney considers the Roman Arch of Constantine (which is replete

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[57] Dale Kinney, 'Rape or Restitution of the Past? Interpreting *Spolia*', in *The Art of Interpreting*, ed. by Susan C. Scott (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University, 1995), pp. 52–67 (p. 58).

with *spolia*) and argues that, even if its designer intended these fragments to 'remind his viewers only of the ideal constellation of triumphs and beneficent gestures that comprise the reigns of specific "good" emperors', it would be impossible to prevent viewers 'subversively recalling the mutilated facade of the Basilica Ulpia instead', or forgetting the relics' sources altogether in favour of 'imagining their association with assorted evil emperors whose memory had been damned.'[58] Without overlooking the potential exertion of power and ideological signification which can lie behind the employment of physical fragments, Kinney nevertheless reasserts the individual's authority to read ruins with a capricious autonomy. In the analysis which follows, I contend that Kinney's suggestion damaged relics are 'by their nature […] resistant to programmatic resolution' is tested and often borne out by Irish writers. Ruin such as that depicted in the opening scene of a damaged Big House in Farrell's *Troubles*, and the extensive textual absences within Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*, promote the reader's ability to interpret fragmented space in unpredictable, potentially anarchic ways. When the 'raw materials' of history are ruined beyond recovery, any subsequent narratives of cultural memory produced by the site will benefit from a liberating instability.

5. 'Irresistible decay': Historical Consciousness in Transience

The unpredictability of narratives founded upon ruin can be aided further if the materials are themselves in a state of flux. If left without intervention, the balance between 'original design' and 'decay' exists in a process of transition, with presence becoming absence. The significance of this state for brushing

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[58] Ibid.

understanding of the past 'against the grain' is articulated in the work of Benjamin himself. In *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), the critic calls on ruin during his discussion of allegory. Attempting to revitalise allegory against claims that it is merely a mechanical device within baroque *Trauerspiel*,[59] Benjamin argues that allegories are in fact characterised by a semiotic instability. He reaches for the image of ruin in order to illustrate the powerful consequences for the representation of history:

> The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. The allegorical physiognomy of the nature-history, which is put on stage in the *Trauerspiel*, is present in reality in the form of the ruin. In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay. Allegory thereby declares itself to be beyond beauty. Allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things.[60]

This passage is densely suggestive, but at its core Benjamin contemplates the power lent to interpretation when the form encountered is in a state of 'irresistible decay'. As a structure becomes ruined, its integrity as an encoding (for instance of authority or beauty) is corrupted: left volatile rather than stable. Under these conditions the 'meaning' that a decaying structure signifies becomes a threatened substance. When 'history has physically merged into the setting' it is no longer possible to disinter and separate what

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[59] Stead, 'The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer', para. 9 of 25.

[60] Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963; repr. London: Verso, 1985), pp. 177–78.

constitutes 'history' and what constitutes the natural 'setting'. The result is a viewer immersed in 'the depths which separate visual being from meaning':[61] unable to surface and proclaim the truth about the past.

Benjamin pursues this contrast and its consequences for meaning by addressing the distinction between allegories and symbols. He cites claims by philologist Georg Friedrich Creuzer which in Benjamin's opinion, although made by Creuzer to denigrate allegory, actually articulate its value. While the symbol is 'self-contained, concentrated' and 'steadfastly remains itself', the allegory is 'a successively progressing, dramatically mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time.'[62] Defining the symbol as that which 'steadfastly remains itself' suggests not only that no rival ideas can infiltrate it, but that it also allows no gap between the symbol and the idea symbolised. Allegories, meanwhile, are 'mobile', progressing with 'the fluidity of time' and so creating transience and with it ambiguity. The distinction between symbol and allegory is between totality and ruin. With allegory, rather than the complete material of signification, we are left (as readers of texts and architecture) with 'a fragment, a rune'.[63] Craig Owens develops this point in discussing allegorical images that 'simultaneously proffer and defer a promise of meaning; they both solicit and frustrate our desire that the image be directly transparent to its signification.'[64] In a tense balance, the irresistible decay Benjamin sketches

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[61] Ibid.

[62] Cited in Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166. Benjamin in fact quotes these phrases from a letter written to Creuzer by Joseph Görres.

[63] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 176.

[64] Craig Owens, 'The Allegorical Impulse: Toward a Theory of Postmodernism', *October*, 12 (1980), 67–86 <https://doi.org/10.2307/778575> (p. 70).

moves us further away from knowledge of the initial reality of history or art, forming what Owens terms a 'progressive distancing from origin'.[65] Rather than offering a pre-determined code, allegories and ruins are illegible fragments that require piecing together, deciphering. Even then are unlikely to confirm whether the glimpses of understanding we gain are correct, because in the fluctuation of decay our understanding moves ever further from the designer's original vision.

With this brief gloss regarding Benjamin's vision of how 'the characters of transience' animate – while frustrating – meaning, it is possible to examine his theory's wider significance for the project of radical decay. Benjamin has sketched out an important means of resistance to hegemonic control over space. Both the example of Virginia Water and Speer's theory of ruin value demonstrate how ruins can be constructed, or subsequently re-presented, with the intention of preserving an ideological message through their visitors' interpretations. Benjaminian ruin frustrates any such practice. As Teresa Dovey comments, his work focuses upon 'historical consciousness', with a vision of allegory (and, I posit, ruin) which 'offers the means to undo both the reifications of history as continuity and the hegemonic power of interpretation in the present.'[66] The relationship between 'continuity' and 'hegemonic power of interpretation' is crucial here. Speer in particular describes the ambition to build structures able to communicate Nazism's 'heroic inspirations' across time without adulteration, even when left

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[65] Ibid.

[66] Teresa Dovey, '*Waiting for the Barbarians*: Allegory of Allegories', in *Critical Perspectives on J. M. Coetzee*, ed. by Graham Huggan and Stephen Watson (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1996), pp. 138–51 (p. 145).

abandoned by their architects.[67] This idea of continuity, sustained through an ability to replicate an ideological encoding wholesale in what Benjamin terms 'a process of eternal life', is eroded in the latter critic's understanding of allegory and decay.[68] Progressive ruin, 'beyond beauty', disintegrates the controlled and aestheticised stability envisaged by Speer in his Romanesque ruin with its 'outlines still clearly recognizable'.[69] And indeed Speer himself conceded later in life that what remains of his Zeppelinfield had fallen prey to this unattractive transience (Figure 5), joking that 'I only can say thank goodness that I am no more together with Hitler [sic], he would have been very mad with me about this bad stone quality.'[70] Ideological authority and the

Figure 5. Speer's decayed 'bridge of tradition', Zeppelinfield, Nuremberg (2012).
© Adam Jones /
Wikimedia Commons
/ CC-BY-SA-3.0

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[67] Speer, p. 97.

[68] Naomi Stead's perceptive essay regarding Speer and Benjamin reaches the same conclusion, discussing aesthetic distinctions in the latter's distinction between allegories and the classicist symbol. As she comments: 'If Benjamin's understanding of the ruin as an emblem of transience is allegorical, Speer's use of the ruin is "symbolic" in that it aspires to the idealised, atemporal totality characteristic of Nazi Neo-Classical architecture.' (Stead, 'The Value of Ruins: Allegories of Destruction in Benjamin and Speer', para. 14 of 24).

[69] Speer, p. 97.

[70] Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New,* Ep. 2, 'The Powers that Be', dir. by David Lewis Richardson (BBC in association with Time-Life Films, 1980).

barbaric 'documents of civilisation' are threatened by a movement towards absence which ostensibly solid materials cannot evade; as a result Benjamin shows us how loss is simultaneously a source of emancipation. As John McCole comments, for Benjamin it is precisely 'the *failure* of human language and signification to capture and stabilize that which they intend' which supplies baroque allegories their 'generative tension'.[71] This holds true for ruin. Much can be made of a site in this animated condition, but not the authentic truth. Benjamin thus depicts a form of decay as flux, which can be used to foster dissent against authorised interpretations of space. 'Irresistible' degeneration becomes resource for resistant reading.

Benjamin's argument allows us to return to – and complexify – the description of a dialogue between incompletion and the spectator's imagination set out by Woodward. Woodward too places emphasis on the impact of decay as a progressing and mobile state in creating a 'generative tension', a means to liberate how a visitor responds and ascertains meaning. He emphasises his point by suggesting the coercive alternative. Mobility in a ruin distinguishes the fascistic theories of Speer and Hitler from his own game of imaginative engagement. Woodward explains this, and contributes a vocabulary to identify the difference and its consequences:

> Should Hitler's obsession with ruins deter us from enjoying them ourselves? No; the opposite rather. To Hitler the Colosseum was not a ruin but a monument [...] He was attracted to the endurance of the masonry and the physical survival of an emperor's ambitions; to the lover of the ruinous, by contrast, the attraction is in

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[71] John McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 133.

> the sight of transience and vulnerability. Poets and
> painters like ruins, and dictators like monuments. [72]

This marks a conceptual contrast between a 'ruin', which permits creative possibility, and the 'monument', a site which may be physically damaged, but serves to enshrine authority and uniformity of reaction. Like Benjamin, Woodward points to 'transience' as the deciding characteristic which subverts monumental reifications of cultural memory. In a resistance against heritage practice and the rhetoric of preservation,[73] the art historian argues that ruin must have a 'visibly alive and dynamic' relation to 'the forces of Nature' in order to prevent sterility of response.[74] Unless there is an evident, active tension between substance and the decay ('Nature') that is changing and destroying the structure, a damaged building will be incapable of animating the spectator's imagination to the extent Woodward envisions. By stilling the natural degeneration of a building or monument, its authorities restrain the viewer's full imaginative (re)constitution of a space, denying those who view it the opportunity to engage actively and intimately, against ideological designs.

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[72] Woodward, p. 30.

[73] Whilst this thesis is at heart a work of literary criticism, the reflections concerning ruin and memory produced in pursuit of radical decay have interdisciplinary implications in relation to the pragmatic work of heritage and its policies regarding treatment of physical spaces. The argument made by Woodward – that intervening to preserve a site of ruin inhibits its viewers' imaginative engagement – is itself a fierce resistance to ingrained practice in building conservation. Timothy Darvill notes how the 'PARIS principle' (Preserving Archaeological Remains in Situ) has been 'the overarching philosophy of archaeological resource management' for many decades (Timothy Darvill, 'Public Archaeology: A European Perspective', in *A Companion to Archaeology*, ed. by John Bintliff (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 409–34 (pp. 420–21)). For a counterargument to the presumption in favour of preservation in professional heritage, see David E. Cooper, 'Should Ruins Be Preserved?', in *Appropriating the Past: Philosophical Perspectives on the Practice of Archaeology*, ed. by Geoffrey Scarre and Robin Coningham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 222–35).

[74] Woodward, p. 73.

While Woodward's phrasing above is rather stark in declaring that 'dictators like monuments', critical use of the latter term in relation to memory which has been prescribed within normative limits is not unfamiliar. Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin state that 'the monument expresses the power and sense of the society that gives it meaning, and at the same time obscures competing claims for authority and meaning.'[75] In Irish culture, the concern regarding monuments and their obscuring of alternative, potentially subaltern claims to meaning is particularly acute with regard to acknowledging Magdalene asylums. In April 1996, an attempt to give those incarcerated within Magdalene laundries a place in Irish cultural memory was made by the state, with a bench and plaque placed in St Stephen's Green (Figure 6).[76] The adequacy of this official action has been questioned. Emilie Pine notes how survivors of incarceration voiced 'resistance to the top-down institutionalisation of memory that is typified by monuments, memorials and plaques. These can close down avenues of remembering, rather than actively considering or redressing the wrongs that occurred.'[77] This emphasis on the *active* within public memory is expressed also by James M. Smith, who describes the need to 'initiate critical dialogue with the past' and praises literature which 'performs rather than fossilizes' the history of what happened

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[75] Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin, 'Introduction', in *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, ed. by Robert S. Nelson and Margaret Olin (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 1–15 (p. 7)

[76] 'Magdalen Women Plaque Unveiled', Irish Times, 22 April 1996 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/magdalen-women-plaque-unveiled-1.41798> [accessed 15 May 2019].

[77] Emilie Pine, 'We Need More than a Plaque to Mark Ireland's History of Cruelty', *Irish Times*, 14 April 2018 <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/heritage/we-need-more-than-a-plaque-to-mark-ireland-s-history-of-cruelty-1.3452991> [accessed 15 May 2019] (para. 3 of 29).

within the asylums.[78] My reading of *The Secret Scripture* takes place in this context, exploring the location of memory within transient, and hence subversive, ruins.

Figure 6. Magdalen seat, St Stephen's Green (2015).

Osama Shukir Muhammed Amin / Wikimedia Commons / CC BY-SA 4.0

The Benjaminian ruin, far from fossilising memory within a monument, serves to liberate interpretation. It shifts the transhistorical ideological fixity theorised by Speer to a knowledge of the past unmistakably located in a subjective, unrepeatable present. Benjamin emphasises a level of agency and personal experience in this encounter with history, for 'the dry rebuses which remain contain an insight, which is still available to the confused investigator.'[79] Even while 'confused' by the fragmented state in which this pictorial puzzle ('rebus') has reached us, we are nevertheless capable of discerning 'insight' into the original vision; but that understanding is both incomplete, and particular to our own present. The next visitor will know even less. The raw materials of history reach our contemporary moment in a state of ongoing, merging absence which cannot be undone, so that any

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[78] James M. Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007), p. 94.

[79] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 176.

meaning ascertained from amongst 'the characters of transience' is provisional and consciously uncertain.

Nevertheless, I contend that 'irresistible decay' does not set us free from the idea of historical knowledge altogether. In order to clarify the value of this relationship to history further, a comparison between Benjamin's theory and that of Jacques Derrida can be useful. It is worth taking a moment to attempt a summary of Derrida's intense engagement with the ruinous, although, as I shall argue, its insight into the work of radical decay remains limited. In his discussion of self-portraits, the 'father of deconstruction'[80] asserts that ruin exists at a more fundamental level:

> At the origin comes ruin; ruin comes to the origin [...]
> The ruin does not supervene like an accident upon a
> monument that was intact only yesterday. In the
> beginning there is ruin. Ruin is that which happens to
> the image from the moment of the first gaze.[81]

This passage brings ruin in relation to the original act of communication or *logos*, captured not least in his courting of the Biblical: 'in the beginning...', and corroding it with ruin. In Derrida's proclamation, meaning is inherently ruinous. Ruin is present 'at the origin' of an artwork or expression. No 'monument' is able to exist antecedent to or preserved from it, and so

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[80] Jonathan Kandell, 'Jacques Derrida, Abstruse Theorist, Dies at 74', *New York Times*, 10 October 2004 <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/10/obituaries/jacques-derrida-abstruse-theorist-dies-at-74.html> [accessed 28 April 2019]. Nicholas Royle discusses the possibilities of suggesting that Derrida has written 'nothing beside an extended, interruptive series of treatises on love of ruins.' (Nicholas Royle, *After Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 129).

[81] Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 65, 68.

'memory does not here restore a past (once) present'[82] to a now-ruined state; no such intact original existed, and there is 'no promise of restoration.'[83] The artwork produced under these conditions of 'untamed genesis'[84] is not at risk, but rather emancipated.[85] A priori ruin associates the expression and perception of historical meaning in ruins with the idea of 'free play' in language, for Derrida notes elsewhere how this radicalised communication has always been limited, 'neutralized or reduced' by 'referring it to a point of presence, a fixed origin'.[86] Establishing a centring, originary point gives structure an 'organizing principle' which limits its play. This implies that finding ruin 'at the origin', within the organising principle itself, is a radical embrace of 'free' (and unstable) state of communication.

Derrida's philosophy, like that Benjamin, finds liberation in ruins and their immanent resistance to 'intact', reified meaning. Yet despite this shared ground, Benjamin presents a different, more focused understanding of fragmentation and its relation to historical knowledge. His conception of 'the symbol' as that which 'steadfastly remains itself' in opposition to the 'mobile'

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[82] Ibid., p. 68.

[83] Ibid., p. 65.

[84] Responding to Husserl, Derrida described an 'untamed genesis' without 'the solid structure of a *Telos*'. (Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass ([Paris]: Éditions du Seuil, 1967; repr. London: Routledge, 2001), p. 196).

[85] Derrida argues that 'the dimension of the ruinous simulacrum has never threatened – quite to the contrary – the emergence of a work'. (Ibid., p. 64). The teleological and artistic liberty in an 'untamed genesis' is glossed by Steven Shakespeare: 'There is a wildness at the origin of any structure. [...] The savage genesis is the opening of history and its ruin. It is therefore also the possibility of a real future and genuine otherness. [...] Following the question of origins, he unlocks a savage genesis and a wandering word that cannot be held in check by philosophy, which must therefore be unsettled' (Steven Shakespeare, *Derrida and Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2009), p. 44).

[86] Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, p. 352.

allegory[87] has implications beyond the baroque;[88] but it is more discrete than Derrida's confrontation of the transcendental 'organizing principle'. Benjamin suggests that it is not possible to read or restore the original truth from a structure overrun by 'irresistible decay'; but the structure's instability is secondary and progressive, not already there 'in the beginning', as Derrida describes. Benjaminian ruin is a process, in which a form and its meaning move from extant presence to a condition of illegibility and finally absence. The result is more relevant to the interventions in Irish cultural memory and the hegemonic claims to truth described by this project. Benjamin allows focus to be turned to the contemporary moment within which the raw materials of history are apprehended: the 'characters of transience' bear witness to how present-day understandings of heritage are compromised (and animated) by a specific temporal distance.

6. Discomposed Voices: Ruin as a Textual and Human Condition

Benjamin's location of 'insight' amidst semiotic failure is key part of resisting the control over historical meaning which takes place within authorised heritage. 'Irresistible decay' threatens prescribed cultural boundaries between signification and the meaningless, deformity and design. The textual analysis below demonstrates how Irish writers' efforts to cultivate instability are not limited to representations of damage within the *built* environment. The

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[87] Cited in Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.

[88] Derrida contrasts his own position to Benjamin's discussion of allegory, but does not gloss the critic's ideas in any detail, instead claiming that the ruin is presented by Benjamin as 'simply a theme of baroque culture.' As this thesis argues, Benjamin's ideas regarding ruin and its relationship to symbolic meaning have more far-reaching possibilities for understanding historical consciousness than Derrida's brief remark indicates. (Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 69).

remainder of this introduction will examine two other manifestations of ruin which appear in the texts below, deployed by their authors in order to threaten cultural stability within Irish culture. Firstly, I will discuss how ruin is a force within literary form, breaking up coherent and monolithic versions of history – though at the cost of potential dissolution. Secondly, I consider how ruin is illustrated as a human experience, (almost) silencing problematic voices within Irish culture. The authors below mark these vocal absences, but do not necessarily restore them.

Literary construction is rarely far from ruin, and as with physical decay, the tension between composition and disrepair is productive of resistance. Given the centrality of Benjamin's arguments here, it is apposite to acknowledge the critic's own work in this regard. Terry Eagleton describes Benjamin's oeuvre as 'rife with images of excavation and disinterment, of grubbing among buried ruins and salvaging forgotten remains',[89] and contends that Benjamin is revolutionary in doing so: 'in search of a surrealist history and politics, one which clings tenaciously to the fragment, the miniature, the stray citation, but which impacts these fragments one upon the other to politically explosive effect'.[90] There is evidence of the author's awareness throughout *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* that he attends to a form already consigned to the waste paper bin of literary history; the texts studied are not products with an 'eternal life' that can continue unchanged

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[89] Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin, or, Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 2009), pp. 55–6.

[90] Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1990), p. 338.

across centuries, between readers.[91] But the fragmentation undergone by literary as well as physical monuments is characterised by Benjamin as a kind of 'rebirth' in which 'the work stands as a ruin'.[92] This rebirth into ruin does not revive the original, but creates instead a new mode of artistic and historical consciousness which embodies the animated liberation he attributes to allegory. Irregularity and a lack of 'conclusiveness' both changes and intensifies meaning for the reader, so that 'just as mosaics preserve their majesty despite their fragmentation into capricious particles, so philosophical contemplation is not lacking in momentum.'[93] Benjamin's fascination with ruins is due to their productive condition as crumbling but 'irresistible' signifiers in the project of brushing history against the grain. For, as overlooked fragments, these ruins have escaped the grain altogether.

The idea of 'momentum' in a text fragmented into 'capricious particles' suggests the potentially subversive capacity of a text which 'stands as a ruin'. This textual ruin is inflicted in different ways by the authors studied here. Works can assume the guise of a palimpsest, composed of multiple voices and revisions accruing over time without quite erasing their precursor; or they can appear not as a composition as much as a loose compilation of competing styles and voices. Several instances of textual ruin are discussed within this thesis. Farrell's *Troubles* sabotages its own structure, provoking scepticism about the narrator's capacity to organise plot and

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[91] Benjamin's own style can also be construed as a source of ruin. Susan Sontag describes how his essays close 'just in time, before they self-destruct' – a method that is 'torture to execute'. (Susan Sontag, *Under the Sign of Saturn* ([New York: Farrar, 1980]; repr. London: Penguin, 2009), p. 127).

[92] Benjamin, *The Origin of Tragic Drama*, p. 182.

[93] Ibid., p. 28.

historical constituents. Revision and disruption are suggested as the process of construction itself. The result is a text barely on the respectable side of ruin. Firmly on the other side lies Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*, a novel bearing deep fissures, in which warring voices are placed together with little narratorial intervention. In its own structure, Barry's *The Secret Scripture* is more restrained, but the fragmentation of documents manifests as a vital resource by which the official, archival control over marginalised histories is discomposed.

While the concept of a ruined text may be useful in literature beyond Ireland, this nation's history proves a particular impetus towards fragmentation in form. Critics such as Eagleton stress that Ireland's failure to develop the realist novel can be attributed to historically identifiable trends: 'the realist novel is the form *par excellence* of settlement and stability, gathering individual lives into an integrated whole; and social conditions in Ireland hardly lent themselves to any such sanguine reconciliation.' Thus 'the Irish novel from Sterne to O'Brien is typically recursive and diffusive'.[94] Historical disorder registers lively presence in the fictionalisation of Ireland's past. Interpreting this 'recursive' movement as ruin is a means by which to move past rehearsed debates regarding postmodernism, instead focusing on writers who engage the ruinous encounter with absence and fragmentation as a source of subversion in historiography.

As Benjamin's concept of the work's 'rebirth' suggests, formal ruin has productive possibilities. In *The Secret Scripture*, ruined archives disrupt medical and religious authorities' discursive control over patients such as

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[94] Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), pp. 146–47.

Roseanne, so that individuals made systematically voiceless in post-independence Ireland are given a contingent space in which to formulate resistant narratives. In *Troubles*, press clippings interrupt an otherwise realist narrative in order to facilitate intellectual links between events taking place elsewhere, so that the end of colonialism in Ireland is connected – in a disparate, unresolved fashion – to revolution and anti-colonial violence across the world, against the spatial and thematic grain of national history. And in *Cré na Cille*, I argue, speech is consumed by fragmentation, which enables otherwise marginalised and deliberately ignored articulations of global history to gain presence.

To reveal the potential productiveness that emerges from this last example of (corrupted) structure, I make use of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of *heteroglossia*, which describes speech consisting of multiple 'languages'. These 'may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically.'[95] Bakhtin's portrait of 'unresolvable dialogues'[96] between voices, speech patterns, and ideologies assists in describing how *Cré na Cille*'s textual environment, largely unmanaged by any narrator, allows countercultural perspectives regarding the Emergency to become audible. What Woodward terms the 'perverse fertility' of ruin – its capacity to render historical meaning ambiguous, and hence to engage the reader's imaginative perception of the past – is available within radical decay in literary form. However, the profligate energy of heteroglossia is only a partially viable model in these circumstances. Fragmentation may

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[95] M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. by Michael Holquist, trans. by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 259–422 (p. 292).

[96] Ibid., p. 291.

bring Benjamin's 'momentum' to the narration of history, but it also creates disjuncture and lack, which risks the irreparable loss of historical knowledge and meaning. Describing texts such as *Cré na Cille* as 'ruins' allows this uneasy tension between animation and failure to be made visible.

The incomplete attempt to give erased memories voice leads to a final form of radical decay discussed within this thesis: that of ruin as a human state. I will examine the portrayal of characters whose identities have been damaged by events in Ireland's past, leaving them in a state of psychological or social deterioration. Like the shells of Big Houses and Free State asylums, the authors I examine suggest that these characters' condition is not necessarily acknowledged by authorised and idealistic national heritage. This thesis does not seek to claim that cultural memory is incapable of acknowledging personal trauma, or of remembering the mournful histories which have entailed personal devastation, both in Ireland and the rest of the world. Guy Beiner's 2018 essay regarding the development of Irish memory in the long twentieth century details the nation's crowded history of commemoration, which includes the recognition of tragedy as well as triumph. Emphasis on the former increased in the second half of the twentieth century, reflecting 'a noticeable shift in the dominant international paradigm of commemoration, which moved from celebration of victors to remembrance of victims.'[97] Suffering during the Great Famine (1845–49), for example, has always remained 'a significant point of reference within Irish culture',[98] and this trauma became the object of more audible, sustained

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[97] Beiner, p. 717.
[98] Ibid., p. 719.

commemoration during its sesquicentenary in the 1990s. [99]

Nevertheless, the literature of radical decay portrays what can be termed 'human ruin' in order to suggest elisions within popular memory. In *Fools of Fortune*, Evie, who loses her husband, daughters, and house during the War of Independence, is driven to alcoholism and ultimately suicide by melancholic trauma. Although her son's act of revenge against a Black and Tan is heralded as nationalistic heroism, Evie's condition is unacknowledged by post-independence Ireland and spoken of only in euphemisms. I therefore investigate how her character's ruin has political implications, for while Evie is unable to articulate her experience, leaving little more than silence to mark trauma, Trevor draws attention to her story's elision from wider cultural memory in favour of more easily romanticised history.

A second instance of human ruin occurs in Ó Faoláin's 'A Broken World'. The narrative is largely driven by a priest who expounds criticism of the Free State and its atrophied condition. Only when he has left does another character explain that the clergyman has been 'silenced' for his political beliefs regarding Ireland's past and present. He is unable to preach or carry out sacerdotal rituals, and so left in a bitter and self-corroded existence. I read this revelation as illustrative of the puritanical repression by the Church in Ó Faoláin's Ireland. Authority intervenes to ruin the cultural standing of dissident voices, ensuring that their reflections upon Irish history go unheard. Within the story itself, the priest is not silenced; but his message and identity are only perceptible in the transitory environment of a train carriage and gain little purchase in the surrounding landscape. Elsewhere, forms of radical

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[99] Ibid., pp. 718–19.

decay are used to stimulate dialogic engagement with what remains of a historical message. The priest's condition, cynical and voiceless in wider Ireland, reveals Ireland's cultural elisions, but offers little prospect of repair.

This introduction has sought to illustrate the dynamic, heterogeneous substance of ruin and its key place within Irish literature and the work of radical decay contained therein. Having discussed Irish heritage and coercive practices within the nation's cultural memory, I have explored the form of the ruin itself, examining the debate regarding the access to history which it can be used to provide. In the analysis which now follows, I will build on this theoretical groundwork in order to demonstrate that incompletion and transience are powerful resources within Irish literature.

Chapter 1. Revolution and the Big House

Going to Pieces: Troubling Perspectives on the Majestic's Road to Ruin

1. 'Blinding Magnificence': Ruin out of Control

J. G. Farrell's *Troubles* (1970) is an aptly named text. Set between 1916 and 1921, the novel charts the final stages of English colonial rule in Ireland. The first text within Farrell's 'Empire trilogy', it tells the story of a virginal veteran of World War I named Major Brendan Archer. Shell-shocked and adrift in 1919, he travels, to meet Angela, his 'fiancée' since 1916, whose Anglo-Irish family own a hotel in Ireland. The detailed letters written by his 'fiancée' have provide a granite reality which he holds onto during the traumatic conflict. Once he has arrived in Ireland, however, the Major does not find a stable space in which to recover. Instead, he becomes inextricably involved with the Majestic Hotel, a decrepit imperial bastion in a country moving rapidly toward revolution. Although once grand and successful, the vast hotel is evidently in the final stages of decline; its only guests are unpaying, never-leaving elderly ladies, and it is managed in an increasingly deranged fashioned by Angela's father, Edward. The intensifying violence of the Irish War of Independence, the guerrilla conflict which escalated gradually during 1919 and lasted until the Anglo-Irish Treaty in December 1921, is matched in Farrell's novel by this increasingly malevolent and ruinous building, ever more decayed and overtaken by proliferating cats and plant life. As its residents finally abandon Ireland, their exit consonant with the effective end of British rule, the hotel is put to death in an infernal conflagration started by its shadowy, sinister manservant, Murphy.

What hopes a reader might have of fashioning a comfortable, unquestioning metanarrative from the historical 'raw materials' represented in *Troubles* will have gone up in smoke by the Majestic's end. Set ablaze, the hotel becomes a vision of such 'blinding magnificence'[1] that no earthly terms prove adequate. The narrator at first seizes upon Blakean imagery, depicting streams of fire 'the size of oak trees' while 'caterpillars of flame' wriggle through the house.[2] At this point, the building denies the adoption of any perspective whatsoever; the watchers must shade their eyes and subdue their sight of the fire in order to observe it at all. The building quickly becomes almost unrecognisable as its remaining inhabitants, cats, are set aflame to transcend their material existence:

> Those not already ablaze exploded in mid-air or ignited like flares as they hurtled through the great heat towards the earth. Someone in the crowd remarked that it was like watching fiery demons pouring out of the mouth and nose of a dying Protestant. But that was not all, for now a hideous, cadaverous figure was framed for an instant, poised on the roof, his clothes a cloak of fire, his hair ablaze: Satan himself! (pp. 450-51)

Simultaneously ecstatic and parodic in the credulous delivery, this inferno is

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[1] J. G. Farrell, *Troubles* (London: Phoenix, 2000), p. 450. Further references to *Troubles* within this chapter will be to this edition, and will be given in the text.

[2] This is an obscure, seemingly idiosyncratic allusion which in fact refers Farrell's alert reader to the tension at play between a sublime inferno that dazzles wilful appropriation of history, and a suspicion that perspective creates the reality of all events, even the most catastrophically material ruin. The Frontispiece to Blake's 'To the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise' details a child swaddled on an oak leaf, Blake's priestly caterpillar curling above. Blake's image itself is accompanied by a commentary upon perception, in the inscribed verse: 'What is man! The Suns Light when he unfolds it | Depends on the organ that beholds it'. (*The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. by David Erdman (London: University of California Press, 2008), pp. 258–59).

Farrell's version of the sublime – which, in Edmund Burke's influential 1757 definition, is an 'irresistible force' acting upon the imagination and emotions,[3] hurrying us on to 'delight; not pleasure, but a sort of tranquillity tinged with terror.'[4]

The blinding picture, one manifestation of 'radical' ruin, thwarts the efforts of authorised heritage discourse to establish a teleological understanding of history by negating any attempt to read the burning Majestic according to a political agenda. Interpretations cannot wrest it into service. It is not nationalistic – neither a revolutionary success for Sinn Féin nor an expression of enduring Anglo-Irish authority – and the sublime rebuffs the saccharine picturesque. Even Farrell's religious imagery ridicules the religious divide along which the dominant narrative of Irish independence is constructed: the surreal transformation of a building's shape into 'the mouth and nose of a dying Protestant', coupled with the urgent clauses multiplying toward a peak of sulphuric malevolence ('Satan himself!'), creates a bathetic Medieval cartoon. Impossible to look away from, but equally impossible to gain any semblance of perspectival control over, this event of 'blinding magnificence' supports a key agenda of radical decay within the text.

Farrell's work is far more than a passive account of Ireland's past. In exploring its more contentious contribution to historiography, the question I seek to answer is this: how does the production of ruin in *Troubles* resist coercive formulations of cultural memory, and what resources are readers offered in order to reconstruct a more critical understanding of the

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[3] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* ([London: R. and J. Dodsley, 1757]; repr. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 53.

[4] Ibid., p. 123.

past? In answering, I argue that the author gives his reader access to the semiotic ambivalence of ruin described by Benjamin, thus changing how meaning is perceived within space. This is orchestrated in order to challenge how Ireland's authorised heritage directs the interpretation of space in service of 'dominant narratives' regarding national identity.[5] By presenting the raw materials of history in ruins, Farrell inhibits their hegemonic selection and manipulation and returns a level of agency to individual readers.

This is the commitment of the countercultural literature of ruin which I pursue throughout this thesis. As Smyth describes, fiction which 'demands to be read in terms of the present' (as I argue *Troubles* does) asks the reader to 'measure the country described [...] against his/her own perceptions'.[6] In *Troubles*, the space and history described instigates potential awareness of those perceptions' flaws. Farrell presents visitors to the Majestic with an image of 'radical decay' that disrupts the lenses usually employed to comprehend the past within the present – and perhaps, as a result, facilitates the development of new perspectives regarding Ireland's revolutionary period.

Farrell deploys this strategy of radical ruin on multiple fronts. It is most evident as a fictitious presence at the heart of *Troubles* in the Majestic Hotel building, created for the reader's imagination (with the suggested presence of real Big Houses behind this depiction). But it can also be understood as a textual force at the level of form itself, for the novel is characterised by a disorienting chronological progression. *Troubles*' realist prose is interrupted in particular by newspaper articles referring to imperial history taking place elsewhere. These disruptions dislodge the reader from a

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[5] Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, p. 199.

[6] Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation*, p. 168.

secure historical and geographical context. The manifestation of a more radical narrative intention is shifting and ambiguous. Farrell's work is deceptively hospitable, appearing at first glance to be a straightforwardly entertaining novel, with inviting comedy and a clearly apparent plot and setting. Yet upon closer inspection it presents a highly problematic assemblage of ruin, which mounts a challenge to established narratives of history.

I focus on key ways in which the hotel's ruin is developed to create radical decay. Resistance to coercive perspective takes place from the outset, with Farrell's opening description of the hotel featuring ambiguous language and dubious narrative authority. Close and extended study of these key first passages reveals how the Majestic's ruin is prevented from becoming a firm foundation upon which to construct a history. This concern with construction can be pursued further, for as I go on to discuss, the literary structure that follows this opening is disordered. I read this as the use of aesthetic and historiographic fragmentation in order to create new discursive proximities. The novel thus returns agency to readers, assisting the development of perspectives which dissent from dominant paradigms. I then discuss how, despite the frustration of narrative, the material decay taking place within the Majestic is palpable – and as such offers a new means of connection to the past. Finally, I posit that the mischievous tension between ambiguity and tangibility – which creates radical decay throughout *Troubles* – is used to develop the Majestic into a site of cultural memory with curiously preserved qualities. According to the opening chapter, the remnants of the hotel have reached their modern witness untouched and unchanged since the historical

events which the texts proceeds to narrate. I read this as the novel's resistance to the process of erasing problematic ruins from cultural memory through the management of landscape discussed above. The work of authorised heritage to ensure that spaces with uncomfortable connotations are, in Lowenthal's words, 'rarely memorialized', is counteracted. [7] By visiting Farrell's imaginatively provocative ruin, contemporary readers are given the opportunity to engage with incompletion described by Woodward (but in the nevertheless 'confused' fashion described by Benjamin),[8] and so recognise an unresolved past.

2. The Worst Tour Guide: Documenting the Majestic's Remains

Let us proceed by examining the opening passage of *Troubles* (pp. 3–5) in detail. Though 'blinding magnificence' is a peak reached only at the novel's climax, impediments to easy vision are encountered from the text's opening passages. Although Farrell's narrative does indeed provide materials for subsequent plot construction, it also sabotages historical narrative by being a thoroughly questionable site tour, preventing the reader from following an authority obediently and without concern.

> Here and there among the foundations one might still find evidence of the Majestic's former splendour: the great number of cast-iron bathtubs, for instance, which had tumbled from one blazing floor to another until they hit the earth; twisted bed-frames also, some of them not yet altogether rusted away; and a simply prodigious number of basins and lavatory bowls. At

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[7] Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 332.

[8] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 176.

intervals along the outer walls there is testimony to the stupendous heat of the fire: one can disinter small pools of crystal formed in layers like the drips of wax from a candle, which gathered there, of course, from the melting windows. (pp. 3–4)

The narrator adopts the role of a guide, noting features 'here and there', at first glance appearing to provide assistance in directing our imagination. For instance, they supply the exciting atmosphere of the fire (exciting, but not in their description sublime: 'of course' the reader can comprehend it), and direct the formation of a connection between visible objects and the stories to which they are 'testimony'. As Bernard Bergonzi (a significant and early critical advocate for Farrell) observes, the narrator adopts a 'detached and knowledgeable descriptive register', a 'calmly assured tone' in which to 'focus attention on the places that are the physical locations of the novel's action, and, equally, their metaphorical centres.'[9] Key thematic details are indeed supplied, for example, the 'bed-frames' and 'prodigious number of basins and lavatory bowls' that are dominant in the Major's experience as he moves restlessly through rooms. Main characters are mentioned, and attention is drawn to the 'tiny white skeletons' (p. 4), an incipient hint of the cats who will assume such a lively symbolic and physical presence in the hotel. In describing the ruin, this guide gains considerable control over the reader's experience, but appears to do so in order to facilitate access to history.

However, the narrator's exposition is also chaotic, and the 'focus' adopted does not bring clarity. This may serve to arouse the reader's

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[9] Bernard Bergonzi, 'Fictions of History', in *The Contemporary English Novel*, ed. by Malcolm Bradbury and David Palmer (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), pp. 43–66 (p. 59).

suspicion about their competence – or indeed that of any guide tasked with explaining the ruin of the Majestic. If the opening is a microcosm of the book, it is cunningly designed, saturated by evasion and ambiguity. Bergonzi alludes to the novel's 'centres', but its first few pages make it difficult to ascertain any central elements:

> In those days the Majestic was still standing in Kilnalough at the very end of a slim peninsula covered with dead pines leaning here and there at odd angles. At that time there were probably yachts there too during the summer since the hotel held a regatta every July. These yachts would have been beached on one or other of the sandy crescents [...] But now both pines and yachts have floated away and one day the high tide may very well meet over the narrowest part of the peninsula, made narrower by erosion. As for the regatta, for some reason it was discontinued years ago, before the Spencers took over the management of the place. And a few years later still the Majestic itself followed the boats and preceded the pines into oblivion by burning to the ground – but by that time, of course, the place was in such a state of disrepair that it hardly mattered. (p. 3)

The scene is littered with objects never mentioned again. There were once pine trees and yachts at this site, even a regatta – the first and only time these features explicate the Majestic's past. Meanwhile, the climactic final blaze 'hardly mattered'. It is impossible to disentangle important information from the wreckage provided by this voice. Its authoritative tone becomes anecdotal and ill-informed, noting evidence 'one *might* still find' (p. 3, my emphasis). There were 'probably' yachts, and the vague phrase 'for some reason' features

more than once (p. 3). The trustworthiness of this narrator as an omniscient guide (or even a moderately well-informed one) is questionable. This is evidence of how ruin – obviously the content of the description – extends to the narrative itself. Yet all the while the narrator refuses to acknowledge the obvious gaps in knowledge: in the midst of this confusion the term 'of course' recurs, as if explaining the obvious, and by doing so suggesting that we are strangers in a place and story with legendary status (pp. 3–4). The parenthetical comment regarding curious quadruped skeletons intensifies this: '... ("But no, not rabbits," says my grandfather with a smile.)' (p. 4). An absent figure, perhaps an eyewitness to what has become history, is summoned to give a teasing remark on the reader's insecure position. From the start then, awareness is cultivated about how past stories are not necessarily arranged helpfully by those who present them. Given the task of disentangling multiple temporal and spatial layers, the reader is made highly dependent on the provisions of the narrative voice, but it also becomes necessary to treat their words with caution.

This introductory mischief, indicative that the narrative we are about to receive is not connected perfectly to the ruin itself, is evident in the chronological structure (or lack thereof) framing the site. Benjamin's 'characters of transience',[10] marking progression from presence to absence, underwrite this scene: the tide has already ('now') resulted in the loss of once-flourishing 'pines and yachts'. This erasure of both the natural environment and human activities within it is, apparently, set to continue; the remark that 'one day the high tide may very well meet over the narrowest part of the

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[10] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 177.

peninsula' uses putatively natural 'erosion' to create a sly metaphor for the Ascendancy's own diminishing, but apparently not yet quite concluded, place within Ireland. However, the temporality of gradual decay is disrupted by the narrator, with the result that the trajectory between the hotel's origin and its eventual absence is placed into confusion.

The history of the Majestic Hotel has no discernible starting point, with the first words – 'In those days' (p. 3) – beginning the text *in media res*: presupposing knowledge of prior conversation, as if we had joined the tour mid-way. Any location, any clue to when 'at that time' refers to, is refused, supplemented instead by vague indicators ('at that time', 'one day', 'a few years later still', p. 3). Denied temporal order, ruin cannot be identified as a discrete, referable event. There are multiple *kinds* of deterioration attached haphazardly to the hotel: 'erosion', 'burning', 'disrepair' (p. 3). Ruin in various guises dogs the Majestic to the extent that the term 'ruin' itself, as well as the history of the space, is problematised. The impulse to visualise the Majestic as a total structure – to access the 'splendour' of a glamorous big house, open for business – is thus corrupted by uncertainty. Even 'in those days' it is just 'still standing', implying it is barely surviving against a pressure of deterioration. Ruin leaves the viewer unable to decipher the building's starting point – an Anglo-Irish assertion of power in Irish space – from what Benjamin terms 'the dry rebuses which remain'.[11] The mythical imperial glory of 'in those days' is infiltrated slyly by rot and corrosive historical pressure. It is impossible to reconstruct 'former splendour' from these remains. Ruin is a multifarious substance traversing the building's history, so that it is not only

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[11]Ibid., p. 176.

difficult to be certain of an original design, but also to envisage the forward movement towards decline with any steadiness. This impression of pervasive ruin disturbs our ability to see the Majestic's history clearly; in its documentation here ruin slips cultural control. At the Majestic ruin is let loose with an innate anarchy, and no authority can disguise an agenda by claiming to solve the problems inherent in the term.

Farrell makes sure that the Majestic's ruin is constructed with a constant sense of imperceptibility and suspicion, suggesting a lack of stability in the treatment of such spaces by those who narrate them as history. The failure to provide an adequate framework with which to access the ruin (a clear temporal structure; adequate distinctions between what characteristics of space are historical narrative and which are in the present; and suspicion with regard to the narrator's capacity for descriptive accuracy) immediately foregrounds problems of cultural memory. It styles the text as one in which the reader's attempts to access simplistic teleological confirmations through the genre of historical fiction will be frustrated. Any effort to stabilise a source of cultural memory into what Woodward calls a 'monument', a totalising vessel which retains and imposes a fixed ideological message regarding the past, will falter among the Majestic's ambiguous remains.

Farrell's novel is percolated by a sense of anxiety with regard to the potentially treacherous authority of narrative guides who might control historical perception. The foundations of authorised commentary are undermined at the outset by the opening voice's dubious understanding of the ruin they present; and this sense of having an insufficient perspective with which to control the novel's focus continues through the text. As well as

presenting the reader with an ungraspable conception of 'ruin' as this site, there are subtle details in the opening which indicate that the supposedly impartial narrator in fact inhabits a politically subjective perspective. When summarising the building's history in the opening paragraph the narrator, arriving at the moment of the final blaze, omits the cause of the fire and gives the hotel agency in its own destruction when it 'preceded the pines into oblivion by burning to the ground' (p. 3). This omission can be read as an attempt to control the potentially sensitive connotations of the Majestic within the post-independence landscape in which its ruins now lie (not yet removed from the mainland). The document of ruin that follows contradicts this non-agential, apolitical characterisation of the hotel's blaze, reasserting the historical responsibility of ruin by intertwining decay with escalating troubles. The desire of this opening voice to evade political strife is supplemented by their peculiarly filial comment regarding the delicate bones of 'small quadrupeds … ("But no, not rabbits," says my grandfather with a smile.)' (p. 4). This suggestion of spatial stories kept alive through family anecdotes humanises an otherwise anonymous voice, and gives an indication of how long ago was the relevant part of the hotel's 'past': within the space of two generations, and in living memory. The comment is thus one of our few hopes for a temporal anchor, but reading it as such further emphasises that the narrator is not impartial, and in fact may have close emotional ties to this space, even if they never elucidate these.

This sense of curious but unexamined personal connection to a historically significant site identifies an important ambiguity in Farrell's own position – one which is important in the foregrounding of (and struggle with)

perspective in *Troubles.* If the novel seeks to satirise how history can be represented from questionable positions, it is also a text which implicates itself in concerns regarding the distortion of narrative (and authorial) perspectives. *Troubles* is a representation of colonialism from an ambivalent authorial position. Lavinia Greacen describes how Farrell's first conceptions of the novel were inspired by personal experience residing in Ireland: "'Having lived there," he would explain when the task was completed, "I was very interested in the situation of the Protestant Anglo-Irish, who were left rather stranded in the new nation and finding it rather difficult to adapt themselves.'"[12] However, interest in the experience of a class of historical subjects he initially identified with developed into concern that this perspective was too limited in empathy and insight. As Greacen continues:

> relief at the decision to focus on Irish independence gave way to dismay when he realised that his ambition had grown to weave in all shades of opinion – "to comprehend and interpret for universal experience" – which called for a story capable of sustaining such a theme. He could not envisage how it could be done.[13]

The attempt to capture 'universal experience' is a common one within historical fiction, which typically presupposes the capacity to record the responses of people existing in a very different time and setting without issues of obscured vision or bias. Discussing the possibilities for the contemporary novel, Hilary Mantel criticises popular contributions to the genre for depending 'on the perception of the people of the past being just

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[12] Lavinia Greacen, *J. G. Farrell: The Making of a Writer* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. 218.
[13] Ibid.

like us, which they were not'.[14] Although the desire to make this assumption regarding past times' similitude can emerge from sympathy for others' perspectives (rather than ignorant faith that one's own experience is already universal), cultural difference nevertheless poses an intense challenge to the validity of historical fiction – particularly in the context of deep social divisions, such as between Irish Catholic tenants and Protestant Anglo-Irish tenants, when an author may be closer to one of the parties.

Breezy universalism in supposedly apolitical historiography can be accompanied by idealism, even romanticism. This is an accusation often directed toward the Ascendancy fictionalisations of Ireland, a tradition which Farrell ironically places himself within (or at least fairly close to). The Big House novel receives criticism for its commitment to what Kreilkamp summarises as a 'revivalist yearning for eighteenth century Anglo-Irish hegemony'.[15] Farrell's awareness of being an Anglo-Irish (but not Ascendancy) writer, constructing a potentially nostalgic historical fiction, is detectable in how the generic components of the Big House novel are ironically refracted, rather than reproduced, in the ruined *hotel* of the Majestic. Rather than claiming to have overcome the struggle to find a narrative position from which to offer the reader a universal perspective, Farrell emphasises the failure to do so with a deliberately problematic representation of ruin. Attempting to resolve the ambiguities in the Majestic's ruin is impossible,

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[14] 'Man Booker Prize Winner Hilary Mantel on Wolf Hall', *Guardian*, 7 October 2009 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/video/2009/oct/07/booker-prize-hilary-mantel-wolf-hall> [accessed 14 April 2015].

[15] Vera Kreilkamp, 'The Novel of the Big House', in *The Cambridge Companion to Irish Literature,* ed. by John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 60–77 (p. 61).

because they are deeply embedded in the text. The opening certainly resists complacent, universalist access to history; it presents the hotel and its story not as a seat of luxury to be admired but as a disorienting, miscommunicated process of decay. This at once enables and frustrates a reader's entrance to it. The strategy results in an aesthetic of ruin that cannot be easily suited to requisition by a particular political agenda – including an agenda which condemns British imperialists unequivocally. Consequently, *Troubles* fails to accommodate the labels applied by critics of late twentieth century fiction: terms such as 'historical fiction', 'metafiction', 'modernist' and 'postmodern' – all of which have relevance in a discussion of the novel but fail to stay firmly in place. *Troubles* dramatises itself struggling to refuse participation in existing historical perspectives. The text resists ideological location, not only through distorting spatial reference, but by extending this ruinous agenda to novel's own formal composition.

3. 'Reality as hard as granite': Farrell's Writing in Ruins

In order to bring to crisis established, mainstream cultural resources for apprehending colonial history, Farrell sets about unsteadying the construction of narrative itself. *Troubles* deliberately damages the space in which the decline of Anglo-Irish authority unfolds. In doing so Farrell invites the reader to take a more active hand, sorting and reconstructing the disordered narrative materials – but all the while frustrating any desire the reader might have for this effort to be easy. Reading the text's form through the metaphor of ruin offers a means to disperse typical standpoints regarding Farrell's adherence to the concept of realism. Neil McEwan asserts that

'Farrell is a realist' who 'accepts the older conventions of modern prose narrative and believes they reflect what we normally experience.' The novel's theme is 'the problematic nature of historical interpretation' as opposed to 'the problematic nature of fiction.'[16] However, while it is true that Farrell seeks to trouble 'historical interpretation', the effort is partly achieved by unsteadying fictional structure, and in doing so drawing subtle attention to the role of conventions of form and presentation in organising as much as reflecting normal experience. As is evident from the opening, an impartial voice capable of providing *Troubles* with a homogeneous narrative is out of the question. Not satisfied with showing that a single ruin can in fact be a puzzling conglomeration of times and areas, Farrell proceeds to incorporate multiple, unassimilable sources of information into the rest of the novel, including (but not limited to) swiftly travelling rumours, overheard arguments, and newspaper articles. The basic layout – numbered chapters in continuous prose – is broken up, particularly by the newspaper articles which are interpolated without integration into their surroundings. Chris Ferns reads this dialogic compilation as a strategy with which to 'call into question the authority of any single narrative voice',[17] demonstrating that 'there is no stable yardstick' against which to measure accounts.[18] Multiple voices in competition collectively question the capacity of any one to claim mimetic authority. In Angela's letters, 'precise and factual', the Major thinks that he has found an 'invincible reality as hard as granite' (p. 18), but this solidity is

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[16] Neil McEwan, *Perspective in British Historical Fiction Today* (London: Macmillan, 1987), p. 130.

[17] Chris Ferns, 'Walter Scott, J. G. Farrell, and the Dialogics of Historical Fiction', in *J. G. Farrell: The Critical Grip*, ed. by Ralph J. Crane (Dublin: Four Courts, 1999), pp. 128–45 (p. 138).

[18] Ibid., p. 141.

soon destabilised. By embracing unexplained, sometimes jarring proximities of formal materials and subject, *Troubles* is *ruined* at a textual level – which serves to demonstrate how much apparently stable narratives require their author to paper over the cracks that Farrell himself cultivates. Realising this allows a reader to query how far verbal expression constitutes a viable artefact with which to perform cultural memory.

The significant historiographic judgements available within ruins are made apparent in this poetics of proximity. The disruptive effect imbricates the construction of history with ruin, supporting readerly query of how any texts and monuments claim a flawless structure for presenting memory. As Ronald Tamplin argues, Farrell renders problematic 'the working of history itself, its randomness in which we trace patterns, striving after meaning, attempting to arrest what seems to be the mere erosion of time.'[19] The consequences of this structural fragmentation for cultural memory can be understood further with the aid of Rothberg's concept of 'multidirectional memory'. Rothberg's work, while primarily concerned with the 'zero-sum game' regarding cultural memory of the Holocaust,[20] nevertheless presents a model which can interpret particular manifestations of radical decay. This will play a role in Chapter 4's analysis of *Bowen's Court*, but it also assists in understanding the ruinous international connectivity which pervades *Troubles*. Rothberg argues that the past is a source of 'dialogic interactions',[21]

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[19] Ronald Tamplin, '*Troubles* and the Irish Tradition', in *J. G. Farrell: The Critical Grip*, ed. by Ralph J. Crane (Dublin: Four Courts, 1999), pp. 48–64 (p. 55).

[20] Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 11.

[21] Ibid., p. 5.

'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing'[22] in a 'commitment to historical relatedness'.[23] His work focuses in detail on 'ruinous histories',[24] asking the crucial question, 'what does it mean to write and remember from the site of a ruin?'[25] However, Rothberg does not specifically conceive of the ruin as structural (or, rather, destructive) presence within *form*, and I argue here that examination of Farrell's text offers an opportunity to develop the dialogic work of multidirectional memory.

In *Troubles*, the attempt to arrange raw historical materials as if they were 'granite', a representation of reality without fragmentation, seems at times to have been abandoned altogether. The result produces unexpected, lateral connections in order to disrupt isolationist readings of Ireland's movement towards independence – creating instead the 'cross-referencing' of with Rothberg speaks; in this case between disparate revolutionary histories. Multiple 'articles' appear, alluding to events with no apparent connection in space or theme. For instance, when the opening is complete the narrator settles down by describing the post-war Major, returned to his aunt and preparing to visit Angela. But this is suddenly interrupted:

TROTSKY'S THREAT TO KRONSTADT

> The situation in Petrograd is desperate. According to a manifesto issued by the Soviet, the evacuation of the city is going on with eagerness. Trotsky has ordered that Kronstadt shall be blown up before it is surrendered.

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[22] Ibid., pp. 2-3.
[23] Ibid., p. 29.
[24] Ibid., p. 148.
[25] Ibid., p. 135.

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> It was the early afternoon of July 1st, 1919, and the
> Major was comfortably seated in a train travelling south
> from Kingstown along the coast of Wicklow. (p. 8)

Between Bayswater and Wicklow is a casual visit to Russia. The incongruity, by compromising narrative progress, actually illuminates 'historical relatedness' rendered invisible by entrenched historiographical patterns. Such strange proximities further the narrative's radicalism. The trip to Russia makes it clear that conflict continues, no matter how much the memorials declare WWI to have ended in November 1918. The comment of de Valera's which follows, that 'twenty new wars' have replaced one 'nominally ended', confirms this (p. 9), and implies that the reason the Major's 'nerves are in a poor state' is not just a failure to move on from the past but also a reaction to its continuation in the present. Oblique revisionism is suggested by the momentary threat to narrative coherence, introducing a challenge to the agreed structure of past events. Political troubles bleed over the edges circumscribed by the classification of historical incidents, a classification that serves the colonial-minded representation of Irish history as an isolated series of civil disturbances. De Valera's argument against such representation is given potential support by the demolition of straightforward narrative. Farrell's formal ruin, therefore, may precipitate the 'dialogic interactions' described by Rothberg.

The text provides for a radical decaying of the received narratives of the twentieth century – narratives which may continue to be accepted too

readily by criticism. For example, Farrell offers a unique historical consciousness that demands the reader challenge their organisation of Irish and world politics. Glenn Hooper's re-examination of *Troubles* advances a related thesis, arguing that the text intends a much farther geographical reach for its historical reflection that is usually granted. Hooper discusses how '*Troubles* is regarded as fitting more comfortably within the Irish tradition, commonly the Big House tradition, than as part of the broader discourse of empire.'[26] In fact the 'historical associations'[27] of *Troubles* are much wider and should be put in the context of the Empire trilogy to show something of Farrell's 'holistic view':

> that these differing territories not only share common characteristics, but that they constitute a larger picture of imperial atrophy. In other words, the themes explored are set against a sense of Irish political developments, but Ireland's role in the general decline of empire is markedly shown, something to which Farrell was acutely sensitive.[28]

This reading enables wider conclusions about Ireland's failure to be accepted as a nation with a fully valid postcolonial experience, and allows Farrell to take up the place of charismatic advocate for an adjusted perspective which centralises Ireland's experience of colonialism as crucial to understanding the British empire's reign and demise. Hooper (like many critics) somewhat mischaracterises the existing Big House novel as a tradition referring only to

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[26] Glenn Hooper, 'Troublesome Tales: J. G. Farrell and the Decline of Empire', in *Irish and Postcolonial Writing: History, Theory, Practice*, ed. by Glenn Hooper and Colin Graham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 222–49 (pp. 223–24).

[27] Ibid., p. 231.

[28] Ibid., p. 234.

Ireland with little space for imperial or global critique; in fact *Troubles* is but one of a number of texts dramatising an advancing Irish ruin against foreign social contexts (not least, as we shall see, William Trevor's engagement with English country house heritage in *Fools of Fortune*) – though it is true that Farrell does integrate an extraordinary range of alternative contexts with a connective effect.

The lack of any 'stable yardstick', to return to Ferns' phrase, with which to assess historiographic reference is therefore a productive aspect of ruin in *Troubles*. It is not only designed to dispute remembrance by suggesting flaws in its construction. It also becomes possible to forge one's own links between usually divided topics, and a radical historical intertextuality develops with documents of destruction elsewhere in the world. Referring to events elsewhere does not so much forge as sketch alternative discursive patterns. This wreaks havoc upon established causalities and turning points – and makes new ones possible. For instance, the Major considers Ireland, able to 'make no sense' of its troubles, and feeling as if he is 'out to sea in a small boat' (p. 136). Then a report titled 'INDIAN UNREST' gives an account of '*Lord Hunter's Inquiry*'. A British captain, 'doing his duty to the best of his ability under rather trying conditions', gives callous justifications for impositions upon the local population (pp. 136–37). The geographical deviation provides a gloss for the Irish history which, to the Major at least, appears bereft of a 'stable yardstick'. The lack of commentary permits consideration of how the two situations might be read in light of each other. In India, those charged with the brutal enforcing of imperialism not only control their subjects through humiliating oppression, but also fail to

appreciate its human consequences. The lack of understanding regarding these 'rather trying conditions' suggests those tasked with managing Ireland are likewise unable to perceive its realities. The imperial perspective revealed by this brief passage to India proffers (rather than forces) a making-sense of Ireland's troubles where the Major cannot. Farrell's formal strategies here are not only dismantling history but offering new perspectives by which its meaning might be reconstructed.

The text offers scant resources to confirm how viable this reconstruction, made amidst a ruined narrative, might be – and this irresolution is key to Farrell's radical invitation. Musing on James Joyce, Derek Attridge describes how *Ulysses* (1922) 'accumulates details, multiplies structures, and overdetermines interpretation [...] Rather than attempting to control the mass of fragmentary detail to *produce* meaning, Joyce's major texts *allow* meaning to arise out of that mass by the operations of chance.'[29] This echoes Benjamin's comment regarding ruinous forms, which he argues bring forth a productive mobility,[30] so that the reader gains 'momentum' from a structure which has undergone 'fragmentation into capricious particles'.[31] *Troubles* does not strive to achieve a place in the category of Joycean Modernism, but a similar opportunity to that described by Attridge results from its less than coherent accruing of details. A reader can perform more independent movements through the unsystematised space, and so disobey the ways 'Irish' history is framed. For instance the emphasis on 'Irish exceptionality' that Kiberd identifies amongst some nationalist historians

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[29] Derek Attridge, *Joyce Effects: On Language, Theory, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 120.

[30] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 166.

[31] Ibid., p. 28.

claiming that 'the Irish experience was not to be compared with that of other peoples who sought to decolonize their minds or their territory',[32] is compromised here by understanding Ireland's troubles through events elsewhere in the Empire – and even world events not related to imperialism at all. Should a reader so choose, Ireland's situation can be read in relation to Communist Russia's invasion of Poland (p. 157). Entrenched binaries about the relationship between Britain and Ireland loosen – but there is no other secure interpretation which a critic can retroactively supply to replace this perspective, either. The universal understanding Farrell sought when initially envisaging the novel is abandoned in favour of multiple, overdetermined possibilities for interpretation.

In its intensely multidirectional, internationalist construction, *Troubles* resists becoming a manifesto for any cause or school. Hooper advocates a neglected postcolonial reading of the text and there is clear evidence for this, but it cannot quite stand as a final reading. He argues that if these reports 'excuse Farrell from the charge of too realistic a form […] they also express the breakdown of British authority in Ireland in a relatively uncomplicated manner.'[33] While it is certainly apt to stress Farrell's engagement with the politics of the British Empire's fall, this assessment generalises ever-too-slightly. Many of the newspaper articles which appear throughout *Troubles* refer to other parts of the Empire, but that is not their organising principle; articles regarding the invasion of Poland, and reference to the race riots in Chicago, while seemingly minor thematic deviations,

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[32] Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 644.

[33] Hooper, pp. 234–35.

nevertheless place Ireland in the context of event more diverse 'troubles' – and this quietly extends the complexity of the text considerably beyond Hooper's postcolonial conclusions.

Troubles is a source of historiographic animation which resembles the 'dialogic interactions' which Rothberg describes as a 'productive, intercultural dynamic'.[34] Nevertheless, the application of Rothberg's model requires some mitigation in relation to Farrell's ruinous text. In my reading of *Cré na Cille*, I show that while the concept of heteroglossia provides an advantageous theory to understand the novel's cacophony of voices, its relevance is also compromised by a decayed form. Evanescence and lacunae overwhelm the prodigality of Bakhtin's vision of heteroglot 'languages' in ceaseless interaction. Similarly, the productive dialogism described by Rothberg is threatened as well as facilitated in *Troubles*. The narrative's alternations between spaces and contexts can be read as one means by which to bring about the 'self-lacerating' action that Vera Kreilkamp describes as a palpable strategy in many Big House novels whose authors wish to dispel complacency or nostalgia.[35] It becomes impossible to work with a secure concept of which histories to foreground, which to relegate to 'context', and which to ignore, when a supposedly focused narrative progression is continuously interrupted (and saturated) with referrals elsewhere. With the lack of a complete picture and a sense of irreversible disassembly, it is hard to be more than provisional in one's reading of *Troubles*. Links can be considered productively, but not formed into a coherent historical metanarrative. Because of this shift in interpretative authority (against the critic seeking an

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[34] Rothberg, p. 3.

[35] Kreilkamp, 'The Novel of the Big House', p. 61.

unassailable theory, but in favour of the exploratory, makeshift reader) the textual ruin creates a site of cultural memory which resists rigid interpretations of history, instead offering those presented with its (partially) loosened materials the opportunity to produce their own means of connecting with the past. The result evokes Benjamin's conception of architecture merging into the landscape, neither one thing nor the other; the ruined structure developed in *Troubles* allows radical new historical frameworks of memory to be perceived; but it also signifies a level of self-critical fragility.

This being said, while Farrell does incorporate Kreilkamp's 'self-lacerating' method in order to facilitate reinterpretation of history and challenge the potential coercions within the Big House genre, it is wrong to characterise the ruining of *Troubles* as an endorsement of relativism. Although it is still useful to discuss how Farrell can be situated in the context of terms such as 'postmodern' – terms which, although now longstanding, still cast a gravitational pull over literary scholarship – I do not seek to argue that the novel is a postmodern adventure along the lines of B. S. Johnson's *The Unfortunates* (1969) in which memories are formulated into twenty-seven unbound sections to be assembled by the reader.[36] Robert Ginsberg notes the powerful shifts in agency permitted in the ruin of both architectural and discursive structures: a means of challenging the coercions of completed designs. 'The subject has been ruined for you so that you, too, may enter it and take a hand. Reach out, tear down what is offered you here! […] Vent your dissatisfaction.' Readers are faced with 'the attraction of rebuilding',[37] that is to say intervening in intellectual interpretations of a ruined space to form new

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[36] B. S. Johnson, *The Unfortunates* (New York: New Directions, 1999).

[37] Robert Ginsberg, *The Aesthetics of Ruins* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004), p. 334.

relations with it, and this is possible in *Troubles* – not least with regard to the authorised narratives of Ireland's heritage. But while Farrell does pull the ground from under these constructions to demonstrate their potential flaws, it is not possible for a reader's intervention to be so radical that they can reconstruct anything from this ruin. The authorities that commission a certain vision of history are not wholly vanquished, and the direction of the reader's progress by the text continues, albeit shaken.

4. Taking Things in Hand: Tangible Encounters with the Majestic

In *Troubles*, the idea of refusing any 'stable yardstick' by which to interpret history is therefore not the full story. Both the text's form and the decay it describes possess a stubborn materiality which both defies and contributes to the ruinous project of historical intertextuality outlined above. This can be associated with John McLeod's argument that readers of Farrell 'need to account for an unruly element that fights against the dissolving of the referent and represents an attempt to mediate some contact between representation and historical experience.'[38] Farrell insists upon materiality by having a building as the central image: a solid structure that seemingly anchors characters and plot against the tide of accruing historical determinants and multidirectional dialogism. As it turns out of course the building is not exactly solid – yet still the Majestic's material substance is set as a source of deliberate resistance to the text's self-reflexive tilt. The tension between both forces bears witness to a deep-seated anxiety regarding history

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[38] John McLeod, 'J. G. Farrell and Post-Imperial Fiction', in *J. G. Farrell: The Critical Grip*, ed. by Ralph J. Crane (Dublin: Four Courts, 1999), pp. 178–95 (p. 187).

and engagement.

The ruin of *Troubles* is both tangible and difficult to grasp. From the outset, despite the untrustworthy narrator, strong sensory images make the ruin a space in which remembrance can take place on a physical level. Unlike the blinding fire, the debris, 'twisted', 'rusted', are raw and palpable (pp. 3–4). It is possible to 'disinter' the 'small pools of crystal' that gathered from the windows; the narrator's encouragement to 'pick them up' (p. 4) invites performance, so that the ruins become an intimate space in which to enact the 'dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator' described by Woodward.[39] Readers are permitted to personalise the pronoun 'one' and enact what is described as possible themselves, a sense confirmed by the use of the term 'your' following the less specific 'one'. The access to history here is fragile but unmistakable. It means that, at the same time as the first paragraphs situate the reader in a disorienting multiplicity of times and spatial states, a strong sense of place can still be accessed. The surreal ruins, used by Farrell to create a crumbling but almost solid substance through verbal text alone, allow the reader to encounter touchstones of a specific historical reality. The security of such material experience is itself troubled. The relation between descriptions of ruin and Ireland's history is made particularly unreliable in the context of biographical knowledge. Greacen's biography of Farrell reveals details which indicate that the 'cloudy droplets', so emblematic of corporeal history, were sourced from the author's experience of a ruined hotel on America's Block Island. Farrell travelled by chance to a ruin which had no historical links with the time fictionalised in

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[39] Woodward, p. 139.

Troubles, although he was 'reminded of Ireland by the feel of sand, sea and wind' at the site.[40] Presenting pure, unequivocal moments of historical material, but at the same time pulling away and denying underlying authenticity, is characteristic of Farrell's shifting engagement with Irish colonialism.

The connection between material description of ruin and historical reality indicated by fragmented remains is nevertheless powerful for contemporary readers' interaction. It overcomes the otherwise safe distance often maintained by heritage between history and its visitor. *Troubles* refuses to tolerate any such comfortable neutrality in historical perception. Ronald Binns writes that the narrator's authority in representing the opening setting is 'a sham': the ruin and its surroundings 'exist nowhere other than as words on a printed page',[41] and this is always legitimate truism about literature. But the scraps and suggestions intimated by Farrell's narrative, supported by the implied tangibility of decay, develops a nearness in the ruin's representation, working to overcome the fact that it is mediated by a printed page. This nearness gives a strong sense of the ruins' existence as a historical document through the partial objectivity of material encounter. Sensory location makes the ruin a transient but perceptible support (in the absence of an organised framework) to hold onto in the face of any attempts to commandeer that perception. Thus ruin, experienced in small glimpses of empirical insight, has a key part in negotiating distance and identification, not least for Farrell's own Anglo-Irish authorial standpoint.

The perceptive anchor of ruin, available to readers of *Troubles*,

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[40] Greacen, pp. 223–24.

[41] Ronald Binns, *J. G. Farrell* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 47.

becomes an instrument with which to satirise the characters' very different experience of decay. The stubborn historical authenticity palpable in the physical decay brings into comic relief the remarkable sightlessness that Farrell portrays as characterising the imperial outlook. The Major and Edward are able to experience their house's collapse without devoting it mental attention, and by doing this they avoid any responsibility to evaluate its state. This is a choice – not precisely a conscious choice, but one made by a *deliberate unconsciousness*, which, in her discussion of *The Last September*, C. L. Innes terms a 'willed darkness':[42]

> All this time the hotel building continued its imperceptible slide towards ruin. The Major, though, like Edward, had almost come to terms with living beneath this spreading umbrella of decay. After all, the difference between expecting something to last for ever and expecting something, on the contrary, not to last for ever, the Major told himself, was not so very great. It was simply a question of getting used to the idea. Thus, when he put his foot through a floorboard in the carpeted corridor of the fourth floor, which these days hardly anyone ever visited, he sprang nimbly aside (the carpet had prevented him from making a sudden appearance on the floor below) […] Edward sighed and said he would 'consider the matter'. (pp. 213–14)

His coping strategy, altering expectations and 'getting used to the idea', enables the Major to screen out the emotions that multiple death hazards might inspire by performing a mental equivocation, a neat sidestepping

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[42] C. L. Innes, 'Custom, Ceremony and Innocence: Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September*', in *Troubled Histories, Troubled Fictions: Twentieth Century Anglo-Irish Prose*, ed. by Theo D'haen and José Lanters (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1995), pp. 105–18 (p. 114).

suggested in extra clauses used to provide rhetorical assurance: 'after all', 'on the contrary', and the helpful vagueness of 'something'. Alarming physical encounters eventually barely register, emerging in evasive phrases (it is not a catastrophic crashing through the ceiling but rather a 'sudden appearance on the floor below'). An extreme form of wilful blindness becomes evident to readers in the Major's relation to perilous material decay. The clear dislocation between dangerous reality and disinterested perspective reveals the determined denial in which Farrell's bastions of colonialism take refuge – and so the text administers a political challenge to the flawed 'vision' with which this history was (and could continue to be) perceived. The ironic use of 'imperceptible' captures the absurdity of this state of denial, for decay at the Majestic occurs through a series of instances that are nothing if not perceptible. These, I argue, make ruin a mocking critique of how imperial perspectives are capable of overlooking what is bluntly real – a perspective the reader may eschew complicity with when made aware of its dangerous falsities.

These falsities are dangerous because residents ignore human suffering through the same blindness directed toward decay. A crucial part of the radical decay in *Troubles* is that characters' failure to apprehend this suffering is approached by illustrating ruin, not only in forming an extreme demonstration of wilful ignorance but also suggesting that focus on certain ruins obscures that given to others. The Majestic's ruin is bequeathed surreal excess, with its cats and plants still hilarious even while sinister. The surrounding country, however, shows no evidence of their teeming multiplication: there is only loss, and the narrative does not give rural Ireland

the same voluptuous spotlight shone upon the Big House. The Major drives through a 'degenerated' countryside: 'meadows empty of cattle, the potato fields abandoned to the weeds that devour the soil so voraciously in the damp climate of Ireland' (p. 138). But the Major and narrative drive onward and cease to consider the vision. There is even a suggestion that the situation is natural in Ireland – weeds are almost inevitable in the climate. Margaret Scanlan argues that this bias in perspective regarding different ruin fails to address Ireland's suffering. Instead, 'a restricted narrative point of view shuts out the Catholic Irish and, thereby, becomes complicit in their dehumanization by the British.'[43] Scanlan's argument regarding *Troubles* has often been discussed in subsequent analyses, and it is perceptive in raising questions of perspective and responsibility which are crucial to the novel.

Scanlan reads the Majestic's increasing decay as a contribution to this culpable introspection, providing 'distractions from political issues', and hampering the Major's attempts to 'see Ireland' with clarity.[44] She deduces that the blindness is embodied by the text itself: Farrell does not take us fully into the destitution beyond the imperial demesne. There is indeed a curious hesitancy and self-restriction to the novel which might be traced to Farrell's sense of uncomfortable personal proximity to Ireland, and the acute uneasiness with regard to historical responsibility that can be detected in certain areas of the Anglo-Irish writing tradition. As I have suggested, concern regarding blithe or unwarranted universalism (which might easily be deployed in fiction in a manner reminiscent of totalising imperial

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[43] Margaret Scanlan, *Traces of Another Time: History and Politics in Postwar British Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), p. 61.
[44] Ibid., pp. 55–56.

assumptions) can at times be detected in a deliberate prohibition of extending narratorial vision into presumptive sympathy with Irish men and women outside the Majestic's crumbling walls. *Troubles* is restricted instead to the imperialists' viewpoint, thus making Scanlan's accusation of a 'restricted narrative point of view' quite valid. The second and third novels in Farrell's Empire trilogy offer more material with which to fight such an assertion; as Derek Mahon comments:

> he is one of the few English (or Anglo-Irish) writers who can see events through the eyes of the colonized, certainly in the *Siege* and the *Grip*, where the submerged life of the Chinese community is explored sympathetically. The exception, curiously, is *Troubles*, where everything is seen through the eyes, or binoculars, of the Big House characters.[45]

Mahon's adroit insight underlines how *Troubles*, out of a trilogy which consistently satirises the danger and cruel absurdity of imperial perspectives, does so almost exclusively from behind their eyes.

However, while this reservedness in contributing to an Irish tradition is a key feature, it is not necessarily one that should inspire condemnation from critics. Seeking to justify critique of whether Farrell's restricted viewpoint in *Troubles* may endorse a colonial outlook evades Farrell's clear self-awareness in this representative failure. Acknowledging perspectival limitations (a subject to which the narrative returns at multiple points) through the manifest brevity of these glimpses into Ireland takes

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[45] Derek Mahon, 'Foreword', in Lavinia Greacen, *J. G. Farrell: The Making of a Writer* (London, 1999), pp. xv–xviii (p. xvi).

precedence over attempting to negate them. Representation in *Troubles* is itself impaired, but the narrative's own culpability in failing to comprehend ruin intensifies its satire. Depiction of ruin in this text therefore constitutes a call to acknowledge how much imperial vision of Ireland is structured upon *not seeing*.

The difficulty of refusing this call is enhanced by the emotional complicity engineered within Farrell's depiction. Laughter among ruins disturbs as much as it amuses. Satire demonstrating the faults of others through humour is particularly capable of targeting such flawed vision, in this case taking it to extreme length via ruin. Discussing Jonathan Swift, Ireland's master of political satire, F. R. Leavis described satire's power 'to make comfortable non-recognition, the unconsciousness of habit, impossible',[46] and this is a driving force within *Troubles*. The comedy of decay leaves a bitter taste which disturbs the ability of any reader to receive a narrative habitually. Ruin risks trespassing 'beyond a joke' (p. 286), forcing doubts about the ethical and humanitarian consequences of reading history to extract laughter. As McLeod comments, Farrell's insights are established through a 'bittersweet levity', underneath which is the knowledge that the past is 'no laughing matter':[47] 'throughout *Troubles* a frivolous representation of history is held in check by an awareness of the carnage of conflict.'[48] Carnage, yes, but also its partner: slow destitution under a neglectful oppression.

An example of this uneasy balance between humour and despair comes when a group of Oxford students visit the hotel. To these characters

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[46] F. R. Leavis, 'The Irony of Swift', in *Determinations: Critical Essays*, ed. by F. R. Leavis (New York: Chatto & Windus, 1934), pp. 78–108 (p. 85).

[47] John McLeod, *J. G. Farrell* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2007), p. 41.

[48] Ibid., p. 40.

history is an amusing game, played with materials which have no painful connotations. At a dinner attended by all the hotel's residents, Edward's absurd preparations for revolution (revolver bullets placed strategically in the sugar bowl) become visible. All the students can do is 'throw back their heads and howl with laughter':

> This great gale of youthful laughter filled the dining-room and echoed away down dim, empty corridors, ringing faintly through all the familiar sitting-rooms, dusty, silent and forgotten; penetrating to the floors above with their disused bedrooms and dilapidated bathrooms and to the damp, sleeping cellars, quiet now for eternity, unvisited except by the rats. It was such healthy, good-natured laughter than even the old ladies found themselves smiling or chuckling gently. Only Captain Roberts at one table and the Major showed no sign of amusement. They sat on in silence, chin in hand, perhaps, or rubbing their eyes wearily, waiting in patient dejection for the laughter to come to an end. (p. 419)

The description of mirth echoing through an abandoned, decayed space makes for a disquieting antithesis. Emptiness offers no defence against lighthearted responses to history – but all the same, the silent presence of the vast ruin exists as a source of echoes, almost but not quite absent, chilling the laughter it has precipitated. Its desolation suggests that practicing cultural memory for entertainment – through resources including novels, heritage sites, and even some memorials – necessitates not acknowledging unpalatable sights like the Majestic's vast decay. But unlike the Oxford students, the reader of *Troubles* cannot evade notice.

Through its imagery and linguistic development, the narration of this passage makes it seem as if the ruin itself is slowly draining away the mirth with its immense desolation. Though the paragraph is supposedly a description of this 'great gale' of laughter as it penetrates and reverberates through the whole house, it instead becomes a description of the utter silence which the laughter has somehow not disturbed: it can be heard 'ringing faintly' through 'dusty, silent, and forgotten' rooms and cellars 'quiet now for an eternity'. The intensity of the loneliness which characterises this abandoned space dominates the passage and overpowers the capacity of this loud, positive force to hold the narrative's tone, and to direct attention away from abandonment in favour of the students' carefree location in a joyful present. This silent response of the Majestic to ahistorical mirth is emphasised further by the language used to characterise that silence. In a move that has the space take on an intensely sinister edge, Farrell's portrayal illustrates areas that are 'quiet now for an eternity' yet still lifelike. These rooms' past life and purpose continue to haunt our reception of their ruined present by infiltrating the description: the sitting rooms are 'dusty, silent and forgotten' but also 'familiar'; the cellars are 'quiet' for eternity but still only 'sleeping' (an unsettlingly anthropomorphic verb). This projection of peculiar residual sentience within the empty space makes it difficult to dismiss as abandoned. The uninhabited hotel becomes capable of arresting and threatening human attention, a depicted materiality that draws the reader's unwilling gaze.

This confrontation with the emotions and aesthetics which lie within the Majestic is situated as a deliberate but silent response to the

students' debonair philosophy. The students are able to adopt sophisticated intellectual positions which present the Irish with more sympathy and political justification than anything shown thus far by the narrative; yet their sincerity is deeply questionable (the primary 'spokesman for political and intellectual matters' is 'strongly fancied as the next President of the Union', p. 413) and undercut by their failure to perceive the depth and extent to which memory besets and continues to trouble those who recall what is past. The students have among their number another veteran of the First World War, but wish he would no longer put them through stories of his experience: '"Oh, give the bloody war a rest will you, Roberts? It's been over for three years!" [...] it was all past history now, all that; no reason why they should be interested' (p. 413). Though the narrative itself never explicitly questions such a perspective, the drawing of such easy historical boundaries in order to determine what is worthy of discussion or emotional experience is questioned by the house. These quiet rooms and sleepy cellars, mute but saturated with memory and the 'familiar', are associated with the attempt to characterise a history declared redundant, when it in fact still draws the eye and the mind. The history the ruin attests to is not over nor harmless, for this space is not free to be inhabited by whatever emotional reaction one might prefer. The students' antic sensibility, their capacity to see history from a privileged and marginal position for the purposes of bathos, meets a spatial embodiment of what is unspeakable but very much present in the deserted hotel. The likely silencing of readerly humour indicates that this ruined space signals the limits as well as the location of laughter.

The ruin that Farrell constructs can thus be a means of

demonstrating the coercion and false reports of dominant voices in cultural memory, those same tendencies which allow heritage authorities to create 'documents of civilisation' suggesting we have moved on from the past even while it might still be palpable. The human ability to move on lightly from history is critiqued through its contrast with how the past's remains are presented as unresolved, contemporary materials. This is evident also in the treatment of the ruin that the Majestic finally leaves behind. The self-questioning protest against glib, bathetic treatments of the site of memory that takes place over this dinner is a subtle, quietly asserted one, and the Major himself does not draw such melancholic sense from his concluding apprehension of the ruins. When he sees the burnt remnants, he appears unable and unwilling to use the remains to access what took place there. He views what the reader did so many pages ago – wash-basins and lavatory bowls, drips of molten glass and cat skeletons – but struggles to 'orientate himself' amongst these ruins (p. 453). Fiona MacPhail likens how the Majestic and Major undergo historical catastrophe in Ireland: the two 'mirror' each other,[49] 'their apotheosis and fall coincide, and just as the Majestic never disappears but remains a ruin even when burnt to the ground, so the Major comes back from death by drowning'.[50] The coincidence, however, is misleading, for when the Major looks at the remains he does not see any memorial connotations; rather the strewn matter looks 'quite insignificant' (p. 453). The novel's final words confirm this lack of responsibility for remembrance: he has left Ireland not only physically but in his consciousness

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[49] Fiona MacPhail, 'Major and Majestic: J. G. Farrell's *Troubles*' in *The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation*, ed. by Jacqueline Genet (Dingle: Co. Kerry, 1991), pp. 243–54 (pp. 243–44).

[50] Ibid., p. 244.

– 'at peace' (p. 454), no longer at risk of ruin. The one icon he takes away to represent the past as his life continues is a statue of Venus. 'Strangely undamaged' (p. 453), it has not been etched with any physical characteristics that might make it an undesirable but insistent reminder of historical events. By choosing to leave Ireland with this bland relic alone, the Major selects a resource for cultural memory likely to sustain self-preserving amnesia, rather than provide stubborn reminder of the less palatable past. Though reading the objects of *Troubles* as allegorical denotations is a dubious reduction of their vibrant materiality, the wider conclusion is that this leave-taking, abandoning Ireland to its ruins and only retrieving an 'undamaged' statue, characterises the final act of Britain's imperial project: refusing to take away an emblem that adequately captures any of the history that took place within the Majestic and led to its final calamity, and instead continuing the work of colonial plunder by removing the only intact and attractive object which remains.

By contrast, the encounter with the Majestic's ruin that the reader will experience allows no clear getaway. Its depiction suggests that the ruin embodies an unresolved history that demands the reader's memorial involvement, using the remains to reconstruct history and (imperfectly) comprehend it. There is a strange lack of change at the site:

> Curiously, in spite of the corrosive effect of the sea air the charred remains of the enormous main building are still to be seen; for some reason – the poor quality of the soil or the proximity of the sea – vegetation has only made a token attempt to possess them. Here and there among the foundations one might still find evidence of the Majestic's former splendour. (p. 3)

The failure of development permits the Majestic's 'former' state to be discovered, its story understood (albeit saturated with ambiguous ruin). Despite the narrator's uncertain explanations, I conclude that the preservation denotes that the causes of ruin at the Majestic were historically contingent: not Derrida's declared diagnosis of an existential ruin 'at the origin'[51] but rather a Benjaminian source of historical consciousness, in which fragmentation reveals imperial history and its descent into destruction. Thus the structure before us attests to a specific past that continues to be evident from what remains; it is not a generalised insight into corrupted transcendental signifier, or how the human condition is powerless against time and nature.

The events of 1919–21 are not distanced in this ruin. Space has been stilled as the record of a history with continued bearing upon the present moment. And while no authorities have appropriated or even touched it (suggesting that the history it records fits no desirable narrative of colonial circumstances), the ruin's material resilience, its refusal to disappear, offers close imaginative involvement with a past others have abandoned. The fire becomes tangible through the glass that it melted into drops: 'pick them up and they separate in your hand' (p. 4). This insistence upon engagement is the radical decay that I have identified through *Troubles*: a state of dereliction constructed to implicate its beholder in active involvement, not peaceful departure. The memorial performance within ruin is likely to be flawed; our view of history is always disrupted when built upon a ruin, and, unlike the perfect but inauthentic statue of Venus, the fragile materiality of the glass

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[51] Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind*, p. 65.

droplets is unreliable, and problematic. One may return to the space in which history took place and be confronted with what is nearly dust. Yet at the same time, the indicated perception is sharp and the remains are palpable; consequently, the story they enclose is preserved as an open wound, not healed over by time or heritage intervention. What results is an unusually authentic resource for cultural memory - and a ruin that will remain, for some time yet.

'A world all to itself': The Presence of Ruin in *The Last September*

1. Dividing Lines: The Ruin of Anglo-Irish Heritage

Bowen's narration of Irish history in *The Last September* (1929) is deeply preoccupied by ruin. Ruin pervades characters' consciousness as a threat to security, and ultimately overtakes their lives with physical destruction. The novel depicts Anglo-Irish identity in a constant battle against instability, rarely secure or uncontested. The insecurity present in this text can be traced to Bowen herself, for it is visible in her own, equally unstable, literary identity. Bowen's position in Irish cultural heritage is the subject of controversy, fractured by the cultural distinctions between 'Irish', 'Anglo-Irish', and 'English' which evoked much tension at the time of this novel's writing, and indeed continues to do so – affecting Bowen's place within the agreed canon of Ireland's literary heritage.

The hostile assertion that to be an *Anglo-Irish* writer precludes consideration as an *Irish* writer is articulated most starkly by the editors of *A North Cork Anthology* (1993), who feature Bowen's work, but present her name as '~~Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Bowen, C. B. E~~', declaring that 'we include her in this anthology in deleted form, in order to explain why she does not belong to it.'[1] They justify the intervention by arguing that although Bowen was a resident of Bowen's Court, her family's Big House, this land was 'not North Cork':

Elizabeth Bowen has an attribute which it is difficult

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[1] Jake Lane and Brendan Clifford, *A North Cork Anthology: 250 Years of Writings from the Region of Millstreet, Duhallow, Slieve Luachra, and Thereabouts* (Millstreet: Aubane Historical Society, 1993), p. 9.

for an Irish writer to acquire – she was English. […]
Though Bowen's Court was physically located in North
Cork, it was socially and culturally a world all to itself –
a little piece of Anglo-Irish Dublin which was itself a
little piece of the English Home Counties.[2]

This inclusion under erasure, at once present and absent, is a nationalistic statement about the place of Bowen – and, it is implied, her class – within Ireland's authorised cultural heritage. As Hermione Lee comments, 'the history of the Anglo-Irish is one of an ambiguous position, of a culture existing in a world from which it was, even if unconsciously, separate. Writer after writer emphasizes the insensitivity of the Protestant Ascendancy to Gaelic Ireland.'[3] The editors of *A North Cork Anthology* enact aggression, not only upon Bowen's work, but also the Irish landscape, proclaiming the space of North Cork to be fundamentally divided.

They do so on the basis of the Ascendancy's historical role in Ireland: representatives and enactors of the British imperial agenda. Their presence was subject to violent resistance and symbolic cultural erasure during the revolutionary period, with the destruction of Big Houses forming part of a 'purge of the markings of loyalist heritage' which Beiner describes as 'memorial iconoclasm' and 'de-commemoration'.[4] By granting Bowen's work a place in national tradition but simultaneously compromising it, the *Anthology* attempts (with an atypical level of hostility, given Bowen's frequent inclusion elsewhere in Irish culture) to provide a modern articulation of this 'de-commemoration'. They suggest that Bowen herself has been afforded a

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[2] Ibid.

[3] Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Estimation* (London: Vision, 1981), p. 41.

[4] Beiner, p. 712.

ruined place in post-independence Ireland's heritage. As I will show, the same conflicts of identity and the legacy of imperialism which leave Bowen's artistic legacy struckthrough in this publication also emerge within her fiction, and in that fiction's preoccupation with contested, liminal environments showing the presence of decay.

The Last September's form exhibits this position of precarious, fractured involvement with the culture depicted. The novel, set in 1920, is a conscious contribution to historical fiction, but one produced only nine years after Bowen herself experienced the time and position that it fictionalises. The narrative is thus in part personal reflection on history: Bowen wrote in her Preface to the first American edition (1962) that 'I *was* the child of the house from which Danielstown derives', connecting the Danielstown's ruin to the imagined ruin of her own family house, Bowen's Court: 'so often in my mind's eye did I see it burning that the terrible last event in *The Last September* is more real than anything I have lived through.'[5] As a consequence of this emotional involvement with fiction, the text is preoccupied with its own subjectivity, and this influences its form. I argue here that *The Last September* is a novel of the Ascendancy, operating almost exclusively from within the restricted horizons of Anglo-Irish consciousness, and yet it simultaneously seeks a means to critique this cultural identity. The perspectives of Danielstown's residents in relation to ruin are illustrated with reflective scrutiny that exposes their flaws, but Bowen's position remains ambivalent and the text does not take a resolved position of historical

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[5] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Preface to the Alfred. A Knopf Inc. edition of *The Last September*, New York, 1952', in *Afterthought: Pieces about Writing* (London: Longmans, 1962), pp. 95–100 (p. 100).

judgement. Ruin threatens the security of the Anglo-Irish worldview in *The Last September*, but it is also depicted as the tool for resistance to post-independence narratives of Irish culture. In this way, Bowen both acknowledges and works against the erasure posited by *A North Cork Anthology*.

Ruin is never perceived objectively in *The Last September*. Instead it is the subject – and product – of multiple perspectives that compete for legitimacy during the Irish War of Independence (1919–21). The novel narrates the experiences of Danielstown house's residents, Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, who live with their niece Lois and nephew Laurence. The family play host to Mr and Mrs Montmorency, as well as a soon-to-be-married woman named Marda. Their lives are also permeated by regular visits from English officers engaged against the IRA. While ostensibly experiencing idyllic Ascendancy life, the characters exist in a world infiltrated and finally overtaken by destruction at the hands of republicans. Although the guests who arrive in September 1920 find a house functioning far more smoothly than Farrell's Majestic, there is an underlying awareness of impending ruin, which residents and guests work increasingly hard to overlook. Mr and Mrs Montmorency arrive in 'a moment of happiness, of perfection' to meet the household.[6] But the Ireland of this text is at war and disintegrating, both politically and physically – and with this comes the disintegration of the Anglo-Irish existence. The attempt to maintain an identity as part of the nation yet maintain a privileged life within the Big House demesne is

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[6] Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Constable, 1929; repr. London: Vintage, 1998), p. 7. Further references to *The Last September* within this chapter will be to this edition and will be given in the text.

increasingly compromised by historical events. Finally, in February 1921, their vision is destroyed altogether in the house's 'execution' (p. 206). The Naylors are forced emigrate, leaving a ruin behind.

Through the novel, ruin and its threat determine the text's meaning in multiple ways. Ruins have both a literal and a symbolic presence in *The Last September*. Danielstown is emblematic of the Ascendancy's Big Houses, 192 of which burnt down between 1921 and 1923.[7] Yet regardless of this evident social context of collapse and chaos, the incursion upon Ascendancy life is furtive and slowly developed by the text, rarely acknowledged by either the narrative or its characters. I intend to analyse this furtiveness in the characters' acknowledgement of ruin, arguing that it is actively restrained from influencing Anglo-Irish perception, and tracing how this attempt to restrain its force becomes increasingly futile as Ireland's political tensions worsen. Ruin infiltrates the Ascendancy's consciousness even when it is overtly denied, emerging as a brooding hostility in the narrative's descriptions of the natural landscape surrounding Danielstown. Through much of the novel ruin exists as a threat rather than an actual presence: a suppressed fear of impending apocalypse resulting from the ongoing, but rarely mentioned, war. This destruction is kept at bay through an asserted boundary between the Anglo-Irish demesne and the rest of Ireland, which attempts to secure in Danielstown a controlled space free from military or cultural threat. As I will show, the text also features instances in which ruin and desolation appear to have breached this crucial division, undermining the inhabitants' ability to enact nostalgic fantasies of an

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[7] Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–1979* (London: Fontana, 1981), p. 110.

unspoiled Ascendancy way of life.

Despite this persistent figuration of ruin as a threat, when Danielstown is finally destroyed, its collapse presents an unexpected affirmation of the identity that has just been overcome. I read the depiction of Danielstown's ruin as an act of resistance to change in spatial control. The house's destruction does not erase the presence of the Anglo-Irish in order to allow for progression to a subsequent authority in post-independence Ireland. The Naylors leave Ireland, but the burnt-out ruin that remains does not become a palimpsest, erased in order to provide the opening for a new creation. Neither does the house's physical destruction provide an unambiguous touchstone by which opposing political ideologies can share perceptions. Instead Bowen attempts to fashion it as a stubborn monument to the Anglo-Irish lifestyle which she both critiqued and participated in. While Bowen does not necessarily succeed in doing so – there is no guarantee that the meaning of any monument will remain stable across time and cultural change – her portrayal nevertheless characterises ruin as a positive cultural force that is not relinquished; an attempted testament to ideologies and perspectives now supposedly defunct. I show how Bowen associates the politics of Ireland's future with a very different ruin: not a monument to the vanquished aristocracy, but rather the decrepit mill which a fugitive IRA man uses for shelter. This confrontation with ruin is highly significant to the novel, but it is denied any aesthetic magnificence; its decay is perceived instead as an embodiment of political futility and panic regarding the relationship between meaning and space.

2. 'Splintered darkness': Ruin as a Hostile Incursion

In Bowen's novel, perception exists in a complex relationship with landscape. Rather than being described as an objective, apolitical reality, Danielstown's space provides insight into its residents' subjective perceptions. Their experience of landscape is structured by oppositions, including that between artificial and natural; between the space within and the space beyond the estate's boundaries; between light and dark. Such confinedness in the residents' apprehension of their surroundings reveals a desire to maintain strict epistemological control over space, delimiting the margins of the visible and so ensuring that what happens outside this border remains in the dark, out of sight and thought. Critics have noticed how the limits of the physically perceptible in Bowen's work have symbolic implications. Toni O'Brien Johnson describes how the prominent contrast between light and dark in the text is linked to the theme of 'enlightenment': 'a painful process, we learn, particularly if it is forced from without, and there is a constant sense that it is preferable that some things be kept in the dark.'[8] Johnson describes how the presence of what is prohibited from knowledge, kept in the dark, emerges out of the psychological insecurities of characters; in this case he discusses Lois's loss of romantic innocence in her relationship with the British officer Gerald.[9] However, this interplay between perception and convenient blindness has implications beyond the personal. *The Last September*'s spatial environment is characterised by approaching threat, the apprehension of which is heavily suppressed. My analysis contends that the Anglo-Irish exhibit this wilful

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[8] Toni O'Brien Johnson, 'Light and Enlightenment in Elizabeth Bowen's Irish Novels', *Ariel*, 18.2 (1987), 47–62 (p. 48).

[9] Ibid.

blindness in an attempt to deny ruin. It is a fear of ruin – of an impending spatial catastrophe, in which boundaries and security are wholly compromised – which underlies the perceptive evasion practiced by the novel's characters.

This concealed conception of ruin in Ascendancy consciousness illustrates how the relationship between landscape and perception is politically charged. Like that of the real Big Houses it represents, Danielstown's deliberate destruction in the War of Independence constitutes a political statement: an explicit rejection of an existing social order enacted through blunt physical destruction. Yet characters defer acknowledgement of this direct ideological threat, so that the ruin which will ultimately consume the house emerges laterally, in depictions of Ireland's natural environment. For instance, an early moment of environmental description focuses on the sense that an ominous outside force is pressing in upon the household:

> Like splintered darkness, branches pierced the faltering
> dusk of leaves. Evening drenched the trees; the beeches
> were soundless cataracts. Behind the trees, pressing in
> from the open and empty country like an invasion, the
> orange bright sky crept and smouldered. Firs, bearing
> up to pierce, melted against the brightness. Somewhere,
> there was a sunset in which the mountains lay like
> glass. (p. 22)

This passage demonstrates how the political anxiety in the Ascendancy's relationship with their surrounding country is not confronted explicitly, but rather surfaces through suggestive imagery. The trees that border Danielstown are described as 'soundless cataracts', giving an impression,

along with the scene's darkness, that those inside the house are insulated from perceiving aspects of the outside world. But the description troubles this protection by acknowledging what presses in 'behind the trees'. The 'splintered' nature of the darkness fits with a description of trees, but the word also indicates breakage and cracking. A sense of fragility under pressure is intensified by the characterisation of this scene's sky, 'pressing in', 'an invasion' – the latter word used casually, yet imbuing the natural environment with a militaristic presence. Supposedly neutral features of the Irish landscape become signifiers of menace.

The resultant tone of threat, accompanied by prophetic images of conflagration in the sky that 'crept and smouldered', associates the scene's natural features with approaching ruin. The narrative does not countenance exact details of what instigates this ruin: there is no clear association with IRA resentment or the armed conflict taking place 'beyond the demesne' (p. 30). Yet the landscape is not undergoing an ordinary play of light, a harmless part of the everyday. Political threat is concealed within the supposedly natural. This subtle foreshadowing suggests that while the house's destruction and its historical causes are not confronted directly by Danielstown's inhabitants, consciousness of ruin nonetheless registers as an insistent intrusion on the edges of their perception. C. L. Innes identifies this epistemological manipulation, 'willed darkness',[10] with anxiety regarding ruin. She comments:

> Bowen imagines the invasion by natural forces which is
> a consequence of political change, leaving no new

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[10] Innes, p. 114.

> structure but only vacancy and desolation […] for Elizabeth Bowen a tension between nature and the Anglo-Irish Big House has always been present.'[11]

While ruin does indeed enter the text's descriptions as an oppressive conflict with 'natural forces', the kind of destruction threatened in this landscape is actively violent, rather than only a 'vacancy and desolation' in space. In the above passage, nature is a force of ruin, but not in the sense of slow decay or weathering in the passage of time. Instead, the landscape outside the estate's boundaries is charged with a much more ideological danger. Behind the imagery of fire that masquerades as natural light – an 'orange bright sky' which 'crept and smouldered', the demesne's 'melted' tree line (p. 22) – lies an allusion to the republican incinerations of Ireland's Big Houses; but this presence is never confirmed by the narrative, which does not override its characters' subjective consciousness through direct reference to historical facts.

Nevertheless, the connection between the natural environment and the threat of destruction emerges linguistically throughout the text, including in descriptions of the supposedly safe demesne. Anglo-Irish perception is infiltrated by imagery of its own demise, and so betrays the security it should maintain. The house's façade is described as 'cardboard', 'without weight, an appearance less actual than the begonias' scarlet and wax-pink flesh' which are aflame in the language at least, 'burning in an impatience of colour' (p. 116). Suggestions of conflagration, displaced onto supposedly innocent features of the scenery, imply that the house is highly

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[11] Ibid., pp. 106–07.

vulnerable to ruin. Metaphor gains sinister power in its capacity to foreshadow the ruinously literal. This background presence of impending ruin is one of several manifestations of fissures and cracks in the otherwise controlled pattern of social order that dominates Bowen's fiction. Neil Corcoran comments that 'the "pattern" about to be disrupted or transformed is figuratively cultural and political, as well as literally meteorological or horticultural'.[12] The environmental structure of Danielstown is crucial to its cultural survival, but in Bowen's narrative its expression is not always separable from its destruction. Contaminating the structure of Danielstown with insights into its future conflagration means that ruin is not simply a force from without, but an internal feature of the house: almost a part of its structure. Thus part of the threat posed by this impending ruin is the revelation that Anglo-Irish existence is in fact already ruined, already damaged beyond repair, with no possible means of social reintegration.

Characters in *The Last September* arrange their lives diligently to evade acknowledging ruin: firstly, in refusing to confront the Ascendancy's historical responsibility for its own destruction, given the political legacy to which the IRA respond; and secondly, in denying that this destruction is already upon them. Corcoran's allusion to a structured 'pattern' is apposite. This is visible in the spatial artificiality that characters attempt to maintain within Danielstown. After staying outside alone in the dark, Lois is struck by the powerful, controlled illumination which she can now see dominates the house. This light, very different from the 'smouldering' sunset visible outside the demesne, is associated with the protection of the house's structure and its

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[12] Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 48.

occupants' identities. Characters are held in place, 'sealed in lamplight, secure and bright like flowers in a paperweight' (p. 33). Lois, approaching the house to see 'thin yellow lines round the downstairs shutters', and aware of the lamplight inside, thinks of the 'dinner-table certain of its regular compulsion; the procession of elephants that throughout uncertain years had not broken file' (p. 34). The description, replete with imperial artefacts, places stress on regularity and order in the house's colonial existence; the security of the objects (and their apprehension) is a way to survive 'uncertain years' (p. 34). The brightness that 'seals' the inhabitants into their pattern of existence reduces the outside world to darkness, concealing the ruin threatened by surrounding natural landscape.

However, the supposed safety in this self-contained, 'secure and bright' space is not presented as flawless. The paperweight-like scene which Lois sees depicts the 'pattern' of Anglo-Irish life as one synonymous with imprisonment and traces of decay. The depiction of an attractive but also deficient home is a recurring motif in Bowen's fiction. Vera Kreilkamp writes that houses in her novels repeatedly stage a desire for 'wholeness and safety' that is never successfully fulfilled: 'Her heroines both flee from and seek houses that function as symbols of a psychic shelter that defines and threatens them. […] The emblematic Anglo-Irish Big House, or diminished versions of it, hovers before her characters, yet repeatedly fails them.'[13] Lois appears to seek sanctuary in Danielstown but also begins to apprehend the illusions by which the house maintains its shelter. She is brought to doubt the security of her family's illuminated space when perceiving it from an exterior

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[13] Vera Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), p. 142.

position:

> Below, the house waited; vast on its west side, with thin yellow lines round the downstairs shutters. It had that excluded, sad, irrelevant look outsides of houses take in the dark. Inside, they would all be drawing up closer to one another, tricked by the half-revelation of lamplight. 'Compassed about,' thought Lois, 'by so great a cloud of witnesses…' Chairs standing round dejectedly; upstairs, the confidently waiting beds; mirrors vacant and startling; books read and forgotten, contributing no more to life (p. 34)

This brief external perspective permits Lois momentary independence in her assessment of the house's vulnerability. In a pessimistic lexis, Lois's home is depicted as insignificant, 'vast' and yet not central to the landscape, 'excluded' rather than beneficially distinguished. Its appearance in the dark is that of all 'houses'. Those within are lit up, but the revelation of this simulated lighting – a word intimating provision of knowledge as well as illumination – is the much more dubious 'half-revelation' which has 'tricked' its recipients. Even before the safety of the residents is compromised, Danielstown brings encounter with lifelessness and sterility – both in the space and among its inhabitants.

3. Preserving Revelations

The idea of ruin is emotionally complex in *The Last September*, and is not simply a hostile force, or threat of elegiac regret. It is also revealed to provoke excitement and even relief. This is particularly so for Lois and Laurence, whose status as younger inhabitants of Danielstown – niece and nephew to

the Naylors rather than actual heirs to the estate – brings with it an apathetic disjuncture from their residence's heritage. According to Laurence, the ruin of Danielstown (which he articulates with a frankness that shocks other characters) will bring energy and understanding, a welcome intrusion into the boredom he associates with the carefully managed Anglo-Irish lifestyle. He speaks of the house burning with ironically blithe optimism, responding to Mr Montmorency's remark that:

> 'I had no idea you were such a materialist.'
> 'I can't help my stomach. Besides, I like eating, it is so real. But I should like something else to happen, some crude intrusion of the actual. I feel all gassy inside from yawning. I should like to be here when this house burns.'
> 'Quite impossible; quite unthinkable. Why don't you fish or something? … Nonsense!' he added, looking warningly at the house.
> 'Of course it will though. And we shall all be so careful not to notice.' (p. 44)

This outspoken voicing, not only of the house's approaching fate but also of the Ascendancy ability to disregard reality, proves an upsetting breach in conversational protocol for Mr Montmorency, who dismisses the idea as 'unthinkable', with an absurdly trivial response ('why don't you fish or something?') comparable to Farrell's satire of imperial blindness. Laurence figures ruin as a force that can provide emotional sensation, a break in the torpor caused by his class's careful, deliberately unthinking inattention to 'the actual'. In describing the future moment 'when this house burns', he uses a verb of extremely rare directness: burning does not infiltrate perception

through surreptitious imagery here, but is for once discussed in the open. Laurence restyles this event as a personal service rather than political incident, capable of bringing a welcome change to the emotional stagnation of the Anglo-Irish patterned lifestyle. This reasserts a semblance of control over the situation's threat by suggesting that ruin has beneficial and even creative potential.

Laurence's exhilaration is fuelled by his definition of ruin as an abrupt, violent force, capable of bringing reality to a world of acquired social customs. The 'intrusion of the actual' raises the possibility of reuniting Ascendancy experience with the outside world's material reality – even though this revelation comes at the cost of destruction. He implies that ruin provides a moment of objective understanding that can be shared between otherwise conflicting ideologies. This concept of reciprocation in perspective is restricted as soon as it is glimpsed. Alternative perspectives regarding Danielstown's significance remain marginalised; Laurence describes how he longs to experience 'the actual', but this identification is itself vague. He makes no mention of who might burn Danielstown, or the reasons they will do this. The reality he claims to seek appears to be desirable as a personal sensation, rather than as an opportunity to empathise with conflicting worldviews. The ruinous 'actual' thus remains a static, almost impersonal conception of 'reality', that is not discussed with any specificity. What reality will intrude (beyond the physical experience of heat and flames) remains furtive.

Nevertheless, the definition of ruin as an access to new understanding of reality is certainly at play in Bowen's depiction of

Danielstown's destruction. The novel's conclusion brings with it apprehension as well as devastation, an 'apocalypse' in the sense of both cataclysmic disaster and revelation. Lady and Sir Richard Naylor's response to the ruin demonstrates the catastrophe is epistemological as well as physical, providing the perceptual shock desired by Laurence. In the description of the house burning, ruin is associated with stark perception:

> For in February, before those leaves had visibly budded, the death – execution, rather – of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night. A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness; indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to abortive birth that these things might happen. It seemed, looking from east to west at the sky tall with scarlet, that the country itself was burning; while to the north the neck of mountains before Mount Isabel was frightfully outlined. […] Sir Richard and Lady Naylor, not saying anything, did not look at each other, for in the light from the sky they saw too distinctly. (p. 206).

The unveiling witnessed by the remaining Naylors is far greater than the 'half-revelation of lamplight' that Danielstown's inhabitants benefited from when living safely behind shuttered windows (p. 34). It is rather different, too, from the concluding inferno of *Troubles*, which almost defeats sight with its sublime surreality. Here the three houses' burning is associated strongly with material and visual clarity. The darkness is portrayed as a 'hard' physical substance, so that it too is burnt and destroyed along with the house, leaving the now-exiles to perceive 'too distinctly'. The repressed ruin, which emerged earlier only as a hostile incursion in the language used to describe landscape –

a sunset which 'crept and smouldered' (p. 22) – has now become palpable, dominating a sky 'tall with scarlet' in a 'frightfully outlined' surrounding country. Laurence's supposedly desired predictions of 'the actual' are realised at last in flames.

That being said, the political reach of this revelation is limited at the same time it is established, so that the text forms a defence against the involuntary perception enforced on Anglo-Irish consciousness, even as it shows wilful ignorance eradicated. Only the two Naylors are present to witness the final blaze. Laurence, like most of the guests, has been sent away before the conflagration actually takes place – a fact which limits the ruin's impact: whilst it is a performative gesture by the republican 'executioners' (p. 206), the Naylors have themselves managed this performance by removing its potential audience. Furthermore, though their new insight is evidently stark – they see 'too distinctly' – and, given the context, presumably unwelcome, there is no definite indication of *what* they are now able to see.

The absent noun expands the connotations of this revelation, allowing it to convey a potentially profound awakening of social insight now that there is no secure spatial boundary with which to banish outside Ireland and its political grievances. Nicola Darwood argues that the death of Danielstown

> signifies the end of Sir Richard and Lady Naylors' own perhaps Edenic existence. The 'execution' of their house […] symbolises not only their eviction but also the eviction of the childlike Anglo-Irish race, and must surely force them into the recognition that they cannot

continue 'not noticing'.[14]

The text does lend some support to this analysis. It is significant that the Naylors no longer look at each other, but instead demonstrate a newly outward focus of attention, directed now towards subjects beyond the familial and introverted gaze that has characterised Anglo-Irish culture up to this point in the novel. This altered perspective comes as a result of an illumination, but not in fact that provided by the blaze itself. The characters see by 'the light from the sky' (p. 206), which introduces competing sources of revelation here. The 'fearful scarlet' that during this night 'ate up the hard spring darkness' might be understood as a dramatisation of the fire; Danielstown's physical destruction forms the natural climax to the steadily established anxiety regarding its ruin. But the narrative continues that 'indeed, it seemed that an extra day, unreckoned, had come to abortive birth that these things might happen', suggesting rather that the light which enables this ruin to take place is in actuality that of the day itself. This shifts the source of revelation away from the material ruin to the surrounding Irish environment, as well as to the event's temporal setting; it associates their new consciousness with an expanded conception of Ireland and of their own location in it. The circumstances of the fire, a deliberate act of destruction by 'executioners' carrying out a notoriously ideological 'duty' (p. 206), imply that the new insight it has triggered for the Naylors is an apprehension of the revolutionaries' perspective. The 'design of order and panic' which now overtakes the ruinous landscape must then have been adjusted to

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[14] Nicola Darwood, *A World of Lost Innocence: The Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), p. 44.

accommodate an acknowledgement of differing cultural positions.

However, this capacity of ruin to bring about altered, and in political terms reformed, perspectives is also limited by Bowen's narrative. This is a part of a deliberate move to refuse a straightforward narrative of revolutionary victory and Anglo-Irish culpability. The Ascendancy's consciousness, symbolised by the Naylor's perception of their own ruin, remains enigmatic. The critical claim that the ruins of Danielstown signify a transformation in Ascendancy perspective, from deliberate political innocence to culpable awareness, is inescapably speculative. It is never *confirmed* that the executioner's work has brought about Anglo-Irish acknowledgement of what their actions were designed to embody, and so the full political connotations of the scene are left ambiguous. The staging of ruin in *The Last September* actually marginalises the IRA 'executioners' who bring it about: they are not without agency, having dispossessed and ejected the Naylors successfully; yet they are at the same time are left wholly uncharacterised in Bowen's telling, 'bland', slipping away in the shadows rather than declared a visible part of this new perceptual 'design'. Instead, the burning house itself, and the Naylor's enigmatic response, are the focus of attention. The depiction of the couple's attitude in apprehending the scene also carries with it a residual defence of Anglo-Irish demeanour. As Ellen M. Wolff comments, the scene 'chastise[s] Anglo-Ireland's tendency to grasp the obvious only too late' but at the same time might 'implicitly applaud the Naylors' stoic witness-bearing, the restrained civility that elsewhere the

narrative debunks'.[15] Wolff concludes that 'the novel's closure shares the Naylors' stolid, implacable restraint'.[16] As she discerns, this image of the couple's restrained witness-bearing is not politically neutral. It bequeaths them a position of respectability and rightful participation in the scene of their own eviction. No other perspective is ever actually acknowledged, so that the 'design' of the ruin, though infiltrated by panic, may still be shaped by the Naylors themselves.

This failure to relinquish Anglo-Irish determination of the meanings Danielstown holds, even during its ruin and climax of revelation, creates a version of the apocalyptic which actively resists the Ascendancy's end. The ruin in part endorses their contested legacy, at the same time as depicting its close. The concept of apocalypse is typically inseparable from the *post*-apocalyptic, raising always the question of what new order will supersede the end. Frank Kermode's extended analysis of this term notes that the idea of 'transition' is a key element of 'apocalyptic tradition',[17] not least being endemic to the utopianism of political revolution.[18] Kermode draws upon strands in W. B. Yeats's *A Vision* (1925) to illustrate the persistent view that, out of cataclysmic war, civilisation finds renovation: 'He saw his time as a time of transition, the last moment of before a new annunciation, a new gyre. There was the horror to come […] but out of a desolate reality would come renewal.'[19] These cycles of ruin and restoration, which are according to

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[15] Ellen M. Wolff, '*An Anarchy in the Mind and in the Heart': Narrating Anglo-Ireland* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006), pp. 102–03.

[16] Ibid., p. 103.

[17] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966; repr. 2000), p. 100.

[18] Ibid., p. 98.

[19] Ibid., pp. 98–99.

Kermode familiar 'fictions of epoch',[20] are evidently at play in the ideological narrative that supports revolutions, including that of the Irish Civil War and the establishment of a Free State. With the symbolic destruction of the established political order, enacted through the physical destructions of Big Houses as well as the deaths of British imperialists such as Gerald, a new cultural identity will emerge. The revelation of any forthcoming or reinvented identity is not endorsed in *The Last September* – in fact, Bowen's ruin is formulated to actively resist this anticipatory movement in history.

Rather than permitting Danielstown's ruin to become a space in which a new history can commence, palimpsestic, over the vanquished structure of Anglo-Irish authority, Bowen establishes a vision of ruin that refuses to grant the impending Republic entry or control. In theoretical terms, it is far more cognate with Speer's vision of the ruin as a 'monument'[21] than it is the ideologically shifting 'characters of transience' depicted by Benjamin,[22] with architecture speaking 'of former power' even though supposedly overcome.[23] The novel is most certainly not an ambiguous propulsion of imperialist ideologies; as a whole it facilitates critique of the Ascendancy's position. Yet there is a strong note of condemnation in the depiction of the 'death – execution, rather – of the three houses' (p. 206), and the experience of the fire suggests that Bowen is using this event as a means of denying the revolutionaries their 'transition' to a new order. She does so by maintaining an intense, self-enclosed focus on the moment of material ruin:

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[20] Ibid., p. 100.

[21] Woodward, p. 30.

[22] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 177.

[23] Speer, p. 97.

> Here, there were no more autumns, except for the trees.
> By next year light had possessed itself of the vacancy,
> still with surprise. […] At Danielstown, half-way up the
> avenue under the beeches, the thin iron gate twanged
> (missed its latch, remained swinging aghast) as the last
> unlit car slid out with the executioners bland from
> accomplished duty. The sound of the last car widened,
> gave itself to the open and empty country and was
> demolished. Then the first wave of a silence that was to
> be ultimate flowed back, confident, to the steps. Above
> the steps, the door stood open hospitably upon a
> furnace. (p. 206)

While the executioners are banished to the 'bland' shadows in an 'open and empty country' (a space not liberated by the destruction of the Big Houses but instead reduced and made barren), here Danielstown maintains its own defiant spatial character even during the blaze. The image of a front door open to a 'furnace' that still maintains an air of hospitable welcome gestures back ironically to the opening scene of welcome, so that the executioners' leaving exists as part of the house's own symmetrical narrative of arrival and departure.

The presentation of this fire inhibits the 'executioners' using the space for any social revival or renovation. An 'extra day, unreckoned' in which these events take place can be read as positioning the ruin outside Ireland's history altogether, refusing it an official place in future historical narratives of how the Free State came about. The curious detail that this day is an 'abortive birth' confirms this sense of denying any cultural regeneration with disturbingly brutal language (p. 205). While the entire description of Danielstown's end occurs on the final page, it is intense enough to provide a

vision of what this ruin's future will be. Along with the building, the last sounds of life in this space are 'demolished', to be replaced by a silence that is not only 'confident' (refusing any new presence on the site without question) but also 'ultimate' – a term that denies any further development emphatically. Thus, even though the Naylors have left, they still maintain an ownership of this site – and with it an (abandoned but also untouchable) cultural presence in Ireland – because the ruined space only communicates their identity and its tragic end. It is not overwritten or repossessed to become the site of a subsequent national narrative. Even Ireland's natural environment inhabits this site with unease. Light 'possessed of itself the vacancy' but it does so 'with surprise', and the leaves that bank up with 'the wind's hesitation' do so 'frightened, against the too clear form of the ruin' (p. 206). This impression of a space that, without the Anglo-Irish, is devoid of any human perspective at all gives a continuing clarity to a symbolic ruined form. Bowen's conclusion suggests that the shell of Danielstown still functions as a monument, with a securer location in the environment than the wind and trees. It provides the possibility of embodying traces of Anglo-Irish identity, even after the space from which their class exerted power has been long abandoned.

4. Trouble at t'Mill: The Nightmare of Lost Meaning

The new Ireland that developed in the time between the end of *The Last September* and the text's composition is denied welcome in the climax given to Danielstown. Instead, the revolution and its historical consequences emerge symbolically in a different ruin: the dilapidated mill that Lois, Marda, and Hugo Montmorency stumble across (pp. 122–29). This scene has particular

aesthetic and political intensity, with the 'high façade of decay' (p. 123) connected to Ireland's Civil War politics by the presence of an inarticulate IRA soldier, sleeping rough amidst its insecure walls. This revolutionary's connection to the impending ruin of Danielstown estate is articulated overtly by his warning, on hearing that they come from Danielstown, that they should 'better keep in the house while y'have it' (p. 125). His statement provides the text's most explicit articulation of the threat facing Danielstown, and in this sense the scene can be read as an encounter with the reality that is being kept outside the Anglo-Irish insular demesne. However, because Bowen's depiction of the burning and then empty Danielstown is as I have argued stylised in order to deny any Republican ownership over cultural meaning, the encounter becomes more than an IRA vocalisation of prescient threat. The mill is the location of Republicanism in the novel: a controversial association with ruin.

The scene's symbolic intensity has resisted definitive critical consensus. It has an allegorical connection to British governance and the deleterious material consequences for Ireland. Three residents of Danielstown have strayed out of their controlled landscape, and the ruinous reality of Irish space that they find can be read as archetypal evidence of colonial neglect. This is a reading proposed by Julian Moynahan, who discusses how the scene's focus on decay has moral implications. He argues that:

> one may recoil from the spectacle of the ruins of the nongiving mill to a thought that if the dominant and empowered class in Ireland during the nineteenth century [...] had given – had given *something* – to the

country, then perhaps the Gothic strangler, English law,
might not quite have been able to do its worst.[24]

There is evidence in the novel to support this conclusion. The space is introduced with the thought of 'those dead mills – the country was full of them' (p. 123), placing this site in a much wider context of social and industrial collapse, and briefly illuminating a country overcome by structural failures. The mill is also part of a wider vista of decay which includes a row of roofless cottages (p. 123). This setting is certainly developed to exist in opposition to the comfortable security of Danielstown. Hugo Montmorency's comment when seeing it begins to voice England's systematic culpability in this ruination. '"Another," Hugo declared, "of our national grievances. English law strangled the –"'. In a familiar move, his statement is cut off before the issue at stake can be fully voiced. Nevertheless, there is clearly guilt among the emotions that this space evokes: Lois and Marda are both curiously 'ashamed' when they see a man sleeping amongst the nettles, and experience another moment of altered self-perception, in which they 'could not but feel framed, rather conscious, as though confronting a camera' (p. 125). Here again an uncomfortable external perspective brings awareness to characters that their identity is understood differently by those who live beyond its demesne. The mill's existence as a testament to their classes' behaviour intensifies this moment of social judgement. A connection between English neglect and the existence of revolutionaries is clearly present, and waiting to be made.

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[24] Julian Moynahan, *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination in a Hyphenated Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 244.

However, the scene is also a more complex engagement with the relationship between monumentality and ruin, which is revealed to threaten colonial foundations. The disrepair visible at the mill is capable of disrupting the established relationship between space and historical meaning – and in this forms an instance of radical decay, revealing but also troubling Anglo-Irish distinctions between 'civilisation' (supposedly embodied by grandeur of Danielstown) and 'barbarism' (supposedly represented by the culturally mundane mill). In this respect, the later site's dilapidation is as troubling to Lois as its presentation of a hostile Republican; the text describes how it represents 'her nightmare: brittle, staring ruins' (p. 123). Innes examines this scene in her discussion of how the natural environment brings associations of ruin to the Ascendancy, commenting that for Lois, 'the big house and all that it stands for seem to be a bulwark against the nightmare of ruins and meaninglessness.'[25] The association of those two concepts – not necessarily a given, for as we have seen, Danielstown preserves the Ascendancy's cultural identity even in its destroyed state – offers a means of interpreting the mill scene as a whole. Lois does appear to apprehend the loss of controlled historical meaning in the building's decay:

> Those dead mills – the country was full of them, never quite stripped and whitened to skeletons' decency: like corpses at their most horrible. [...] Incredible in its loneliness, roofless, floorless, beams criss-crossing dank interior daylight, the whole place tottered, fit to crash at a breath. Hinges rustily bled where a door had been wrenched away; up six stories panes still tattered the daylight. [...] Banal enough in life to have closed this

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[25] Innes, p. 108.

> valley to the imagination, the dead mill now entered the democracy of ghostliness, equalled broken palaces in futility and sadness; was transfigured by some response of the spirit, showing not the decline of its meanness, simply decline; took on all of the past to which it had given nothing. (p. 123)

If the remains of Danielstown embody a bounded ideological vision most akin to the 'bridge of tradition' idealised by Speer,[26] then this site is emblematic of the alternative 'characters of transience' which, according to Benjamin, put space and its meaning into a state of 'irresistible decay'.[27] With no efforts towards preservation, the mill is in a condition of extreme vulnerability, so that absence has almost overcome original design: the building is 'roofless' and 'floorless', on the threshold of complete non-existence – 'fit to crash at a breath'. But the threshold has not quite been crossed. Presence and meaning still linger here. Bowen indicates this through the metaphor of a rotting corpse. The mill and those like it are 'never quite stripped and whitened to a skeleton's decency', 'dead' but still bleeding with rust. These buildings contain substance yet; they are vanishing but not completely gone. This unsightly lingering of signification creates 'some response of the spirit': an incitement to perform unfinished memory.

The level of transience visible has a considerable impact on the imaginative narratives that the mill's remains can be used to form. It leaves the relationship between space and historical meaning in a state of extreme flux, which threatens the Ascendancy's ordered assignments of cultural value. To Lois, the building's rightful character is 'banal', suggesting that she sees it

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[26] Speer, p. 97.

[27] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 177–78.

as a space for common, culturally insignificant work. Adducing any social connotations other than inferior 'meanness' is in her mind not only wrong, but an active, nightmarish political threat. Decay has progressed here to such an extent, with the building's history (previously determined by 'English laws') now so far 'merged into the setting',[28] that its putatively 'banal' nature is no longer evident. Instead, more radically glamorous associations are permitted, disrupting the dichotomy of the civilised and the barbarous described above. The mill is now equal with 'broken palaces', imbued with 'the democracy of ghostliness' – a term which connects the liberation of prescribed meaning at this site to the presence and revolutionary intentions of the Republican soldier. Benjamin's concept of semiotic mobility is taken to an extreme, so that the ruin's meaning is now barely connected to previous prescribed identity as a working structure. Yet the scene also suggests that this supposedly 'banal' identity is an imposition by imperialist perceptions; and it reveals how these perceptions may falter amidst the transient signification of decay. *The Last September* is fraught with the anxious sense that an encounter with ruin may result in the undermining of Anglo-Irish cultural values, and their power to determine meaning within Ireland's landscape.

As I have argued in regard to the defiant dramatisation of Danielstown's blaze, Bowen also works to resist this perceptual threat, ensuring that the house's ruined future is distinguished from the mill's decay; civilisation and barbarism kept in their distinct places. Danielstown remains 'clear' even as a ruin (p. 206): still capable of embodying the meaning that it

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[28] Ibid.

was originally constructed to present. In fact, it is implied that the dramatic nature of its destruction *is* what enables the Big House to maintain its monumental authority. The final burning is not only figured as an execution by Irish Republicans, but also as an intervention in a slower process of degeneration. Thus the event of ruin acts as a historical rupture, which gives the house a peculiar survival – one that contrasts to the process of dilapidation which has begun to overtake it previously. Instead of the creeping decay evident at the mill, Danielstown is overcome in a singular event that possesses an ongoing visibility. This is very different to the slow dissolution into absence, and the Benjaminian liberation of meaning, found within the mill's collapsing walls. The drama of the Big House's final inferno is a conscious intervention, through the form of historical fiction, to prevent the Ascendancy becoming subservient to the 'democracy of ghostliness'. Violent conflagration is the only way to defy 'oblivion' (p. 98). The drama of a ruin makes the house into the culturally fixed 'monument' described by Speer, and while the event of its burning has material brevity – a house can only burn once – it remains emblematised in fiction.

The provision of such an acute apocalypse in a single night thus emphasises a distinction between opposing experiences of ruin. The climactic fire that facilitates the Naylors' revelation is marked as an alternative (and, from the perspective Lois reveals, a preferable one) to the alternative slow dilapidation. It brings with it different emotional, as well as epistemological, implications. Terence Brown traces this opposition between catastrophe and decay to the legacy of Yeats, commenting:

the destructive fires of revolutionary change were a
heroic climax for what he believed was a noble caste,
preferable to the indignities of taxation, poverty and
gradual decay that were to be the lot of ancestral houses
elsewhere in this egalitarian century which Yeats
detested.[29]

This heroic conceptualisation of destruction is cultivated by youth in *The Last September*. It is notable that both Lois and Laurence – though neither are present when the house does burn – demonstrate a desire for ruin as a dramatic event. In Lois's imagination, this singularity is an intervention in the otherwise interminable process of protracted decay that defines the ongoing history of a Big House:

> Over the mottled carpet curled strange pink fronds:
> someone dead now, buying this carpet, had responded
> to an idea of beauty. Lois thought how in Marda's
> bedroom, when she was married, there might be a dark
> blue carpet with a bloom on it like a grape, and how this
> room, this hour would be forgotten. Already the room
> seemed full of the dusk of oblivion. And she hoped that
> instead of fading to dust in summers of empty sunshine,
> the carpet would burn with the house in a scarlet night
> to make one flaming call upon Marda's memory. (p. 98)

From her own self-absorbed stance, the preferable apocalypse will place Lois at a distinguished historical moment, privileging her own identity against the longer narrative of an ancestral space in which dead figures from the past are attached to dull, quotidian objects. Lois thus develops an image of ruin in opposition to the concept of an accrued heritage, deemed desirable in her

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[29] Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History, 1922–1985*, p. 133.

family's worldview. The association of this rebelliousness with a younger generation (Lois and Laurence) suggests that the 'idea' of an Anglo-Irish lifestyle attached to a specific place has come to an end. But in this end is a more fundamental preservation. Cultural memory is no longer sought in an extended spatial legacy, with a house forming a palimpsest of multiple histories. Instead it is conserved within ruin, and given monumental fixity in the valuation of a singular and vibrant event.

Nevertheless, across *The Last September* as a whole, Bowen portrays the Ascendancy's uneasy relationship with ruin as the class's final days play out. Although by the text's close Danielstown has come to embody the slew of Big Houses torched during the revolutionary period, I have demonstrated that ruin exists in more diverse, complex forms throughout the novel. These ruins are developed to scrutinise the cultural and perceptual boundaries of Anglo-Irish existence. As an atmospheric and linguistic figuration, the house's approaching destruction threatens characters' carefully managed perspectival boundaries, representing their wilful blindness, and resisting its authority over the text itself. The brief but intense encounter with transient decay at the site of the mill pursues this destabilisation further; characters glimpse a forthcoming 'democracy' in spatial meaning, dissolving the imposed values of 'civilisation' formed to underlie colonialism. However, I have argued that despite these challenges to the Ascendancy's worldview, the conclusion of the novel suggest that in the narrative's end is a more fundamental preservation. The climactic destruction of Danielstown turns destruction against its executors, representing Bowen's attempt to reassert her own place within cultural memory. The result of this tension between ideological disruption

and preservation is an ambivalent contribution to the resistant project of radical decay.

Ruin and Nationalism in Ó Faoláin's Political Fiction

1. Greener Grass and Softer Rain: Nationalist Fictions

Seán Ó Faoláin's presentation of ruin provides a resource to complexify simplistic claims regarding Irish nationalist ideology. Ruin appears as an unsettling presence in the narrative of revolution and rebirth that Ó Faoláin visits in his short fiction. Unlike Farrell and Bowen, the author approaches conflict during Ireland's revolutionary period from a position of personal nationalist commitment. Ó Faoláin pledged his services to the IRA during the War of Independence (1919–21) and to the anti-Treaty forces during the Irish Civil War (1922–23). However, as I will argue, his own ideological commitments do not result in their uncritical endorsement within his fiction. Ruin – encountered as both a physical and a conceptual material – provides resources for a partial resistance to nationalism and the ultimately fratricidal violence used to achieve it. Ó Faoláin's stories of revolution, particularly those published in his 1932 collection *Midsummer Night Madness*, develop heterogeneous portraits of commitment and criticism, romantic belief and disillusionment.

The instances of purposeful ambivalence which emerge in Ó Faoláin's fiction can be read productively in the context of other writers who contribute to the movement I have termed radical decay. As discussed above, *The Last September* uses ruin to reflect on an Anglo-Irish struggle to see 'beyond the demesne',[1] with the ruined mill providing the only site in which the Republican forces intent on destroying Danielstown – and, along with

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[1] Bowen, *The Last September*, p. 30.

this, an underlying loss of the Ascendancy's cultural control – can be confronted. I argue that, in a similar way, the title story of *Midsummer Night Madness* demonstrates the author's awareness of his subjective, although in this case nationalist, perspective on the Irish revolution – a perspective that is both made evident and challenged in encounters with ruined space.

Attending to damaged and decaying space in this text offers an opportunity to bring nuance to previous critical interpretations. Ó Faoláin's self-conscious struggle to formulate dispassionate historical commentary has been read as a preference for romanticised, idealistic portraits of a revolutionary period that proved in reality highly traumatic. Denis Donoghue criticises Ó Faoláin's early fiction on these grounds, arguing that it idealises both rural life and revolution:

> The reader is forced to believe that life in Ireland was simpler, more beautiful, nobler then than now, that the people were a nest of simple folk, richly expressive, articulate, eloquent, that the grass was greener, the rain softer [...] when Republicans were roaming through Cork and Tipperary shooting at the Black and Tans, it was possible to feel heroic. But it must have been hard to feel heroic in the Civil War and the years that followed its crimes. Yet O'Faolain's early stories want you to feel that life in Ireland was a romance, and sometimes an epic. I have never been convinced.[2]

Donoghue claims that 'the reader is forced to believe' this vision, arguing that Ó Faoláin propagates staple tenets of the Celtic Revival in an almost

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[2] Denis Donoghue, 'Romantic Ireland', *London Review of Books*, 4 February 1982, pp. 18–19 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v04/n02/denis-donoghue/romantic-ireland> [accessed 20 May 2019] (para. 2 of 12).

propagandist move. His argument associates Ó Faoláin with the coercive practices of heritage and its attempt to 'improve' the past identified above by critics such as Lowenthal.[3] Indeed, Lowenthal singles out the particular efforts of postcolonial countries (though without using this term) to 'highlight supposed glories', commenting that 'magnified traditions especially bolster peoples embittered by subjugation or newly come to nationhood'. [4] Donoghue's placing of Ó Faoláin within this nostalgic tradition is not necessarily without cause. 'Midsummer Night Madness' opens with a vision of rural 'sweetness',[5] while its narrator's mission as an insurgent is animated by a sense of 'romance' (p. 10) that make his actions exciting and historically meaningful.

Donoghue argues that Ó Faoláin demonstrates not only a general tendency towards romanticising Ireland, but also the use of this style to endorse heroic nationalism during the revolutionary period. Further evidence to support this charge is an apparent reluctance to represent what followed Ireland's revolutionary success: the Civil War, which, as Donoghue notes, allowed for little ideological comfort and made it 'hard to feel heroic'. The struggle to maintain an idealised understanding of the Ireland's civil conflict is identified by Beiner as a source of contention in Irish memory. The war resulted in 'commemorative paralysis' in the years which followed, because it 'had shaped the political fault lines of Irish politics and remained too

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[3] Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country*, p. 332.

[4] Ibid.

[5] Seán Ó Faoláin, 'Midsummer Night Madness', in *The Collected Stories of Sean O'Faolain: Volume I* (London: Constable, 1980), pp. 9–43 (p. 9). Further references to 'Midsummer Night Madness' within this chapter will be to this edition, and will be given in the text.

controversial to be properly remembered in public.'[6] Ó Faoláin apparently shared this paralysis, refusing to address the 'disheartening days'[7] of the Civil War and his role in it through much of his early fiction. His experiences during this conflict are not acknowledged openly in the collection *Midsummer Night Madness*, but instead surface within the context of Ireland's earlier, more 'heroic' conflict against the British. For instance, the author's own claustrophobic work as a bomb-maker during the Civil War[8] emerges in the story 'Midsummer Night Madness' in the narrator's furtive description of his work for the War of Independence, 'cooped up for months past under one of those tiny roofs, seeing the life of men and women only through a peep-hole in a window-blind' (p. 9). Ó Faoláin draws upon his own part in revolutionary violence here, but refuses to acknowledge its actual fratricidal intent, transposing it instead into a fight against a colonial oppressor. As John Grant comments, this 'move away from actuality towards the imaginative' is a means of 'reinventing' violent actions to suit 'a more honourable and valiant cause'.[9] The traumatic memory associated with this civil conflict, and its implications for the fate of nationalism as a concept in the absence of a colonial enemy, are arguably evaded through Ó Faoláin's retreat into the more easily romanticised Tan War. If we are to conclude that Ó Faoláin chooses to contain conflict within ideals of romance and heroism, his focus upon the War of Independence at the expense of the more problematic Civil War is a

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[6] Beiner, p. 713.

[7] Ó Faoláin, *Vive Moi!* ([Boston: Little Brown], 1963; repr. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1993), p. 150.

[8] Ibid., p. 153.

[9] John Grant, '"I Was Too Chickenhearted to Publish it": Seán Ó Faoláin, Displacement and History Re-Written', *Estudios Irlandeses*, Number 12 (2017), pp. 50–59 (p. 53).

turn away from the art of 'radical decay' I have identified as an opposition to saccharine visions of Ireland's national heritage. However, I will argue that the presentation of ruin within 'Midsummer Night Madness' contains resources, not yet considered, with which to critique the revolutionary 'romance' and pastoral 'sweetness' in which its narrator declares faith.

'Midsummer Night Madness' is set in rural Cork at an early point in the War of Independence. The narrator, John, cycles from the city into the open countryside, seeking an IRA commandant and comrade named Stevey Long in order to discover why the local battalion has 'been completely inactive for the last three or four months' (p. 10). He has arranged to meet Stevey at Henn Hall, the home of a decrepit, promiscuous Ascendancy landlord, now being used as a Republican hideout. At the house, the narrator finds his comrade quarrelling with his pregnant lover Gypsy, who is also in relationship with the landlord Henn. Stevey leaves and musters 'incendiaries' (p. 36) to set light to a neighbouring Big House, whose residents take refuge with Henn. Returning, Stevey discovers that Henn is the father of Gypsy's child, and threatens to burn Henn Hall unless the landlord and she marry. Stevey then disappears, and the narrator appoints a new commandant, to continue a war that would go on to destroy many more Big Houses.

The presentation of ruin in this story, both in Stevey's act of arson and the decay already far advanced at Henn Hall, does not necessarily undermine John's nationalist sentiments and avowed 'hate' (p. 12) for colonialism. However, it is used to introduce a degree of ambivalence into his initially uncompromising ideological position. Fintan O'Toole suggests that in reading Ó Faoláin 'as a writer and an intellectual in the new Irish state that

he helped to create', critics should focus on more circumspect signals of dissonance rather than direct challenge to political causes.[10] Creating a provocative comparison between the Free State and Eastern Europe, O'Toole argues that

> The strange, perhaps ultimately incomprehensible mixture of dissidence and collusion that marks the careers of so many intellectuals in Stalinist societies, now so harshly judged, might be viewed a little more sympathetically with O'Faolain in mind. His example reminds us that lies, evasions, ambivalences, failures of courage, are just as much the weapons of dissidence as are the more glorious attributes of forthrightness and inflexibility.[11]

In analysing the reflection on Irish revolutionary sentiment given in the story 'Midsummer Night Madness', I argue that, while Ó Faoláin does not seek to mount a 'forthright' attack on nationalism, he uses the innately radical ambiguity of ruins to develop a subdued form of 'dissidence' that questions the simplistic assumptions of romantic nationalism from within. Lawrence John McCaffrey writes that throughout the independent state's first decades, Ó Faoláin worked to become 'the most prominent, articulate – and relentless – minority voice demanding a more liberal, cosmopolitan, international, and tolerant nation'.[12] I argue here that *Midsummer Night Madness*, a collection which both reflects on the formation of a new Ireland and upon its

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[10] Fintan O'Toole, 'The Intrusive Apostrophe', *London Review of Books*, 23 June 1994, pp. 24–26 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/v16/n12/fintan-otoole/the-intrusive-apostrophe> [accessed 28 May 2019] (para. 3 of 20).

[11] Ibid., para. 4 of 20.

[12] Lawrence John McCaffrey, 'Sean O'Faolain and Irish Identity', *New Hibernia Review*, 9.4 (2005), 144–56 (p. 156).

problematic future, initiates an uneasy advocacy of this resistant liberalism within a context of revolutionary conflict and reductive ideologies.

This discussion will consider firstly how the portrait of ruin at Henn Hall alters and expands the narrator's conception of the Ascendancy and its historical role. I will examine how ruin conflicts with the Hall's status as a site of colonial oppression, including by producing a vision of Anglo-Irish history which runs counter to IRA hostility, and through a debate about the concept of national ruin itself which suggests that ideas of ruin may allow for the introduction of empathy between opposing cultures. Secondly, I will consider how ruin initiates a more critical view of Republican actions and ideals, including the narrator's reaction to Stevey's arson attack. This attack produces a (temporary) crisis in what it means to be a Republican fighter ('is that what you call soldiering?' he asks his friend, p. 37). In detailing the perspective of Republican soldiers – the arsonists whom Bowen calls 'executioners', offering their consciousness no narrative space when Danielstown burns – Ó Faoláin allows further nuance to be brought to understandings of the Big House's ruin in Irish cultural memory.

2. Pity and Hate: The Dissident Force of Ruin

Despite the seemingly unproblematic narrative arc in 'Midsummer Night Madness', a highly complex exploration of ruin – as a physical and conceptual encounter – emerges in the text. Although it does involve the torching of an Ascendancy property, the story differs significantly from archetypal Anglo-Irish Big House texts such as *The Last September* because both its narrator and its author begin from a position of Republican sympathy. The narrator makes

clear that his struggle to end British rule over Ireland necessitates unambiguous hostility towards Henn and the Ascendancy he represents:

> You may pity him as I tell you of him, but I, riding
> along the darkling lanes that night, had nothing in my
> heart for him but hate. He was one of the class that had
> battened for too long on our poor people, and I was
> quite pleased to think that if he lived he lived only in
> name; that if he had any charm at all left he would need
> it all to attract even the coarsest woman (p. 12)

This passage acknowledges the possibility that Henn's feeble state may arouse sympathy, but counters it strongly with a declaration of politically justified 'hate'. The landlord is introduced to us in the context of class oppression, a history which determines the narrator's response to Henn's present ruinousness and his refusal to allow any pity to cross this social divide.

However, the generalised image of upper-class aggression enacted against 'poor people' becomes increasingly dissatisfying, with Henn's character and narratorial treatment generating resistance to such simplistic dismissal. Indeed, Henn becomes more visibly a victim of aggression than its perpetrator, and the consequent possibility of sympathy for his fate tests the narrator's unequivocal aversion. This is evident in the ominous description of Henn Hall's dilapidated boundary, the failure of which is political as well as structural:

> On my left, high as two men, rose the estate walls that
> had once kept the whole countryside at bay but could
> not now (gapped and crumbling as they were) keep a

> fox out or a chicken in. I passed two great entrance-
> gates sunken in the weeds. (p. 13)

This perimeter is symbolic of a division between the Ascendancy and 'the whole countryside' outside it. The need to keep this countryside 'at bay' alters the portrait of the Anglo-Irish as oppressors of an innocent and victimised native landscape; their demesne's structure also embodies a need for distance and protection. The sense of *mutual* hostility present in this is intensified by the language in the walls' description, which forebodes the nationalist violence our narrator has not yet acknowledged explicitly. The description of the walls' inability to 'keep a fox out or a chicken in' takes on sinister metaphorical threat given how unprotected 'Henn', described in (rather unoriginal) animalistic terms as 'like a hen' (p. 19), is against the IRA's present intrusions. Ruin is associated early in the story with the threat of violence, through imagery which does not ascribe oppressive grandeur to the house and its class but instead imputes vulnerability.

While the ruined state of the house and the feeble condition of its owner provide the opportunity for exploitation by the IRA, they also complicate the supposed 'hate' surrounding Henn and his class. As he moves through the house, Ó Faoláin's portrait of Henn and the ruin which assails the building creates fissures and contradictions. On the one hand, John uses ruin to emphasise that the Hall has already lost its power and respectability; but on the other he is also driven to reassert the claim that Henn remains a symbol of imperial dominance, and so maintains the enmity which justifies aggressive Republican ideals. John stresses how decay has overtaken Henn Hall, to the extent that the Big House is robbed almost completely of its role

in representing the Ascendancy. He is struck by Henn's infirm condition, 'shuffling […] stick-tapping and coughing', and reflects how this state, as well as the 'ruin of a house' (p. 12), rob the landlord of his ability to attract local women:

> Perhaps he was beyond all that, and if he was not, he would be like Juan in old age, for the farmers' daughters for miles around would shun him as they would the plague, and for such a man as Henn to descend to the women of the passing tinkers for whom alone his house would appear even yet as a big house, was out of the question. […] I could not believe that even such a house would fall so low. (p. 13)

Only to 'passing tinkers' does his house 'appear even yet a big house' (p. 13). This description reveals that Henn Hall is a ruin in more than its physical condition. It no longer inspires deference from the local community, meaning that it can no longer considered a 'big house' – a status awarded not only for a building's grand physical construction, but also for the way it was perceived socially. The ruin of Henn's house is evident in the loss of its social authority, and the attendant unattractiveness to all but the lowest of Irish society. Ó Faoláin develops a vision of the house's ruin which risks undermining its ostensible role as a continued emblem of persecution and political despotism.

Yet even though John claims that the extent of ruin at the Hall has tarnished its claim to represent Anglo-Irish dominion, he seems unwilling to allow this condition to mitigate the 'hate' already declared for Henn. The presence of little at Henn Hall besides decay and loss does not grant its decrepit owner exemption from colonial guilt in the narrator's eyes. John

emphasises how he can detect residual traces of his host's upper-class (Anglo-Irish) accent: 'the last bit of blazonry he preserved, making him off for all his degradation as one of the conquering race' (p. 20). This works to reassociate Henn with the historical responsibility of his class, preventing any indemnity on account of his particular state of ruin. Although he is physically and socially crippled, a feeble 'madman' (p. 19), the landlord's voice still performs an ostentatious 'blazonry' of imperial power that declares his 'conquering' role. Henn is robbed of physical health, material grandeur, and social prestige – but the narrator holds on to traces of his identity, claiming that they personify Anglo-Irish domination to a sufficient extent to be considered culpable for its existence. This tension does not therefore allow in the 'pity' for Henn's condition initially disavowed by John. However, it does suggest that the unreflective nationalist 'hate' he endorses instead is not without contradiction. The extent of Ascendancy ruin on display at Henn House opens up the possibility that the direction of aggressive nationalism is inconsistent with its targets' culpability.

3. Hospitality in Decay

The reliable location of oppressive imperial agency within Henn Hall is cast under further suspicion in the detailed descriptions of its physical decay, which do not provide sufficient material to criticise the British Empire's exploitation of Ireland. Henn himself resists the simplistic Republican condemnations levelled at him by providing unexpected courtesy, offering his uninvited guest a drink and leading him to the drawing-room. The description of this space focuses on the hospitality of the Ascendancy

(although it is present now only in dirtied fragments) rather than its political oppressiveness:

> His drawing-room was just as I expected, a good room but battered and unkempt like a tramp. At the farther end was a great superfluous fire and standing by it he poured me out a jorum of whisky in a glass whose crevices were brown with the encrustations of the years, all the time peering at me around the side of a pink-bowled oil-lamp whose crude unshaded light made everything look even more drab and dirty – the bare uncarpeted floor, the fine marble fireplaces mottled and cracked, the china cabinets with broken glass and no china in them; and I remembered the look of the yards with their rusted churns and staveless barrels, and everywhere and on everything the fur of mildew and green damp. (p. 21)

Though Henn is introduced to us as a man who, like his peers, has 'battened for too long on our poor people' (p. 12), the encounter with his decayed home here disrupts a singular focus on the malevolent practices of the Anglo-Irish or the trauma of its surrounding people. Through the capacity of ruins to illustrate both a damaged present and a more favourable past, Henn's status as a prosperous landlord is established at the same time as his resemblance to the lowest identity in society ('battered and unkempt like a tramp'). It is too simplistic to argue that this stark illustration of changed fortunes overrides Henn's association with Anglo-Irish authority, or implies that this authority is now so ruined that it is politically obsolete. Nevertheless, it does complicate the location of responsibility for the 'battened' experience of 'poor people' elsewhere in Ireland. There are diverse experiences of misfortune at play

within this narrative.

As well as offering tangible evidence of the low ebb which Henn has reached, Ó Faoláin's illustration of the ruinous drawing room shifts the presentation of Ascendancy's role in Irish history as purely oppressive. The decay described creates a visceral impression of perverted hospitality, with drinking glasses broken or brown with 'encrustations', a damp atmosphere and mildewed furniture. This may be repulsive, but it is also lacking in any evidence of political repression. Instead, it suggests that Henn Hall may be a (presently decayed) embodiment of idealistic characteristics – not unakin to those which Bowen has claimed to be the role of an Anglo-Irish Big House. This role is, primarily, the philosophically driven provision of hospitality:

> they were planned for spacious living – for hospitality above all. Unlike the low, warm, ruddy French and English manors, they have made no natural growth from the soil – the idea that begot them was a purely social one. […] the most ornate, spacious parts of these buildings *were* the most functional – the steps, the halls, the living-rooms, the fine staircases – it was these that contributed to society, that raised life above the exigencies of mere living to the plane of art, or at least style.[13]

According to Bowen, Big Houses in Ireland seek to provide a 'social' function by creating a space which entertains and accommodates guests. Rather than producing superfluous ornamentation, the grandness of such a property is crucial to its function, allowing it to produce hospitality not only in a

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[13] Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Big House', in *The Mulberry Tree: Writings of Elizabeth Bowen*, selected and introduced by Hermione Lee (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), pp. 25–30 (p. 26).

pragmatic material sense but also as a cultural elevation. They raise life 'above the exigencies of mere living' (and, though Bowen does not state it, above the living standards of the local Irish) to 'the plane of art'. This vision of architectural purpose, the intention to foster sociability and with it desirably superior culture, appears far more evident at Henn Hall than do the political outrages with which the narrator initially associated the space. He began by describing the Hall as a 'garrison', 'one of those thousand unofficial blockhouses of the English on Irish soil' (p. 18), but now that he has actually entered its interior, he dedicates attention to the possessions designed to facilitate pleasure rather than impose martial authority. A level of disconnection has thus emerged between the vague descriptions of historical tyranny which underpin the narrator's 'hate' for Henn, and the more detailed experience of decayed but originally desirable surroundings that are given extensive narrative space.

Furthermore, the state of decay described in this passage begins to disrupt the narrator's claim to be set wholly against continued subservience to the aesthetic and social vision of the Big House endorsed by Bowen. The detailed, materially focussed survey of Henn's drawing-room suggests a lingering investment in the lifestyle that accompanied the Ascendancy, emphasising the grandness of this space in its capacity to entertain visitors comfortably: an excessive number of rooms, 'fine marble fireplaces', china cabinets, churns and barrels which presumably once provided better food and drink. Their function is corroded beyond repair, creating a macabre parody of pleasure, but this ruination does not undermine access to historical grandeur or a sense of its prior attractiveness. The decay recalls rather than erases its

designer's intended purpose, provoking imaginative engagement with the idea of luxury even while demonstrating its distance. Henn may live now 'only in name' (p. 12) but his property's very ruin refers its reader to a time when its status as a true 'Big House' was undisputed.

It is helpful here to recall Dorothy Bell's identification of the key tension which defines ruins: that they are a form which 'owes as much to decay as to original design'.[14] This uneasy duality of original composition and deterioration has implications for how reliable the structure is in granting us access to the past. As Bell continues, extensive ruin can make viewing the ruin a creative experience with little relation to what the site might have originally inspired, because 'completely novel spatial combinations emerge from decay'.[15] Nevertheless, though 'original designs mutate in unexpected ways', Bell argues that they 'do not entirely disappear. As the core of new forms, they still send their message.'[16] The extent to which the 'message' of Henn Hall's structure and furnishings remains intact beneath 'the encrustations of the years' (p. 21) is crucial to the means by which Ó Faoláin is complicating a nationalist agenda in this passage.

The advancement of decay has supposedly reduced the Hall to a state barely resembling a Big House, and this might offer John the opportunity to override and reshape what Bell terms the 'original conception'[17] of the building – including by suggesting that this conception is entirely obsolete. But in fact, Ó Faoláin limits the opportunity to impose a secondary, hostile interpretation of what this space means. The state of ruin

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[14] Bell, p. 261.
[15] Ibid., p. 264.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.

becomes an opportunity to imagine the prosperous existence that is no longer experienced at Henn Hall, but which can still be inferred from what remains. This is supported by positive adjectives that reveal an essentially attractive nature prior to the present decay: though now 'drab and dirty' it is a 'good room', with 'fine fireplaces' and a 'great superfluous fire' which is currently lit. This continued activity allows the reader to engage with the more luxurious and politically harmonious encounters the house was once designed to facilitate, without necessarily connecting these to the accusations of impression our narrator initially levelled at the Anglo-Irish.

Indeed, John seems to struggle to maintain the more hostile performance that nationalist ideals might demand here. The description begins with the concession that he is 'a little flattered' to be invited to drink whiskey with Henn, a discrete admission that the elitist hospitality Henn's house was intended to facilitate remains both active and attractive, despite his experience of it being dominated by extensive tarnishing. The capacity of ruins to 'still send their message', in Bell's terms, is sustained by the narrator's treatment of Henn Hall: it can still be seen as a place designed to promote generous hospitality, which those less fortunate should aspire to and admire rather than resent. The way John viewed the property as a child gives a model for this: he describes seeing 'a wonderful old house to look at, and often we looked at it from far off' (p. 11). Ó Faoláin's decision to keep this conception of the Ascendancy's past palpable in the depiction of its decayed present introduces further notes of ambivalence regarding the nationalist historiography supposedly underpinning the narrative. A partial endurance of the structure's philosophical and social intentions is thus made possible

through the persistent legibility of Henn Hall's 'original design' in what remains. And when he encounters it, this uneasy admiration of Ascendancy ideals is capable of disrupting – or revealing existing flaws in – the narrator's Republican identity.

This suggestion of ideological perpetuation within Ascendancy decay can be related (cautiously) back to the philosophy of ruins expressed by Speer, who claims that damaged buildings proclaim more than entropy and epistemological loss. In fact – in Speer's theory at least – ruin may be a means of allowing architectural meaning to transcend history. Symbolism is communicated not in spite of decay, but through it. Speer aspired to design an architecture that, even at a nation's 'lowest ebb',

> will speak to them of former power. Naturally, a new national consciousness could not be awakened by architecture alone. But when after a long spell of inertia a sense of national grandeur was born anew, the monuments of men's ancestors were the most impressive exhortations.[18]

As I have argued, this theory demands some hesitation before application in an Irish context, and is only viable up to a point. I read his 'Theory of Ruin Value' as a limited insight into ruins' potential, rather than an accurate manifesto of their full and radical function. Confronting a building which is only part-way towards absence can compel the viewer to engage with its history, and so discern the designer's original 'message', to borrow Bell's term once more. Through this it might be possible to carry forward the 'sense of national grandeur' and 'heroic inspirations' which Speer hopes will remain

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[18] Speer, pp. 55–56.

'still clearly recognisable' in his ruined architecture.[19] This communication is less stable than Speer desires; the texts discussed within this thesis exploit a fundamentally radical ambiguity within ruins, which resists attempts at epistemological control by both a building's original creators and those responsible for its later preservation.

Nevertheless, the decay described by Ó Faoláin at Henn Hall demands that readers refer back to a concept of monumental former grandeur in order to understand the meaning of its present ruin. At the opening, the narrator suggests that reactions to Henn will be either 'hate' or 'pity' (p. 12), but neither emotion is entirely appropriate to the deeper engagement with Anglo-Irish intention that is produced by the extended examination of decay and design in Henn's drawing-room. Accepting, at least in part, Speer's contention that ideology and 'former power' can be preserved within ruin, the trace of passive admiration visible in the narrator's 'flattered' reaction to his invitation suggests that, while it still stands, this Big House remains a site of subtle resistance to Republican claims by preserving an older authority.

Henn himself maintains a fierce sense that his own identity carries with it an essential stamina. He reduces the power of the Republican cause to nothing more than brute force by asking the narrator: 'If you didn't have a revolver stuck in your back pockets what would you young fellows have over us? Oh, you're stronger – but have you more grit?' (p. 21). Henn's claim to possess 'grit' indicates his belief in his own personal integrity, which survives despite his age and the ruined, vulnerable condition in which he now lives. The existence of this resilient authority does appear to shake the narrator's

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[19] Ibid., p. 56.

philosophical convictions, for after their confrontation he speaks with diminished confidence in comparison to his opening declaration of 'hate'. When Henn demands the narrator explain his motivation for 'this business', he responds 'awkwardly': 'I … I believe in it' (pp. 21–2). The rhetorical insecurity that now inflects his delivery of the nationalistic sentiment supposedly driving this story demonstrates a continued preservation of an authoritative, original Anglo-Irish identity within both Henn's character and the space he maintains. The narrator's handling of decay at Henn Hall is not able to banish this, and a tense heterogeneity develops in the presentation of the Anglo-Irish worldview: at once integral to social injustice, and responsible for an ideology of aesthetic elevation which remains both legible and attractive in its ruins.

The only presence of the Ascendancy lifestyle's 'original design' within its now decayed state thus emerges to disturb the Republicans' claim to be rendering their social enemies obsolete. This is developed when Henn revives further ceremonies of hospitality, following the arson of the nearby Big House. When the house is torched, its residents, the Blakes – a captain and his two elderly, unmarried daughters – seek refuge at Henn Hall:

> There, where fifty years ago he had leant across the shining walnut to his perfumed lights-o'-love, smiling quizzically down on them from his swan's neck, approving the painted lips, the tilted eyebrows, always gracious to them, however cynical, perpetually on the smile, only leaning back from his scandalous whispering when the butler laid a new course or refilled his glass – there, now, he offered his smoke-tainted tea, with the airs of fifty years ago, though they creaked and stuttered a little from lack of use, to the

two silent, miserable old maids. (p. 40)

In this passage, the appearance of his suddenly homeless neighbours, and Henn's own rusty attempts to accommodate and help them, become materials which give access to an image of Henn performing his own version of Anglo-Irish 'hospitality' in more favourable days. The image of Henn entertaining his 'lights-o'-love' fifty years ago, which emerges from the narrator's imagination but is presented as if it were a factual description, is brought forth through its second iteration in a decayed and diminished contemporary form. Henn now offers 'smoke-tainted tea', with a 'soiled table-cloth', and 'tarnished silver' as the narrator watches (p. 40). The decay that is also evident here serves to advance the sense that Henn lives a life beyond repair and 'only in name' (p. 12), with the pleasurable days we glimpse here confirmed as irrecoverably distant from the present by the ruin which has overtaken their materials. Henn's incapacity to re-enact his class's prior hospitality also draws attention to the Ascendancy's reliance upon Irish labour, which has now broken down. The instruments of luxury are reduced to 'unequal ware' (p. 40), served without a butler, so that what takes place is a ghostly parody of the culturally elite lifestyle Bowen described as the responsibility of Henn's class.

This loss of this function – a social role which operates through the provision of pleasure – is emphasised further by the distasteful character of the decay in question. The objects described here have not just undergone damage, but have become revolting; Ó Faoláin's imagery is sensory and intimate, focusing on the 'soiled' appearance of the tablecloth and the bitter taste of the tea (its 'smoke-tainted' quality registering the neighbouring political ruin as well as the slower decay of time). The unsavoury scene

contrasts to what, we are told, used to take place there, and the narrator's repeated, specific mention of the temporal gap ('fifty years') between this ideal past and ruined present underlines the sense of distance. Instead of paramours, Henn now entertains 'old maids', and rather than a butler, he is waited on by a girl from a 'tinker tribe' (p 29), who dances 'superfluous attendance' on the party while with child illegitimately (p. 40). The revival of ceremony precipitated by the torching of the Blakes' house has apparently revealed that both the physical comforts central to the mythology of aristocratic life, and the assumed need to, in Henn's words, 'keep the name alive' (p. 43) through respectable marriage, are in a corrupted state.

However, there is more at work in this scene than a contribution to a narrative of Anglo-Irish demise. Although Henn's attempts to offer the Blakes sustenance do reveal present-day decay, they also utilise the unique capacity of ruin to facilitate engagement with the partially (and so powerfully) legible original design. As Woodward writes, ruins facilitate 'a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator', with flaws and absences in the present compelling an imaginative engagement with the past that does not take place entirely on the viewer's terms.[20] A pull towards imaginative engagement takes place as the narrator watches Henn with his guests, now comforter rather than lover. This is the same compulsion to find historical meaning in decay which Lois, confronted with the mill in *The Last September*, conceives of 'some response of the spirit' which transfigures the space and the connotations it incites her to imagine, against

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[20] Woodward, p. 139.

the 'banal' designation imposed by her own cultural perspective. [21] In 'Midsummer Night Madness', it appears to the same involuntarily 'response' challenges Republican valuations regarding how a site's memory should proceed. Ascendancy hospitality, suggested but not fully illustrated earlier in the ruined drawing room, is now realised in the flashback to Henn's earlier days, with his 'unequal ware' becoming the means by which narrative purchase on the landlord's previous use of it can be made. The imagined scene which results carries little trace of political critique. Henn is shown to be a more dignified and graceful figure, his likenesses to the vulnerable farm animal of his name replaced by a 'swan's neck'. Narrative details such as the 'shining walnut' of the table and the attendant butler add to a sense of polished luxury in describing an attendant butler offering new courses and refilling glasses. This history, only accessed because of its decayed re-enactment in the present, suggests that the ruin now evident not only how distant is the past Henn once enjoyed; it also provides a way of reaching and engaging with it.

The aristocrat's active use of his decayed possessions causes the narrator to digress into a largely favourable image of the past. This exists in tension with the vaguer accusations and cultural mythologies which ostensibly drive the arsonists, 'their memories full of the days when their people died of starvation by the roadsides and the big houses looked on in portly indifference' (p. 37). No attempt is made to inflect Henn's imagined past with the legacy of colonial oppression the narrator references (briefly) in response to the arson. And while it is less surprising that a writer such as

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[21] Bowen, *The Last September*, p. 123.

Bowen would marginalise the systemic inequalities perpetuated by the Big House structure – as she does in the above defence of its ideals – the omission is more unexpected in a narrative told from an explicitly Republican perspective. The consequence is a further moment of ambivalence in John's ideological commitment. The presentation of Henn as he was fifty years prior includes a level of cynicism, with ironic suggestions that Ascendancy refinement was always at least partly artificial. The 'painted' and 'perfumed' character of Henn's women is noted, and the term 'lights-o'-love' – which can refer to a flirtatious lover but also carries connotations of prostitution – imply that Henn's sexual exploits have always been somewhat disreputable. Nonetheless, the narrator does not shrink from creating a positive atmosphere: Henn is 'perpetually on the smile', 'approving' what he sees and provides. Consequently, Ó Faoláin's narrative digressions into this past put uncomplicated, nationalist hatred for the Anglo-Irish at risk once again.

In an echo of Donoghue's criticism regarding Ó Faoláin's apparent tendencies towards the 'heroic' in this fiction, Conor Cruise O'Brien disparages the text by claiming it to be 'typical in its romantic nostalgia for the good old days of youth and anarchy' often associated with more cavalier visions of the War of Independence. Dismissing the argument that Ó Faoláin's early stories are 'disillusioned and cynical' or 'coldly objective', O'Brien argues instead that an 'impassivity of manner […] thinly covers an excitement that is almost exultation.'[22] However, although there is evidence of this romantic excitement in the nationalism which animates the protagonist of this story initially, and, more broadly, which underpins Ó Faoláin's choice

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[22] Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Maria Cross: Imaginative Patterns in a Group of Modern Catholic Writers* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1953), p. 96.

of setting, the story is pervaded by subtler instances of uncertainty. These frustrate romantic simplicities. After the Blakes' house is destroyed, a tension emerges between two imaginative conceptions of Irish history: a vengeful awareness of famine and neglectful rule, and a more ambiguous engagement with the Ascendancy's emotionally attractive refinements. This tension is not resolved, and the failure to present a settled historical position regarding the memorial function of ruin contributes to Ó Faoláin's production of radical decay through 'Midsummer Night Madness'.

4. 'Part of Ireland': The Ruin as Common Ground

As well as provoking discordant engagements with the past, resisting patriotic or romantic reductions, ruin emerges as a subject of active theoretical debate within the text. This is particularly noticeable during Henn's conversation with John. Debates over ruin adjust the conceptual framework of nationalist hostilities, at least for the latter. Despite his more vulnerable position, Henn appears capable of little ideological leniency. While the narrator's opening declaration of animosity incriminates Henn for bringing suffering to 'our poor people', thus drawing a clear divide between oppressors and those who suffer, when the two meet John looks for targets of blame beyond the Ascendancy. The landlord berates the Irish for failing to develop national industry (like the glass-making business his own family founded), but the narrator protests:

> 'Oh, that was all begun two centuries ago,' I cried
> back at him. 'It was the Union with England that
> ruined us and our industries. Can't you see that? It

> ruined you. It ruined your glass-business. Aren't you
> part of Ireland as much as us? (p. 23)

Rather than arguing that the Ascendancy is responsible for the ruin of Irish people – as suggested by opening accusation that they have 'battened […] on our poor people' (p. 12) – he claims that ruin is a state which has been imposed on *both* sides through historical decisions made elsewhere. John argues that Ireland has been 'ruined' by England, but that Henn is also a victim. The concept of ruin – now seen as a shared national condition – is in this instance a tool by which the Anglo-Irish can be remodelled as 'part of Ireland'. This allows Henn's decayed circumstances to be acknowledged, perhaps with empathy: a significant challenge to his previous partisan hatred, even if full pity has not yet been articulated explicitly.

Henn, however, rather than taking advantage of this conceptual shift in order to disperse nationalist divisions further (or even acquire more sympathetic treatment from his enemy), scoffs at the narrator's effort. He scorns the use of ruin to sustain a narrative of historical victimhood and passivity:

> Ach! It's always the same. This ruined us, and that
> ruined us, and the other ruined us. I tell you I'm
> ashamed to be called an Irishman. I'm a colonist – a
> planter – whatever you like, one of those that tried to
> come and do something with you people. Why didn't
> the people fight for their rights when they had a
> parliament? […] Where are our crafts? What can we
> show? What have we ever done? (p. 23)

Henn refutes the idea that ruin is a specific historical imposition – a theory

which sustains the idea of an idyllic, sentimental past existing before ruin was forced upon the Irish. According to Henn, the belief that 'this ruined us, and that ruined us, and the other ruined us' is an excuse rather than a reality, one which makes ready use of external factors to evade the Irish people's responsibility for their fate. Henn certainly characterises Ireland's condition in negative terms, but in such a way as to suggest that this failure is intrinsic to Irish life, not imposed by others: 'What have we ever done?' he asks. There was no ideal prelapsarian moment in Irish history, he argues, because the tenants on his land have always been in the same condition, regardless of Henn's own interventions: 'as dirty as ever, as poor as ever, as backward as ever, and I suppose they blame people like us for it all' (p. 22). In rejecting the suggestion that 'ruin' might provide a means of dismantling partisan division, Henn reconfirms his identity as a colonial other, defined by the arrival from outside 'to come and do something with you people'. His speech, and their disagreement over how ruin can be conceived, brings the narrator new understanding of the Ascendancy's perspective; but this may be little more than the apprehension of an equally narrow and recalcitrant antagonism: 'I saw for the first time how deep the hate on his side could be, as deep as the hate on ours, as deep and as terrible' (p. 22). The opening of empathy, signalled by the narrator's more inclusive definition of 'ruin', raises the possibility that ingrained historical perspectives can develop faultlines – hence opening another space in which ambivalence regarding ideology can be cultivated. But Ó Faoláin does not grant the term enough conceptual potency to truly overcome such enmity. Ruin is thus an ambivalent state within 'Midsummer Night Madness'. It is used to provoke a re-examination of

simplistic nationalist perspectives regarding the Anglo-Irish past; and yet also illustrates unbreakable social division – a division upon which the luxurious experiences of Henn's class were predicated, and the desire for revolution formed.

Chapter 2. William Trevor's Landscapes of Ruin

'Nothing went away': Enduring Memory in *Fools of Fortune*

1. 'Will we tackle a bit of history?': Ireland's Ruined Past

In *Fools of Fortune* (1983), William Trevor uses ruin to explore the perpetually anxious relationship between past and present in post-independence Ireland. This takes place in particular at the ruined Big House, Kilneagh, which plays host to dangerous and politically charged confrontations with Irish memory. *Fools of Fortune* begins in Co. Cork in 1918 and charts the experiences of Willie Quinton and his family, who belong to the Ascendancy but maintain diverse social ties, as well as ambivalent support for the IRA. During the War of Independence, their house is burnt down by Black and Tans in revenge for the murder of an informant on Quinton land. Only Willie and his mother survive, and the novel charts the ongoing consequences of their trauma. Willie appears to recover, falling in love with his English cousin Marianne and planning to rebuild Kilneagh, but his mother's suicide casts him back into the past. Instead of rebuilding his ruined home, he leaves Ireland to murder the Sergeant who led Kilneagh's destruction. After his disappearance, the narrative is resumed by Marianne, who discovers she is pregnant with Willie's child. She returns to Kilneagh and waits for him, raising their daughter Imelda among the house's continually troubling remains.

In the following discussion I will argue that characters' experience of ruin reveals how the memory of supposedly finished conflicts is still an active force within their lives. History is given an oppressive role which extends up to the time of the novel's writing, 1983. Rather than reading this

as a 'Big House novel' about the War of Independence itself, I suggest that *Fools of Fortune* produces an image of post-independence Ireland as a nation state still dominated by ruins from the conflicts which brought it into being. Ireland's national progress takes place within the shadow of these conflicts. 'Will we tackle a bit of history?' asks Willie's tutor Father Kilgarriff innocently at the novel's opening,[1] showing excitement at the ability to delve into a mythical and evidently entertaining past: 'the long gallery of men and women who had enlivened the story of our rebellious island' (p. 7). Yet the history which Trevor's characters are forced to confront after Kilneagh is destroyed is not an entertainment, and has neither the abstraction nor the distance of myth. Using Sigmund Freud's discussion of 'mourning and melancholia', I explore how successive characters find their experience of Ireland dominated by negative, irresolvable attachments to the past.

Trevor also suggests that this anxious involvement with ruins has not always been easy for Ireland to grant open acknowledgement. Even as his characters find themselves drawn into the memory of a negative past which threatens to compromise their identities, they work to sustain more comfortable, nationalistic narratives of their nation's birth and development. Willie's actions in murdering the Black and Tan Sergeant Rudkin, and his daughter's descent into madness in the face of her family's tragedy, are both restyled by the surrounding community as journeys towards heroism and piety. I argue that the text presents the materials with which to question such coercive optimism. Trevor's narrative method in developing his melancholic

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[1] William Trevor, *Fools of Fortune* ([London]: The Bodley Head, 1983; repr. London: Penguin, 2006), p. 7. Further references to *Fools of Fortune* within this chapter will be to this edition, and will be given in the text.

ruins resists simplistic or ideological historiography. As such, *Fools of Fortune* can be counted as a contribution to the literature of radical decay: texts which seek to challenge established narratives of Irish history, in this case the War of Independence and the experience of nationhood which followed.

Part of this challenge takes place in a revision of the Big House tradition. The text's initial focus on an Anglo-Irish estate ruined during the War of Independence is in keeping with other Big House novels' use of this trope. But its development in *Fools of Fortune* soon diverges from convention. The cultural allegiances which motivate ruin in Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* and indeed in Trevor's later return to the War of Independence in *The Story of Lucy Gault* are very different. The Quintons are Protestant and Anglo-Irish, but they offer financial support to Michael Collins; and it is England's Black and Tans who destroy their home, not the rebellious arsonists featured in *The Last September* and refined in *The Story of Lucy Gault*. Furthermore, ruin itself is a more diverse presence within *Fools of Fortune* than in other Big House texts. Ruin in Trevor's novel is spatially disparate, moving away from Kilneagh to the Cork townhouse where Willie and his mother live afterwards, as well his time at school in Dublin, and Marianne's life in England and Switzerland. Although Kilneagh is important, it is not the only site in which remembrance takes place. Rather than positing a single, central ruin as a metonym for the historical period, Trevor deploys ruin as a motif and a recurring encounter over a long timeframe of political and national change.

Trevor shows that Irish history has far-reaching consequences by

structuring the novel around (extended) temporal progression in this way. The approach differs from the spatial dramatisation of history exemplified in J. G. Farrell's *Troubles*, which both plots the progress of the revolutionary period into the fabric of the Majestic Hotel, and introduces unexpected historical parallels by relating it to other spaces in the British Empire. This is Farrell's strategy for brushing against the grain of Irish historiography. Doris Bachmann-Medick notes that employing a 'spatial turn' is often accompanied by a similar 'transnationalization' which 'loosens the connections of national history'.[2] Rather than spatialising history in this way, *Fools of Fortune* interprets the past by plotting its remembrance as it develops across time. A 'sense of the past' (p. 4) results in connections between distant historical periods, and demonstrates that Ireland's forward-looking present is rarely free from the ruins of history.

Given this temporal perspective, I will employ 'ruin' as a term denoting more than the shell of a Big House. It can also account for the mental and physical suffering of characters such as Evie, Willie's mother, who is driven to alcoholism and suicide by the loss of her family. It also takes place at the level of narrative form. My examination of these ruins begins with Kilneagh, assessing the melancholic role of this space in the lives of survivors, particularly Imelda. It then moves on to a discussion of human ruin in the figure of Evie, identifying the way her personal decline and death are treated by the society which surrounds her in Cork, and how this offers insight into her ruin's subtle connection to the Irish nation. I contrast the subdued social response to Evie's death with the way Willie's decision to kill

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[2] Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: New Orientations in the Study of Culture*, trans. by Adam Blauhut (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), p. 234.

Rudkin is lauded by Irish society. The nationalistic histories Willie's memory is used to construct are undermined by Trevor at the level of narrative. Finally I will consider how the ongoing melancholia of the Anglo-Irish within the Free State and Republic is compared explicitly to practices of memory in England. *Fools of Fortune* portrays the Dorset country house Woodcombe Park as a pleasure-driven heritage site which restricts visitors' experience of history. This suggests that any comfortably experienced past is based upon elision – which leads to the conclusion that melancholic ruin may be essential to sustaining a critically active relationship with history.

2. 'The shadows of destruction': A Melancholic Relationship with Ruin

In order to understand the politically charged implications of ruin in the text it is useful to approach memory from a psychoanalytic perspective. This offers a conceptual basis for analysing characters' interactions with the ruins they encounter. Sigmund Freud's theory of 'mourning and melancholia' offers a productive framework here. Freud establishes two opposing states that may be entered into in response to the loss of a loved object. 'Mourning' is a natural, healthy response to grief that ends in self-renovation. The bereaved lets go of the dead by rationally accepting they are gone, so that 'the ego is left free and uninhibited once again after the mourning work is completed'.[3] By contrast, 'melancholia' involves the extension of grief long beyond loss. Attachment to the lost object is not withdrawn and directed elsewhere as it is upon completion of natural mourning:

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[3] Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', in *On Murder, Mourning and Melancholia*, trans. by Shaun Whiteside (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 201–18 (p. 205).

> The free libido was not, however, displaced on to another object, but instead drawn back into the ego. But it did not find any application there, serving instead to produce an identification of the ego with the abandoned object. In this way the shadow of the object fell upon the ego […] Thus the loss of object had been transformed into a loss of ego, and the conflict between the ego and the beloved person into a dichotomy between ego-criticism and the ego as modified by identification.[4]

This response to loss sees the self (ego) pulled into internal conflict. The lost object cannot be let go when it has been 'drawn back' into the mourner's own self. Thus this reaction to the object's loss results in the 'loss of the ego' also. The melancholic self is consumed – and, in my own development, ruined – by 'the shadow of the object'. This psychological response is in evidence in the experiences of memory developed in *Fools of Fortune*. The principal act of ruin at Kilneagh and the loss it causes (of the family's home as well as the lives of Willie's sisters and father) provokes a series of melancholic reactions. This melancholia compromises the emotions and identities of survivors so that they are unable to move on from tragedy, instead living in this 'shadow of the object' and repeating the act of ruin upon themselves or others. In Trevor's novel the Irish nation which emerges out of the violent end to British rule is consumed by melancholic attachments to past ruins which inhibit peaceful existence in the present.

Trevor resists any temptation to believe that ruin is a redemptive or regenerative force in *Fools of Fortune*. Characters are not given the chance

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[4] Ibid., p. 209.

to develop any new existence away from their loss. Close to the novel's conclusion, the family's maid Josephine is shown still meditating on what took place at Kilneagh. Her nurse describes how 'she asks the same thing all the time: that the survivors may be comforted in their mourning. She requests God's word in Ireland' (p. 197). Many decades after the deaths which took place at the hands of the Black and Tans (among other forces), it is still appropriate to describe people as 'survivors'. This remains their identity. To be still 'in mourning' after so long is profoundly melancholic, a state without release that can be seen in the multiple instances of ruin which pervade the text. In his study of elegies, Jahan Ramazani suggests that such grief is particularly appropriate for modern conflicts, with the increasing mechanisation of twentieth century warfare and the decline in public funerary practices leaving a legacy of bereaved without the cultural tools to conduct the 'healthy' mourning of the past. He thus claims that 'the modern elegist tends not to achieve but to resist consolation, not to override but to sustain anger, not to heal but to reopen the wounds of loss'.[5] Trevor takes on this task of reopening 'the wounds of loss', denying the belief that the emotional scars left by ruins will heal over time. Instead, they remain active sources of memory, capable of carrying suffering between generations.

The effect of the ruins of Kilneagh upon Imelda demonstrates their status as dangerous open wounds. Living with her mother 'beside the ruins' of Kilneagh (p. 163), Imelda develops an obsession with her father's life which eventually leads into madness. Her imagination regarding the house's destruction blurs into waking reality. This delusional state appears to arise

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[5] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. x.

out of the past's overwhelming pressure on her own identity. It is a pressure exerted in multiple ways, for there are different sources for her knowledge of her family history. Marianne and the surrounding community tell her bloody stories about past events, and she is also adept at eavesdropping and discovering private written sources, including letters and her mother's diary. Richard Rankin Russell, who also identifies Imelda as succumbing to the 'oppressive weight' of the past,[6] pursues a somewhat judgemental analysis of her investigative behaviour, arguing that 'Imelda has participated in her own decline and tragic muteness by her over-absorption in the past and by her snooping around the house'.[7] He concludes that

> Imelda's madness results from her vicarious and purposeful immersion in the historical cycles of violence across generations in Ireland. [...] She dwells in a type of purgatory that will continue the rest of her life, a suffering that she has partially caused and that has been unredeemed by no attempts at forgiveness within her family.[8]

What I have read as melancholia Rankin styles as 'purgatory'. His use of religious rhetoric indicates that the family needs redemption from these 'historical cycles of violence' but, because they make 'no attempts' towards forgiveness and reconciliation, Imelda is condemned to her purgatory without hope of release. Yet the characterisation of Imelda as 'purposeful' in her own destructive immersion in the past, while useful in attributing a level

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[6] Richard Rankin Russell, 'The Tragedy of Imelda's Terminal Silence in William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune*', *Papers on Language and Literature*, 42.1 (2006), 73–94 (p. 83).

[7] Ibid., p. 78.

[8] Ibid., p. 92.

of agency to Imelda's engagement with history, underestimates the manipulative power within the sources of memory around which Imelda, not least in Kilneagh's ruin.

For Imelda's absorption of the past takes place not only through the scraps of stories she is told or discovers for herself; it also happens through her encounter with the ruin of Kilneagh house, and its properties as a historical signifier. Physical and emotional proximity to this space facilitates the melancholic 'identification of the ego with the abandoned object' that her mind carries out there. Her moment of particularly acute emotional crisis takes place while she is standing in the burned-out house:

> Water dripped beside her, and Imelda watched it falling on to stones and plaster. She searched her mind for the poetry but she could not remember the order of the words. She closed her eyes and in the room above the vegetable shop blood spurted in a torrent, splashing on to the wallpaper that was torn and hung loosely down. […] Imelda pressed her face into the nettles and did not feel their stinging. She pressed her fists into her ears. She closed her eyes as tightly as she could.
> But nothing went away.
> The screaming of the children began, and the torment of the flames on their flesh. The dogs were laid out dead in the yard, and the body of the man in the teddy-bear dressing-gown lay smouldering on the stairs. The blood kept running on her hands, and was tacky in her hair.
> (pp. 189–90)

This moment demonstrates how the past, which proved a melancholic force for Evie and, eventually, Willie too, is now felt as a Freudian 'shadow' over her present identity. Even though she is removed from the trauma by a

generation and has no direct memory of it, she is still unable to live emotionally detached from the past. This passage begins with real sensation, but Imelda's numbness to the stinging nettles brings the scene she imagines into focus without clear narrative distinction. The burning house is not presented as something she thinks of but as something she feels intimately, with blood 'running on her hands'. The spatial continuity and vivid physical experience in Imelda's relationship with the ruined setting demonstrate her inability to separate her own self from the original trauma which took place there.

The narrative's description of her actions in the ruins also threatens the distinction between past and present. The temporal distance between Kilneagh's destruction and Imelda's life is erased when Imelda engages within this space. While the rest of the family do not enter the ruins, instead habitually making 'a semicircle around them' to arrive at the surviving wings (p. 165), Imelda is far more intimate, entering and allowing the space to feed her imagination. In the above passage it is emphasised that Imelda's hallucinations emerge while she is engaging with the ruins, and her experience of this real space subtly directs her visions of the family's violent past. The water she watches 'falling on to stones and plaster' transitions into an echoing image of Rudkin's blood which 'spurted in a torrent'. Her imagination of this event takes place not in Liverpool but back within the ruins of Kilneagh as she watches it 'splashing on to the wallpaper that was torn and hung loosely down.' This intense interplay between imagination and space demonstrates that her hallucination in part responds to the tangible ruin. It shows that her fantasies have an anchor.

Memory is received through the environment itself at Kilneagh, and although Imelda's sense of the past is influenced by the verbal and written sources she also receives, the ruin acts as a touchstone between Imelda's violent imagination and her present. The ruin's continued existence carries forward violence because its present form offers evidence of destructive change that has been neither repaired nor removed. Kilneagh sustains this sense of unmediated access to past violence. It supports the idea that physical monuments are capable of preserving an encoded meaning which can be received in spite of temporal or cultural divides. Jaś Elsner has described this as the possibility that memory 'inheres in the materiality of a monument' as well as 'belonging to the realm of mentality'.[9] He speculates that monuments may have qualities 'specific to their formal nature as material objects (made, altered, partially or wholly destroyed over time)' which could allow them 'to function in a manner special to their material nature as spurs to memory in given cultural contexts'.[10] Elsner is careful to avoid claims of essentialism and does not argue that monuments can preserve their message entirely unchanged. Nevertheless, the acknowledgement that memory has a preserved physical existence, as well as being a purely mental phenomenon, assists in exploring the melancholic power Kilneagh's ruins hold for the family who live there. The material remains of the house carry an inescapable reminder of the wider story of violence which left their mark in this space. Marianne also styles the oppression of her family's past violence as a physical encounter. She claims that 'destruction casts shadows which are

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[9] Jaś Elsner, 'Iconoclasm and the Preservation of Memory' in *Monuments and Memory, Made and Unmade*, ed. by Robert S. Neilson and Margaret Olin (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), pp. 209–32 (p. 209).

[10] Ibid., p. 210.

always there: surely you see that, Father? We will never escape the shadows of destruction that pervade Kilneagh' (p. 179). This phrase is a suggestive echo of Freud's description of melancholia as 'the shadow of the object' falling upon the surviving ego. At Kilneagh the metaphorical shadow of destructive history is physically preserved in the ruined building itself.

Trevor's demonstration of the emotionally dangerous memory that can be received at Kilneagh is accompanied by a suggestion that there may be more spaces across Ireland preserving the same uncomfortable past. Other sites of abandonment and decay, from an era now supposedly obsolete, can be glimpsed. In one of Marianne's explanations of Irish history, she tells her daughter that these ruins are a sign of Ireland's progress:

> It was good to see the ivy growing over imperial Ireland, her mother used to say, and on their drives would point at ivied ruins like Kilneagh's and sometimes at houses that were still intact but had become training schools for priests or insane asylums. The pacific Daniel O'Connell was not her mother's hero: she spoke instead of Ireland's fighting men, of the Earls of Tyrone and Tyrconnell who centuries ago had fled in exile, as the survivors of Ireland's lost battles had always fled. (p. 170)

Marianne's historical narrative values militaristic nationalism and places the end of British control over Irish space as part of this successful fight. Following this, the sites of 'imperial Ireland' are styled as obsolete spaces. Their ruin by neglect ('ivy growing') or reuse as 'schools for priests or insane asylums' in service of the new state is a nationalistic success because it signifies the power symbolised by these buildings has now been transferred

elsewhere. Marianne's assertion that this has taken place within 'ivied ruins' is not necessarily persuasive. Her description includes Kilneagh, a space which the surrounding narrative establishes as the site of an active and fundamentally ambivalent relationship between past and present. The status of ruin and decay does not necessarily mean that 'imperial Ireland' is forgotten and so finished from a cultural perspective. Kilneagh itself, and the effect it has on Imelda as well as her parents' generation, indicates that these 'ivied ruins' have not faded into the obsolete but rather still stand as open wound, capable of communicating a harmful past if approached.

3. Human Ruin after Kilneagh's Destruction

As well as illustrating the potential memorial significance of Kilneagh itself, the concept of ruin can be used to evaluate the personal experiences that followed the Black and Tans' actions. Physical and mental deterioration, as well as death, may be understood in terms of human ruin, and in *Fools of Fortune* the development of this deterioration can be read as a politicised commentary on the construction of Irish history. Willie's family, regardless of their atypical status as an Anglo-Irish family lending support to the IRA, emerges from the War of Independence irreversibly damaged. The impact of this conflict on their future lives is evident in their physical as well as emotional suffering. When characters' relationship with a traumatic past is melancholic, bodily and psychological 'ruin' may be the result. This can be seen most clearly in the figure of Evie, Willie's mother. After the loss of her husband and daughters, Evie begins drinking whiskey and ruminates continually on what happened at Kilneagh. This mental decline is ongoing

and permanent; at her funeral her sister notes that 'she never did recover' and it is agreed that 'there was often nothing that could be done, no consolation for so grievous a loss' (p. 118). Her gradual regression into alcoholism and eventual suicide are not just representative of the Ascendancy's fall in Ireland. They also demonstrate that violent history is internalised and makes its survivors into ruinous beings.

Evie's experience of suffering without possible consolation is a political critique of post-independence Ireland – although this suffering's wider connection with a national historical narrative in which she no longer participates is subtle. The association between her decline and the wider Irish nation can be seen in her continued reference to Rudkin, and the later revelation of Willie's act of revenge; but it is left for readers to assess. Her ongoing ruin at a personal level is also linked to the Irish nation in understated details, such as the design on the bottles which catalogue her alcoholism:

> furniture loomed awkwardly now, and on the landing outside my mother's room the tall oak cupboard that had held my sisters' dolls in the nursery took up almost all the space there was. I opened it once and saw what appeared to be a hundred maps of Ireland: the trade-mark of Paddy Whiskey on a mass of labels, the bottles arrayed like an army on the shelves (pp. 51–52).

The changes brought by the destruction of Kilneagh, both in Willie's mother's health and in their diminished, awkward living arrangements, are registered here. That they are accompanied by a trade-marked image of the Irish nation appears at first to be an innocent coincidence, yet is actually a sly

political signifier. The version of the Irish map on Paddy Whiskey is divided into the four historic provinces, representing 'the island of Ireland' rather than the partitioned state which was actually won from the revolutionary period of which Willie's mother is a casualty. The connection of bottles with the nation state and its ruinous conflict is made by the innocuous simile which portrays the bottles 'like an army'. Small details maintain the knowledge that, although Evie does not produce a sustained articulation of her suffering, it is not taking place in isolation from the narrative of post-independence Ireland.

It is hard to pin down this implied connection to a specific historical occurrence taking place in the nation as a whole. As readers we are forced to work with a general sense of developing history, which is glimpsed from Willie's only half-interested perspective. While the discovery of the whiskey bottle army takes place shortly after a passage of narrative describing how 'peace came hesitantly to Ireland' (p. 47) and referencing 'the Amnesty' (p. 48), readers must be alert and familiar with the history of the Irish Civil War to know this likely references the amnesty offered by the Free State on 8th November 1924,[11] nearly eighteen months after the end of the Civil War. Willie does not engage in detail with the history taking place around him and only specifies that these events took place 'during that time' (p. 47). Instead history, and the multiple kinds of ruin it has brought to characters' lives, exists as half-buried suggestions within the narrative of personal developments. The text thus formulates a suggestive, rather than openly polemical, connection between Evie's ongoing melancholia and

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[11] David Fitzpatrick, *The Two Irelands: 1912–1939* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 272.

Ireland's historical development. Although it is never articulated openly in the text, what emerges from this is an awareness that even while Ireland may be progressing forward and granting amnesty to its combatants, suffering from an earlier conflict has not ended. The ruin Evie enacts upon herself is not a public statement, but it does present a troubling reminder of the conflict that brought Ireland into being, which has left wounds that characters are not able to forget.

Evie's ruin is not only a process of physical decline; it is also felt as a loss of cultural status, to which her alcoholism contributes. Not only are the two remaining Quintons now removed from their Ascendancy lifestyle into an ordinary Cork town house with 'dank' and 'narrow' rooms (p. 51), but Evie's instability and drinking in public make her addiction visible. Willie notes how 'her undiminished beauty caused people to glance at her a second time' (p. 58), but later, when they are out in public together, she is unable to maintain a polished facade: 'small beads of perspiration had broken out on her forehead; she swayed' (p. 62). Her lack of physical control is evident, and Willie is embarrassed, refusing to speak to his mother afterwards. The social ruin demonstrated by her alcoholism is particularly clear when placed in the context of contemporary Anglo-Irish conceptions of respectability. Drunkenness was typically cast as a weakness of Irish Catholicism, and whiskey in particular was assumed to be a working-class vice.[12] Evie's turn to Paddy Whiskey to 'blunt the hurt' (p. 109) that she continues to feel in response to loss sees her abandoning the moralistic divisions of behaviour

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[12] George Bretherton, 'Against the Flowing Tide: Whiskey and Temperance in the Making of Modern Ireland', in *Drinking: Behaviour and Belief in Modern History*, ed. by Susana Barrows and Robin Room (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 147–64 (pp. 147–48).

established to maintain the Ascendancy's social identity. Unable to hide her dependency from the world, she experiences social as well as physical ruin.

Despite this decline, Trevor portrays the Cork society in which Willie and Evie find themselves a part of during these years as respectful of Evie's state. After she dies, her sister says that 'I blame myself for not being firm about the drinking' (p. 115) but other characters are more accepting. Willie notes while on a trip back from school that the next door neighbour 'knew about my mother. By now everyone did' (p. 95). Although her alcoholism is evidently an open secret their neighbour is not judgemental, and helps to cut their dilapidated lawn himself so that Evie can sit outside. Willie also notes that members from the surrounding community ask after his mother and may even pray for her, 'a plea made for some quality to return to her which would rescue from their continuing decay her beauty and elegance' (p. 97). While drink in the novel becomes an instrument of self-harm contributing to personal collapse, this is not treated by Irish society as a source of shame, but seems instead to elicit understanding. Her increasing alcoholism is a physical expression of Evie's melancholic grief, but it draws minimal stigma. This form of publicly visible ruin is an accepted part of post-independence Ireland.

However, this sympathetic response to what the revolutionary period did to Willie's mother does not extend to her death. Evie's suicide is not part of the 'continuing decay' that grief has caused her over a long period: it is a deliberate intervention. As a suicide, it is also a socially unacceptable event with both a legal and religious prohibition. Consequently, Willie's surrounding society is far less willing to even acknowledge what his mother

has done. Willie expresses the humiliation this act of self-ruin has caused him, telling Marianne that 'it's not permitted for a suicide to receive a normal burial. I had to beg for that' (p. 116). His comment follows Marianne's description of how 'two women with filthy children begged and clung on to me, saying they'd offer up Hail Marys for me' (pp. 115–6). Willie's forced request for his mother's 'normal' treatment after death is likened by the two uses of the word 'beg' which place him in the same social position as the 'women with filthy children': inferior and relying upon charity. Evie's suicide brings about a reduction to a new, less positive relationship with surrounding Irish society.

Evie's action transgresses Irish social norms regarding death, and this restricts the cultural acknowledgement that her suicide and its full, historical tragedy receive during burial rituals. This response makes her into a national outsider. Particular rituals in Irish society are associated with an accepting, even celebratory attitude to death, in which mourning takes place and is acknowledged publicly, and Wakes 'appear to be more like a party than a melancholy event'.[13] Marianne notes that she receives respect in Ireland by wearing black in 'consideration for our mourning' and her mother explains that 'the Irish are like that' (p. 114). Yet once they reach the actual funeral, it is evident that melancholy (and melancholia) are predominant. The grudgingly permitted funeral is described in the bleakest terms, in a church with 'rust-marked notices' and 'where pale distemper flaked from the walls' and a meal afterwards in the wings of Kilneagh which still stand around the

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[13] Stella Mary O'Gorman, 'Death and Dying in Contemporary Society: An Evaluation of Current Attitudes and the Rituals Associated with Death and Dying and Their Relevance to Recent Understandings of Health and Healing', *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 27.6 (1998), 1127–35 <https://doi.org/10.1046/j.1365-2648.1998.00659.x> (p. 1131).

ruins (p. 117). There is no socially hospitable levity here, and the attendance largely of surviving family members suggests that concern for Evie's memory has become an Anglo-Irish affair.

Furthermore, the return to Kilneagh, Willie's brooding walk through the territories of his childhood, and Marianne's conscious note to herself that 'I shall forever remember this day' give the ceremony a melancholic tenor. It is evident that this is not a work of healthy mourning which Freud claims leaves the ego 'free and uninhibited'.[14] Shortly after the funeral Willie leaves to murder Rudkin. Reading this murder as an act of revenge demands seeing the multiple, staggered deaths within *Fools of Fortune* as pieces of the same ruin, albeit separated by wide gulfs of time. Willie's mother suffered until she died with a melancholic attachment to what she had lost. Her death is a casualty of the War of Independence and its memorial legacy – a war in which they suffered at the hands of the English and supported the IRA just as did many Irishmen and women. But Evie's death, a taboo suicide and dispiriting succumbing to ruin through grief, is not acknowledged by the nation created in the War of Independence. Her late life and death testify strongly to an involuntary, irrecoverable trauma that left a ruined life in its wake. It is commemorated only by the dwindling class of people the war left behind.

4. Ruining Narratives of Nation

Evie therefore dies as a largely unrecognised casualty of Irish history. Willie, however, is given a very different place within popular Irish narratives of the

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[14] Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia', p. 204.

past when he kills Rudkin and goes into exile. When Evie commits suicide, he replaces his mother in an equally melancholic relationship with the past, but his decision to perform an act of revenge, rather than to decline quietly and without complaint, earns him a fundamentally different historical status. His action causes suffering for Marianne and particularly Imelda, and stops him returning to Ireland to have a family himself. Father Kilgariff states that 'there's not much left in anyone's life after murder has been committed, God insists upon that' (p. 179). But despite this, Willie's actions are celebrated as heroic narrative by the entire Irish community around Kilneagh. Imelda learns about her father through his role in a nationalist narrative:

> She'd become curious about her father because everyone made such a fuss, Sister Rowan saying Our Lady would intercede and Teresa Shea being jealous. [...] He was a hero because his courage and his honour insisted that he should do what he had done: her mother had explained all of that. No one, not even Teresa Shea, said it was wrong to get revenge on the Black and Tan who had burnt down Kilneagh. It was not even the beginning of a crime, her mother explained, not when you thought of the massacres and the martyrs, and the cold-blooded murder of the Quintons in the middle of the night. (p. 171–72)

Willie's murder, and the self-destruction which committing it entails, have been reframed as an act of patriotic bravery, worthy of remembrance. His Aunt describes how 'when he was your age' he was 'the most ordinary little boy', which shows how this version of events is shaped into a progression, charting a development into something remarkable. This makes the house's destruction into the opportunity for heroism and admirable self-

development, rather than the precursor of irredeemable ruin.

The structure of equivocal political commitments developed in Trevor's narrative is distorted here, portraying motivations simplistically. Neither the Black and Tans nor Rudkin's death are morally ambiguous, and there is no mention of his mother's death, which is what spurred him to act. Perpetuating this narrative is also a means for Marianne, previously afraid that Willie despised her 'for being English' (p. 117), to become part of Irish society through its commemoration. 'I am part of all this now. I cannot help my fervour' she tells Imelda (p. 175). The tendency to re-frame events into simplified stories in evidence here is characteristic of a nationalist historiography. As Richard English comments:

> our stories about supposed national pasts – if they are to be widely accessible to the community and easily transmitted across time – need to be relatively simple […] We have seen all this clearly woven into our tale of nationalist Ireland.[15]

This simplification leads, he acknowledges, to 'the much-lamented historical distortion and anachronism associated with so much nationalist history'.[16] In this case the anachronism and distorted focus are shown to be a force of social unification: by dissolving ethnic and religious ambivalence in Willie's identity, the narrative also dissolves certain present-day cultural divisions for Marianne and Imelda. Even the schoolgirl Teresa, who usually bullies Imelda for being a Protestant, is unable to exclude her when this story is told. Willie

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[15] Richard English, *Irish Freedom: The History of Nationalism in Ireland* (London: Pan Books, 2007), p. 446.

[16] Ibid.

becomes a hero through a unanimous project of collective memory which edits and simplifies the previous narrative presented by Trevor.

Trevor does not conduct an outspoken 'lamentation' about this nationalistic effort of memory. But the surrounding context provides the material to critique it. It is significant that this biased version of history is reported from Imelda's point of view. Her narrative is characterised by a child-like reiteration of ideas and stories which others have told her, so that reading her section involves sensitivity to the other authorities constantly informing her narrative. Focusing on the sources behind the story Imelda receives highlights repeated use of the phrase 'her mother explained'. This phrase reflects the simplified communication typical of speaking to a child, but it also suggests the story's falsehood, indicating that an insistent, even forced communication is actually required to make this narrative convincing. Furthermore, Imelda's credulous perspective in receiving her mother's explanations allows readers to distance themselves from a similarly accepting position. Willie is shown to play a romanticised, artificial role in the memories of those he has left behind in Ireland – and while Trevor does not label it as this explicitly, Willie's veneration is styled to allow readers to recognise that an overly celebratory retelling of the past demands drastic simplifications.

It is important too that the description of the murder Imelda receives from this nationalist retelling presents Willie's actions more explicitly than is ever permitted within the rest of Trevor's narrative. Imelda notes that 'no one, not even Teresa Shea, said it was wrong to get revenge on the Black and Tan who had burnt down Kilneagh' (p. 171). While the

righteousness here is evidently at odds with the moral nuance of the rest of the text, it is also noticeable that this representation is a succinct identification of central narrative events which is not found elsewhere. The brief nationalistic rendition of Willie's life articulates its key moments with a directness otherwise entirely eschewed by Trevor. The knowledge that Willie is able to 'get revenge' on Rudkin by travelling to Liverpool and stabbing him is not clearly evident. The truth is revealed gradually, and requires an active rearrangement of the unsynthesised materials which are presented by the text in lieu of tidily ordered facts. Characters in this novel are 'fools of fortune', subject to powerful historical forces that extend beyond their experience. But their encounter with history is not structured into the sequential progression that might create easily consumed narrative of authorised heritage. Instead, characters' experiences are often detached from the supposedly significant history taking place, registering its passing with distracted half-awareness, as when Willie hears an 'Amnesty' mentioned while living in Cork, but does not appear to expand this fragmentary connection to the Civil War into a wider historical framework, or assist the reader in doing so. Even the events of central significance for Trevor's narrative itself are not declared as such. Rather than being presented as moments with crucial significance to the novel, Irish history is understated or refracted.

Marianne's actual discovery of her lover's journey to commit murder is a useful example of the responsibility which this narrative technique provides readers, and how it contrasts to the direct statement which can easily be conscripted into the service of ideological agendas.

Marianne is aware that Willie's absence has a meaning which the Irish community around her is keeping back. When 'the truth crept into my mind' (p. 159) about Willie's murderous actions, readers may make the same discovery. But even Marianne's realisation of 'the truth' is not stated directly. We are guided by her reaction to what she has realised – she explains how 'in a matter of seconds, you had acquired a different identity', and how the revelation of mutual love is also 'part of the truth that made everything different' (p. 159). Her narrative plays with 'the truth' but prevents giving us sufficient information to discover what it is. Marianne describes Willie's actions, but in terms which provide no attempt to convey the narrative event that took place: he has 'sought, as best you could, to destroy our love', and she intends to 'wait […] while you wandered the face of the earth' (p. 156). Eventually Marianne voices her knowledge of the murder to the solicitor she is with, still postponing the reader's understanding but naming it only as it as 'what occurred':

> 'I did not read of what occurred,' I said to Mr Lanigan, surprising him with an interruption unrelated to what he was saying. 'Because of course I was in Switzerland.'
> He nodded slowly, his flow of words abruptly halted, not taken up again. In the rectory that occurrence would have been read about in the newspaper, my father shaking his head over the mystery of it, my mother failing to connect one name with another. 'Rudkin,' you had said, and had described the man, a hand cupped round the cigarette he lit, his genial salute as he stood at the street corner. (p. 160)

'What occurred', 'that occurrence': the narrative is hiding within Marianne's

stream of consciousness to prohibit the reader's access to any grasp on the past more authoritative than euphemism. Only when Rudkin is named is enough information provided to assemble what has taken place – and even then, active work must be done to move from the memory which still evokes him as a 'genial' figure to the inference that Rudkin – the Rudkin who burned Kilneagh, shot its inhabitants, and placed a continual melancholic demand on Evie's future – is the reason Willie cannot return to Ireland. Replacing an ostensibly simple statement of 'the truth' with this game of frustration and suspense is more than a device to maintain the reader's interest. It furthers Trevor's agenda of intervention in and disruption of the simplistic narratives of ruin adopted by Irish society and illustrated through Imelda's experience.

Fools of Fortune stages a resistance to the perpetuation of ideologies through the formation of organised, obliging historical narratives. It does so by rescinding the authority of the narrator. Trevor is a writer who withdraws from his own design, performing minimal interpretative guidance with the result that the reader is allowed to take an active role in disentangling what actually happens in the story from its only partially formed presentation. Francine Prose identifies the courtesy with which this gesture of withdrawal takes place in the text:

> Throughout, we are trusted to draw our own parallels and make our own connections. The most tactful of writers, Trevor steps back [...] another writer might have felt compelled to consider the moral implications of murder and revenge, but again Trevor trusts his reader to understand, without explication and without judgment, how and why the novel's troubling events

take place.[17]

It is crucial here that *both* the 'how and why' of events are left open to discernment. It is certainly true that Trevor does not conduct a moral scrutiny of Willie's motivation himself, thus presenting this act of judgement the reader. But Trevor's withdrawal is not only from analysis; it is also from a more fundamental narration of events – the fundamental structure of actions which sustains the character and plot development in *Fools of Fortune*. This not only invites the reader to assume some of this (re)structuring work themselves; it also provokes awareness of the problems involved in doing so. Marianne's meditation above upon the process of history, which staves off our ability to formulate what happened, also queries the process of narrative construction. Readers are able to make the connection between the dispersed details Trevor has provided. Encountering history in a different form, however, might leave us blind. Marianne's parents will have read of the murder in a newspaper but do not 'connect one name with another' and are left with 'the mystery of it' only. Although it is possible to reach an understanding of Willie's actions from the novel, readers can do so because the materials for this task of realisation have been selected and foregrounded by a narrator to elicit a particular conclusion ('the truth'). Constructing the coherent narrative out of the scattered materials offered by the novel cannot be undertaken without appreciating the potentially manipulative nature of the task.

The novel suggests another means of engaging with history

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[17] Francine Prose, 'Introduction', in William Trevor, *Fools of Fortune* ([London]: The Bodley Head, 1983; repr. London: Penguin, 2006), pp. vii–xvi (p. xv).

against the prevailing grain of heritage, and the narration of history through significant events which can be understood objectively. Attending to ruins as a physical space, confronted sensorially, privileges a different way of documenting history. This is visible in Willie's experience of the night the Black and Tans reduced Kilneagh to a ruin, and killed most of its household. The passage documenting this night does not identify it as an account of the time Kilneagh was ruined. Indeed, there is little introduction at all, merely Willie's awareness of a spatial location:

> I awoke with a tickling in my nostrils. I lay there, knowing that something was different, not sure what it was. […] I was in Tim Paddy's arms, and then there was the dampness of the grass before the pain began, all over my legs and back. […] There were stars in the sky. An orange glow crept over the edges of my vision. The noise there'd been had changed, becoming a kind of crackling, with crashes that sounded like thunder. I couldn't move. (pp. 41-42)

The ruination taking place emerges only as Willie's disordered experience, which leads to a narrative tone devoid of an attempt to engineer pathos. The 'tickling in my nostrils' Willie awakes to suggests that the fire is gentle and harmless. He is also aware of noises, but does not perceive them as the sounds of his house burning. Instead their description as 'a kind of crackling, with crashes that sounded like thunder' shows an innocent struggle to express the auditory experience in language (a 'kind of' crackling) and a resort to a simile which draws upon the natural world to convey their crashes. Willie's language in describing this experience demonstrates his lack of awareness that the destruction going on around him is a deliberate

act. It is not stated that people are being murdered; instead, Willie describes how he hears 'one gunshot and then another' (p. 42). History is experienced only as the reception of physical sensations, described without emphasis, and Willie cannot develop and structure these experiences into a more objective understanding of what is taking place. In *Fools of Fortune*, the only account of the ruin's progress is anchored to its physical characteristics, and this denial of the event in favour of rudimentary, unprocessed sensations provides the means to resist ideological reframing of the site's story.

5. The Melancholic Ruin and the Tourist Site

Trevor sustains a careful project of resistance in response to the coercive reframing of Irish history, deploying ruin as a site of cultural memory in order to draw attention to narratives of trauma otherwise elided or reconstituted into simpler versions of the past. The destruction of Kilneagh, and its subsequent afterlife as an unrepaired shell, are portrayed as politically tense sources of melancholia, which are difficult to assemble into a more idealised narrative of Ireland's history. This portrait of a mournful, unresolved ruin is intensified by the novel's opening, which places Kilneagh alongside a portrait of an English Big House. This latter building has a remarkably different role within its country's national heritage.

English practice in representing the 'raw materials' of history as public heritage, and the consequences for the story of England and Ireland's shared past, is shown to be problematic within *Fools of Fortune*. The central setting of Kilneagh is introduced by way of comparison with another site, the English 'great house' of Woodcombe Park in Dorset. The narrator describes

how the two spaces have a shared history: women from several generations of the Woodcombe family have each met a member of Ireland's Quinton family and become the next 'English girl to come and live at Kilneagh' (pp. 3–4). Even as the narrative describes this connection, a fundamental division emerges in the way memory is treated at each site. The past is remembered and accessible at both Kilneagh and Woodcombe. At Kilneagh memory has been allowed to decay intro traces, 'the voices of the cousins' (Willie and Marianne) heard as 'echoes' in a largely deserted space. Woodcombe Park, meanwhile, has been transformed into 'heritage': a busy attraction which has reframed its history into a marketable experience.

The consequences of these two treatments of memory result in a profoundly different atmosphere in each space. 'It is 1983', begins the narrator. 'In Dorset the great house at Woodcombe Park bustles with life. In Ireland the more modest Kilneagh is as quiet as a grave' (p. 3). Kilneagh's status as a melancholic testament to tragedy is suggested rather than disclosed in the conspicuous silence, which is linked to death by metaphor. Yet the 'life' which characterises the supposedly thriving Woodcombe Park is not to be taken at face value as a positive trait. The subsequent description of this 'life' queries how well it communicates the past. The narrator recounts how Woodcombe operates as an efficient heritage site and the reasons it does so:

> To inspect the splendours of Woodcombe Park and to stroll about its gardens, visitors pay fifty pence at the turnstiles, children twenty-five. The descendants of the family who built the house at the end of the sixteenth century still occupy it and are determined to sustain it.

> They do not care for the visitors, the car parks they have
> had to make, the litter left behind. But naturally they do
> not say so. (p. 3)

In modern England the upper class must compromise the integrity of their homes in order maintain their 'splendours', making continued residence financially viable. Access to the space of Woodcombe can be purchased by visitors, and this transactional relationship has affected the site itself. Turnstiles are required to ensure that entry takes place only after payment, and both litter and car access bring further, unwelcome change. The description of the family descendants' attitude to this stresses their sense of obligation: 'they have had to make' these arrangements. That the Park 'bustles with life' and that litter is a regular feature suggests that tourists flock to this site – and that they are careless about their interactions with it, not troubling about the physical effect twentieth-century consumption can have on sites of cultural memory and their mediation of the past. The residents are 'determined to sustain' the house, but the solution they have adopted also requires its transformation and damage. Rather than engaging with memory at the site themselves, the family are obliged to focus on facilitating others' use of the site.

Popular engagement at Woodcombe is focused around pleasure, and in this the site's status as a heritage project might be criticised for promoting a superficial relationship with the past. Visitors are there to *'inspect* the splendours' of the house and to *'stroll* about its gardens', and both these verbs suggest a position of relaxed authority within space. The narrator claims that 'the sense of the past' is 'well preserved in the great house' but

the status of the past's preservation is designed with the reaction it is required to elicit in visitors in mind. The problem this poses for history at the sites of great houses has been discussed by heritage commentators. As Laurajane Smith summarises, visiting country houses is 'a dominant form of heritage in the United Kingdom' which is often accompanied by criticism on the grounds of 'political conservatism and lack of authenticity'.[18] Unlike the emotionally dangerous ruins of Kilneagh, which raise provocative questions for Ireland's national identity, the 'sense of the past' at Woodcombe is tailored to produce a safer environment. This necessitates erasing parts of the house's narrative which do not facilitate such a movement, and the chapter's narrator makes it clear that Woodcombe visitors are not exposed to the family's Anglo-Irish identity. While visitors linger and consume 'butter-scones and shortbread', 'they do not know' about the established pattern of movement from Dorset to Cork. Woodcombe's involvement with the story of Kilneagh's ruin is registered only in Ireland, for England's country houses, operating as objects of heritage, avoid any sense of the melancholic within history.

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[18] Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, p. 158.

'Ireland of the ruins': *The Story of Lucy Gault*

1. Immaterial History

Fools of Fortune marks a significant contribution to the genre of the Big House novel. However, it was not Trevor's final word regarding Anglo-Irish history, and the trauma associated with its ruins. *The Story of Lucy Gault* (2003) sees the author return to the War of Independence and its consequences in the years which followed. Ruin is a guiding preoccupation in this novel. When a central character Captain Gault writes to his brother one of the many undelivered letters scattered through the text, he describes his estranged homeland as profoundly ruinous: 'Ireland of the ruins I have heard it called, more ruins and always more.'[1] This description provides a telling indication of a crucial theme in the text as a whole. The novel takes place against a backdrop of conflict and change in Ireland, which seems to have left the nation defined by ruins.

This being said, the full significance of a ruinous landscape and its relationship to Irish history in Trevor's text is complex and at times abstract. *The Story of Lucy Gault* opens in 1921 with the Big House Lahardane under imminent threat of destruction by IRA sympathisers from the surrounding community. These activists approach the house with petrol during the night. Their actions are forestalled, but the threat of arson has far-reaching and unforeseeable consequences. Captain and Heloise Gault no longer feel safe, and decide to move temporarily to England. Their only daughter Lucy, not as

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[1] William Trevor, *The Story of Lucy Gault* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 145. Further references to *The Story of Lucy Gault* within this chapter will be to this edition, and will be given in the text.

protected from the surrounding tensions as her parents have attempted to keep her, pretends to run away so that her parents will reconsider leaving – but in doing so breaks her ankle and is unable to move. She crawls to a small ruined cottage and survives for months until found accidentally, while her parents, believing she has drowned, leave Ireland mourning their child. The description of Lucy's life as she waits for her parents' return, immobile in the never-ruined estate, forms a reflection on the process of history: how historical events take place, and the way in which their circumstances are then conceived, understood, and integrated into both personal cultural memory.

Ruins in *The Story of Lucy Gault* are not deployed in accordance with established tropes in Big House narratives, because Lahardane, the house in question, is not destroyed or even abandoned. The text does occasionally provide the names of other Anglo-Irish houses which were destroyed during the revolutionary period. However, at Lahardane the house's attempted arson is forestalled by a gunshot from Captain Gault, so this process of ruination, a signature of twentieth century Anglo-Irish writing, never actually occurs. Material ruin takes place in the world of the text, but at the margins of vision, and in the form of decay caused by time and nature, rather than a particular noted event. Thus, unlike Bowen and Farrell, Trevor does not use a centralised and ruinous Big House to connect clear evidence of past conflict with its subsequent historical narrative. There are no tangible materials of destruction available to anchor stable historical meaning in *The Story of Lucy Gault*.

This refusal of simple materiality makes the novel an example of

'radical decay', for the problematic, uncertain presence of ruin in the text offers a precarious alternative to the more secure historical narratives presented by authorised heritage practice within historical fiction and its appropriation of physical space. Trevor's use of ruin even diverges from that developed by writers such as Bowen and Farrell, for while *Troubles* and *The Last September* also pursue countercultural strategies of memory, they still do so through a central image of a ruined Big House. The complex dispersal of ruin in *The Story of Lucy Gault* carries out a sustained disruption of this trope, bringing the reader to question whether a single, dominant space can be relied upon as an adequate tool for narrating the past within cultural memory; key past events, and hence sites in which they can be commemorated, may lie elsewhere in this story. In suggesting this, Trevor draws attention to how historiography regarding the Big House is sanitised by ignoring marginal experiences, and how the treatment of revolutionary history might work to elide its more troubling aspects. I will explore these issues by examining key features of ruin's manifestation in the text: the seemingly negligible decay of Paddy Lindon's small cottage; the tension between decay and preservation visible at Lahardane after the Free State's establishment; and finally the experience of ruin by Horahan, one of the would-be arsonists, whose repeated dream of Lahardane's destruction demonstrates an instance of resurfacing guilt in Catholic Ireland. Although ruin plays a highly suggestive role in the text, it also frustrates certainties, preventing the reader from reaching any secure answers to question of memorial focus and historical responsibility regarding Ireland's revolutionary period.

2. A Wider Landscape of Ruin

Given that there is no destruction of a Big House, Captain Gault's description of his nation as 'Ireland of the ruins' suggests that ruins have a wider, more figurative provenance within the narrative's characterisation of Ireland. However, the conspicuous absence of this central ruin does not discredit the image of Ireland as a nation overcome by decay. Trevor complexifies the concept of ruin, allowing its cultural significance to be scrutinised. Because Lahardane is not itself physically damaged, attention is drawn to different kinds and spaces of ruin. Most notable is Paddy Lindon's cottage, where Lucy finds shelter when she is missing. This building is an example of how Trevor queries established heritage (including literary tradition), because although it has little place in mainstream culture, Trevor offers it narrative purchase and symbolic significance in this text. The dilapidated cottage questions the extent to which cultural memory depends upon space and monuments to facilitate recollection, and how Big House spaces may be privileged over others remembrance of this historical period. Paddy Lindon indexes the harsh and quotidian experience of 'ordinary' Irish people, who typically live remote from the Big House and its concerns ('beyond the demesne' in Bowen's phrase)[2] and as such are neglected by authorised heritage which, in Laurajane Smith's terms, 'privileges monumentality and grand scale'[3] in discursive valuations of cultural significance.

As we have seen in the depiction of sites such as Danielstown and

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[2] Bowen, *The Last September*, p. 30.

[3] Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, p. 11.

Kilneagh, ruins are associated with the ability to preserve history even in their decay. As Rebecca Solnit comments:

> Ruins stand as reminders. Memory is always incomplete, always imperfect always falling into ruin; but the ruins themselves, like other traces, are treasures: our links to what came before, our guide to situating ourselves in a landscape of time. To erase the ruins is to erase the visible public triggers of memory; a city without ruins and traces of age is like a mind without memories.[4]

The erasure of ruins, argues Solnit, is the foundation of an 'amnesiac landscape'.[5] It is true that many writers, as well as individuals and bodies responsible for cultural memory, present ruins as 'triggers of memory' and 'reminders': images through which the past is brought to mind, even though the structure, in its ruined nature, must always imply the distance of the past as well as commemorating it. Here, however, the presentation of Paddy's cottage suggests that ruin can also be far less prominent as a site of cultural memory, and that the concept of a historical 'treasure' is a problematic one. In *The Story of Lucy Gault* 'Ireland of the ruins' is also presented in part as an 'amnesiac landscape', provoking awareness of how heritage may prioritise particular kinds of ruin, so that some spaces and their stories are remembered while others are permitted to disappear.

Because the cottage is the most prominent physical ruin in the text – the only building in which decay compromises material function to the

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[4] Rebecca Solnit, *Storming the Gates of Paradise* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007), p. 355.

[5] Ibid.

point that it becomes obsolete – it becomes an example of the otherwise unexplored 'Ireland of the ruins' that Captain Gault describes. The Captain's phrase here is an echo of the judgement given in *Bowen's Court* (1942) that Ireland 'is a country of ruins':

> Fallen-in-farms and cabins take only some years to vanish. Only major or recent ruins keep their human stories; from others the story quickly evaporates. Some ruins show gashes of violence, others simply the dull slant of decline. [...] Not all these ruins are ruins of wars: where there has not been violence there has been abandonment. Mansions, town houses, farmhouses, cottages have often been left to die – and very few people know the story of the bitter necessity.[6]

This characterisation of Ireland emphasises not only the proliferation of ruins, which as discussed above qualifies as a predominant national characteristic in Bowen's account, but also how these ruins are sites of cultural memory and narrative interest: 'human stories'. These stories are continually under threat by the material fragility which encloses them. While some 'major' ruins can still be used to discern historical narrative, most have been 'left to die' without wide social recognition, so that there are only a small number of individuals for whom each space has any cultural meaning. Trevor's brief (but highly suggestive) portrayal of Irish ruin in the life of Paddy Lindon and his home evokes a similar state of material and epistemological transience. This decision to attend to the ignored and lost subverts established perspectives on cultural memory. A grand proclamation by itself, 'Ireland of the ruins' might suggest that the material destruction

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[6] Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*, pp. 16–17.

overwhelming the country is of acknowledged historical significance; but instead, we find decay located in a space of seclusion, unmapped and almost forgotten.

Trevor's development of this ruin focuses attention on marginal space, bringing with it the implication that Ireland's post-independence historical consciousness is incomplete; saturated with unacknowledged ruins. The nation already resembles Solnit's 'amnesiac landscape' even though Paddy's cottage is still standing, for the dwelling has been denied cultural recognition and left to decay. This characterisation draws attention to problematic aspects of the treatment and commemoration of cottage life within different discourses of heritage. The level of social neglect suggested in Trevor's portrait of this space runs counter to the expressed priorities of both Anglo-Irish and Irish culture.

The representations of attitudes towards cottage life among the former community reveal a frequent level of disinterest, even disdain; the narrator of *The Last September* describes 'roofless cottages' close to the ruined mill as 'banal enough in life to have closed this valley to the imagination'.[7] Within wider Irish culture, the cottage is – at least on the surface – given much greater respect and cultural prominence. As Rhona Richman Kenneally notes, 'the traditional Irish cottage is an enduring icon' representing a number of 'varieties of Irishness'; it has been studied by cultural geographers and is 'the subject of poems and travelogues, posts and photographs', 'monumentalized' in (often kitsch) commemorations. Nevertheless, as Richman Kenneally notes, the word 'cottage' was 'used disparagingly by

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[7] Bowen, *The Last September*, p. 123.

outsiders' and, historically, carried negative connotations for its occupants; 'the icon and the actual dwelling' are not consonant.[8] Thus, despite the iconographic fame of these spaces (a strong contrast to the Anglo-Irish dismissal illustrated by Bowen), the reality of cottage life is not necessarily represented accurately by their portrayal in Irish heritage. These cultural responses, both potentially problematic, find a source of challenge in Trevor's characterisation of Paddy and his experience. In staging a foundational episode of Lucy's life in Paddy's cottage, *The Story of Lucy Gault* offers a countercultural prominence to a space which may deserve revision as a site of cultural memory.

Trevor's depiction of the cottage's decay suggests a disturbing sense of apathy in regard to granting it remembrance. Its state can be read as a symptom of wider, exclusionary cultural perspectives. The ruin is presented to develop an elegiac understanding of its painful human cost, an emotional undertone which implies that the social conditions which permitted the forces of ruin to flourish here are at fault. It is emphasised that destruction and loss of history in a ruin 'left to die' have not taken place when the cottage was already in a state of natural obsolesce, but rather while Paddy was still alive and actively using the building. Ruin transgresses into his everyday life to a very significant extent, so that he exists in a liminal state between habitation and dereliction – just as Lucy, when sheltering in the ruin, exists somewhere between life and death. From Trevor's description, the building has always been threatened in this way:

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[8] Rhona Richman Kenneally, 'Cooking at the Hearth: The "Irish Cottage" and Women's Lived Experience', in *Memory Ireland*, ed. by Oona Frawley, 4 vols (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011–14), II: Diaspora and Memory Practices (2012), 224–41 (p. 224).

Some of the roof of the cottage had fallen in, he'd told her, but some of it was all right. 'Amn't I destroyed by the rain?' he used to say. 'The way it would drip through the old sods of the roof, wouldn't it have me in the grave before I'm fit for it?' The rain taunted and tormented him, like a devil sent up, he said. And one day her papa said, 'Poor Paddy died,' and she cried then, too. (p. 10)

The life that Trevor illustrates within this ruin is deprived and troubled, and while the final sentence in this paragraph offers no information about Paddy's death or its cause, it is impossible to not link it with the living conditions and evident social neglect which have 'destroyed' him. His statement that these conditions will 'have me in the grave before I'm fit for it' also implies that his death was preventable. The narrative does permit a distinct and even lively character to surface in his reported language, tormented by 'a devil sent up', but the tone in which the passage is delivered relays his brutal life as something neutral, almost unremarkable. The sense of indifference to the commonplace ruins of Irish poverty points to the perspective prevalent in Big House literature, and the struggle of its writers – not least Bowen and Farrell – to represent rural Ireland and the landscape of destitution described so casually within *The Last September* as 'banal'.

This portrayal conveys the conception of such ruin as commonplace and thus unworthy of attention, so that Paddy embodies the prejudice and neglect inherent in authorised narratives of cultural memory. Conveying his death in a short, simple sentence without adjectives increases the sense of mundane and emotionally destitute nature of this death amidst

ruins. Trevor's narrative briefly resists the scene's lack of emotional significance even while furthering it, for the short description of Lucy crying works to humanise the situation and permit it to be understood as tragic, despite its inevitability. Yet it is emphasised that for Paddy, ruin exists as part of everyday life, something that must be endured and lived alongside despite the emotional and physical distress of this situation, 'taunted and tormented' by the natural world from which he has no effective shelter. The blurring of living space with encroaching ruin suggests that the lack of control which dominates his (ruined) life will continue long after it: his cottage will be a place of memory that will go unremembered, despite the emphasis on the 'cottage' as a valuable icon of Irish heritage; 'left to die' because the 'treasures' of memory that Solnit describes as accessible in ruins are not sought there. Lucy's story is exceptional in granting this space a subdued narrative significance and memory; this represents a potential revision of stereotyped, romanticised assumptions regarding cottage life in Ireland, as well as a determined resistance to dismissive Anglo-Irish attitudes towards rural existence, and the replication of this disinterest in the Big House novel.

The cottage is a space of uncontrolled transience, a state permitted by the indifference of Irish society and the lack of interest in any kind of intervention or repair. Scraps of cultural interest appear in *The Story of Lucy Gault*. Lucy is fascinated by the ruin before she goes missing, searching for it 'often' in the woods (p. 10). For her, it is a source of curiosity, followed by trauma. Henry, the Gaults' servant, also has unspoken memories of Paddy's life there, recalling, when he reaches Lucy, 'Paddy Lindon sitting

at the table of which only the legs and a single board were left' (p. 39). Yet his memories of the cottage have not prompted him to visit or protect the space; he is only there to use the cottage's old stones 'for a gap in O'Reilly's sheep wall', indicating how this space is not only advancing in ruin because of natural decay but also through pragmatic reuse of its materials – by a servant of the Anglo-Irish, and in order to repair that class's privileged property. A lack of cultural value permits this pragmatic contribution to destruction. It is therefore no surprise when Lucy acknowledges later that the cottage is 'entirely a ruin now' (p. 139). She herself has not forgotten it, and plans to use an illustration of the cottage's state as a silent commemorative image when, still waiting for her parents' return, she embroiders local scenes: 'In time, she knew, there would be Paddy Lindon's cottage, entirely a ruin now' (p. 139). Yet despite the emotional importance which Lucy demonstrates the ruin can hold, and the fact that it does have a story (both of Paddy's life and Lucy's survival), it is not a space deemed worthy of any cultural response beyond Lucy's mute embroideries.

That Trevor chooses to focus attention upon this otherwise overlooked ruin constitutes a subtle intervention in heritage, including literary heritage, and the spaces typically used to tell stories of Ireland. Anglo-Irish writing surrounding the War of Independence has been dominated by the image of the Big House. Stories in its subgenre present the Ascendancy house itself as the most significant artefact available for exploring and commemorating historical change. Claire Norris remarks that 'the motif of the deteriorating Big House and its society recurs throughout

Irish fiction',[9] often 'associated with death and decay';[10] and according to Derek Hand, this motif became 'the prism through which the past, or a certain version of the past, could be accessed. The established etiquette of the Big House novel offered a stable scaffolding that could be dismantled and deconstructed and reinvented at will' by writers intending to 'self-consciously test' the boundaries and assumptions of the Irish novel.[11] Trevor's move to 'dismantle' the Big House novel's conventions includes disrupting the expectations of finding material ruin at the Big House itself. Shifting ruin and major plot events to the quotidian margins of society unsettles the expectations of the genre, so that the implications of decay for memory are explored in a different cultural setting – one often overlooked.

This manoeuvre is a significant complication of the trope through which modern Anglo-Irish history is commonly narrated, and affects the way literature is used to support established practices in heritage. The cottage's structural vulnerability, as well as its physical seclusion, both contribute to this – for there is a predisposition in heritage to concentrate attention on accessible sites with material tangibility, presenting each as a space of narrative significance and memorial 'treasures'. As Celmara Pocock et al. note, in an article advocating greater recognition of excluded 'intangible' heritage:

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[9] Claire Norris, 'The Big House: Space, Place, and Identity in Irish Fiction', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 8.1 (2004), 107–21 (p. 115).

[10] Ibid., p. 116.

[11] Derek Hand, *A History of the Irish Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 232.

> The process whereby sites are first identified and then assessed for significance inevitably favours the more obvious and apparent forms of built or physical heritage sites. There is a growing recognition that the focus on material heritage can neglect some types of sites and values. […] With few obvious physical indicators of significance such sites are often at risk of being overlooked by management regimes because they lack the monumental or structural elements that underpin European heritage traditions.[12]

The proposed strategy for 'countering the bias in recorded histories' is by 'listening to those at the margins'.[13] Trevor's story of the Lahardane estate – which itself avers literary tradition in its very survival – takes place in part at just such a marginal site. In addition to its evident frailty, there is an air of secrecy and disappearance surrounding the cottage, emphasised in the obscurity of the location (and the irony that, when Lucy does find it after searching many times, she herself goes missing there). It is one of the 'secret places' which she values in her environment, and seeks as a refuge when national troubles bring her family unhappiness, together with the woods and 'the spring her papa had found when he was a child himself' (p. 10). Her valuation of these spaces is personal and invested in the natural world; their significance is less clear than a symbolic Big House, but they comprise instances of intangible heritage that come to light as the novel develops.

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[12] Celmara, Pocock, David Collett, and Linda Baulch, 'Assessing Stories before Sites: Identifying the Tangible from the Intangible', *International Journal of Heritage* Studies, 21.10 (2015), 962–82 <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2015.1040440> (pp. 964–65).
[13] Ibid., p. 965.

3. The (N)ever Ruined Big House

Trevor's dislocation of the familiar trope of the ruined Big House changes the text's emphasis, focusing attention instead on marginal, less materially imposing spaces. This questions established conceptions about which spaces are used to illustrate Ireland's revolutionary period. However, Lahardane itself also plays a crucial role in communicating historical memory. It is not burnt down and so does not stand as an open display of the destruction brought to some by revolutionary insurrection during the War of Independence. Yet, although life continues at Lahardane and it is a superficially active building, Lucy's experience there suggests that the house performs a commemorative function, existing as a monument to the past that changed and harmed life irreparably during the Gaults' existence there. Tom Herron argues that this memorial existence can be seen in the house's continuing association with ruin, even though it did not suffer arson:

> in surviving, and then becoming the site through which a child's refusal ramifies for decades, the house turns into an echoing shell of rooms un-entered, its demesne diminishing, its out-houses and gate-lodge crumbling, its orchards and beehives decaying, its future consigned, as Lucy predicts, to the status of hotel. Even in surviving it is ruinous. As with most houses of the Big House genre, ruination appears intrinsic to its fabric. […] the house stands at the centre of an imagined landscape that is either ruined, or on its way to ruin.[14]

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[14] Tom Herron, '"… as if she were a symbol of something …": *The Story of Lucy Gault*', in *William Trevor: Revaluations*, ed. by Paul Delaney and Michael Parker (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 162–79 (p. 166).

Herron uses Benjamin as the theoretical gloss for the significance of this proliferation of ruin, noting Benjamin's concept that such spaces can be read for 'traces of history' but only 'without security'.[15] It is true that Lahardane and the text itself are overrun by instances of deterioration, which both call to mind past affluence and demonstrate that it is already lost. The opening description of the estate prompts the concession that 'the style of the past was no longer possible at Lahardane' (p. 6). The house's previous Big House grandeur becomes visible through its current absence. This dilapidation tacitly distances the current Gaults from the indulgent lifestyle and reckless Anglo-Irish behaviour seen in 'the style of the past'. Rather than attaining the figure of a domineering Ascendancy figurehead in the mould of Farrell's Edward Spencer, Trevor's narrator portrays Captain Gault as humble, engaged in maintenance of the 'remnants' (p. 5) that have survived for him, patiently implementing repairs that are 'effective for a while' (p. 6) against the estate's apparently irreversible tendency towards dilapidation.

However, Herron's description of Lahardane's 'intrinsic' ruinousness does not adequately allow for the subtle differences in decay at the site. Lahardane does not necessarily meet the idea of dynamic historical access – tangible yet ambiguous and in flux – that Benjamin illustrates through his image of ruin. Herron conflates multiple areas in and times at the estate as part of the same 'ruin'. In fact, ruin is not everywhere. Herron notes the sight of the 'out-houses and gate-lodge crumbling', and this state is increasingly visible throughout the novel, but the growing dereliction of exterior areas such as the gate-lodge (which is not used after Bridget and

[15] Ibid., p. 166.

Henry decided to stay in the house with Lucy) contrasts with and emphasises the lack of decay – or any change at all – in the main house itself. Captain and Heloise Gault's devastation when they leave Ireland results in most of the house's furniture 'left behind [...] to remain where it was' (p. 49). Lucy makes no alteration to the way things have been left, instead ensuring that the entire space is maintained flawlessly for her parents' re-arrival:

> For her part, Lucy did not wonder much about the nature of exile, accepting, with time, what had come about [...] the nature and the tenets of her life had already been laid down for her. She waited, she would have said, and in doing so kept faith. Each room was dusted clean; each chair, each table, each ornament was as they were remembered. Her full summer vases, her bees, her footsteps on the stairs and on the landings, and crossing rooms and in the cobbled yard and on the gravel, were what she offered. She was not lonely; sometimes she could hardly remember loneliness. (p. 81)

Lucy and her house exist together in a state of preservation. Rather than succumbing entirely or predictably to ruin, both her own identity and the house in its careful, detailed safekeeping are set actively against any alteration that might be brought by time or subsequent events. Although the house does not undergo ruin through either arson or the passage of time, it plays the role of spatial commemoration often assumed by a ruin. Lahardane becomes a memory of the past embodied in space, but not as a fragmentary or damaged space like that of the ruin: whole and functional, its features 'as they were remembered' by her parents.

Lahardane exists, then, as a monument to the tragic events of the

early twentieth century and their continued lack of resolution. The perfectly preserved nature of this monument results in a fundamentally different experience of memory to that offered by a ruin. As Benjamin observes, the ruin's ever-increasing lack of integrity as an artefact offers a uniquely provisional, dynamic material for encoding and receiving meaning:

> The word "history" stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience. [...] In the ruin history has physically merged into the setting. And in this guise history does not assume the form of the process of an eternal life so much as that of irresistible decay.[16]

As Benjamin suggests, the volatility of historical meaning engendered when its materials are in transience can be used to challenge established historiography. In the conscious refusal to allow Lahardane to exhibit any sign of change or decay, Lucy prevents any opportunity for this radical capacity of ruin to alter her relationship with the past. The image of the ruin becomes inappropriate because it is too *progressive* a metaphor for the trauma that took place at Lahardane. She styles her effort of conservation as an act of sacrifice, perhaps atonement: 'what she offered'. This sense of voluntary loss is appropriate, for Lucy too is held still by this devout cultivation of the past over the opportunities of a changing present.

Although Lahardane is a memorial to her family's past, Lucy herself does not have full control over it. She preserves and experiences the space's memories, both their curator and their victim, but makes no active

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[16] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 177–78.

intervention in the house's commemorative function. This passive experience of memory prevents any possibility of release or recovery from the arrested past. The very stillness of Lahardane inhibits its usefulness as a space in which to engage actively with the traumatic past in an attempt to resolve it. Lucy does instigate a more personal construction of memory than in her treatment of the house; during the long wait for her parents' return she begins completing a series of embroideries which features local scenes surrounding Lahardane:

> Ancrin's sent linens with designs already marked on them, but Lucy preferred to ignore what was suggested in that way. The first embroidery she attempted was of the pear tree in the yard, the second of the crossing stones she and her father had arranged at the shallow part of the stream, another of the pinks that thrived on the cliffs. In time, she knew, there would be Paddy Lindon's cottage, entirely a ruin now. (p. 139)

These scenes are a depiction of the local area, formed purposefully by Lucy herself, rather than only received or maintained passively. The future representation of Paddy's cottage is particularly significant. That she will illustrate the ruin from her memory with 'natural skill' (p. 139) suggests that Lucy is using these embroideries as an ongoing means of expressing the memories of her persistently traumatic narrative. They are one way for her to represent a past which she herself cannot articulate verbally. Rather than using a pre-existing space (such as Lahardane) as a monument, or filling in a pattern created by someone else, Lucy develops her own designs, emphasising their independent nature in contrast with the stock templates

provided by the manufacturer which she 'preferred to ignore'. This palimpsestic method brings an aspect of creative independence to Lucy's engagement with memory.

Nevertheless, the embroidered image of Paddy's cottage will not necessarily offer her a means of engaging with the past productively. The patterns are as much an expression of her continuing trauma and entrapment in memory as they are a means of reaching recovery through any reconciliation. If anything, her embroidered representations of these areas of Lahardane reinforce her imprisonment in the past. When the reader is shown Lucy's appearance from the perspective of Mr Sullivan, the family's solicitor (who assists in arrangements for Lucy's care after she is rescued), it becomes apparent that her actions in this creative enterprise give her an unsettling resemblance to her mother, who also embroidered designs. This resemblance is symptomatic of Lucy's inability to live beyond repeating Ireland's memory. Although Sullivan thinks that 'the display spread out for him on the dining-room table […] made the occasion Lucy's own', her autonomy is questionable:

> If something had developed in her friendship with Ralph […] Mr Sullivan might at last have begun to consider Lucy as more than a child. But his outsider's eye saw Lahardane, and the small household that had come about there, as something petrified, arrested in the drama there had been. Lucy was stilled too, a detail as in one of her embroidered compositions. (p. 139)

The words 'petrified', 'stilled', and 'arrested' emphasise how Lucy is imprisoned by memory, a victim of it rather than in control. Lucy's only spaces in which to confront the past are the unchanging house and her small,

stilled artworks, both of which refuse the sense of motion and dynamic ambiguity potentially offered by a ruined building. Ruins can be transient rather than 'petrified', and so mark distance from history even while they communicate it, proving temporal progression inescapably through visual change. The potential psychological freedom from trauma that ruins may thus present is suggested by the contrasting stillness of Lahardane and its evident psychological repercussions.

4. Lahardane's (Absent) Historical Context

Even though ruins might offer a potential alternative to Lucy's 'arrested' existence, the other instances of actual ruin that are mentioned within *The Story of Lucy Gault* are not necessarily portrayed to permit any freer relationship with memory. Despite Captain Gault's description of an 'Ireland of the ruins', the ruined Big Houses which form the text's historical context are not examined with scrutiny. In fact they are so marginalised that they are barely visible. On one occasion after Captain Gault has returned to Ireland, he visits 'the caves at Mitchelstown' in Cork with his daughter (p. 172). The caves' only visitors, they assume the role of tourists before proceeding into the town itself. Mitchelstown is a site in which Irish history can be accessed, but there is a notable omission:

> Its great, wide square and the Georgian elegance of a refuge for impecunious Protestants were its main attractions. Nothing remained of the once stately Mitchelstown Castle, burnt and looted the summer after petrol cans had been brought to Lahardane.
> 'Eccentric family,' her father said, 'those poor mad

Kingstons.' (pp. 172–73)

This visit brings the image of a real historical ruin into the text. Mitchelstown Castle, the house of the Earls of Kingston, was the largest neo-Gothic house in Ireland at one point in its history. The castle was occupied by the IRA in June 1922, and by August had been looted and 'reduced to a charred shell.'[17] But this 'shell' did not stand as a monument to the conflict for long, because it was dismantled and its materials recycled; the site is now home to a large creamery.[18] The absence is noted in the Gaults' visit. Lucy and her father still find the town a space in which to engage with Irish history in the 'attractions' encountered there, but this does not include Ireland's revolutionary period. Trevor sets up a confrontation with the traumatic past through its historical evidence, but an absence is encountered instead. This establishes a suggestive commentary about how Ireland relates to its history: instead of a will to preserve the remains that carry difficult and guilty implications, they are erased. Irish society in Trevor's novel is characterised by elisions that circumvent acknowledgement of conduct during the revolution upon which its nation is founded.

The excursion is one of the few instances in which actual Big House ruins, the historical context against which the entire traumatic survival of Lahardane is developed, are mentioned explicitly. Yet this important opportunity to situate the Gaults' narrative in Ireland's historical reality is decidedly, purposefully lacking. Rather than putting Lahardane into

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[17] Frederick O'Dwyer, '"A Noble Pile in the Late Tudor Style": Mitchelstown Caste', *Irish Arts Review Yearbook*, 18 (2002), 30–43 (p. 41).

[18] Mary Leland, *The Lie of the Land: Journeys through Literary Cork* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1999), p. 164.

the context of the concrete world and its history outside the boundaries of the text, the authentic destruction of Mitchelstown Castle is situated by reference to Lahardane's fictional near-miss: the date of Mitchelstown's ruin is not provided, only that it took place in 'the summer after petrol cans had been brought to Lahardane'. The house's anchorage in a verifiable historical context is frustrated further by the choice of a Big House which is now completely gone. Captain Gault remembers the family and mentions the 'poor mad Kingstons', but the tangible presentation of meaning provided by a ruin – or any kind of physical evidence – is in this case lost: 'nothing remained'. Consequently there are few resources to deny a stranger's comment that 'everything's long ago now' (p. 174). The ruined Big Houses that ostensibly form the background to *The Story of Lucy Gault* are not accessed, or as in this case are erased altogether, so that 'Ireland of the ruins' is not the secure, evident historical context that it may seem at first glance.

This circumvention of an opportunity to locate the text's 'story' in Ireland's real ruins is even more pronounced than it first appears. Although initially this visit seems a straightforward incursion into Ireland, Mitchelstown is a literary resource as well as a physical location. Elizabeth Bowen knew Mitchelstown Castle before it was torched in the War of Independence, and she describes its edifice with the surrounding town in detail in *Bowen's Court*, during her survey of the ruinous landscape surrounding her country home. She gives a brief, vigorous narration of Mitchelstown Castle's history up to its destruction, after which:

> For a year or two longer the shell stood, then its cut-
> stone facings were bought and carted away to build a

new wing for Mount Mellary monastery. Stripped, the unseemly inner structure of rubble was left, then decently taken down: the Castle site is now little more than a mound; the demesne is in plough or pasture, with one or two playing fields. One avenue, now little more than a track, runs downhill to the gates that open on the Kings-square.[19]

Only by following this concealed reference to Bowen does Trevor's brief description of the town lead to a reliable, historically informed description which locates the reader adequately in space. The 'refuge for impecunious Protestants' Trevor so cryptically refers to (p. 172) can also be traced back to a tangible site when Bowen is consulted, for she describes 'three sides of Kings-square are occupied by Kingston College – a Kingston foundation for indigent gentlepeople of the Protestant faith.'[20] Lucy and Captain Gault's visit to Mitchelstown is a rare instance of their encounter with Ireland beyond Lahardane; but the writing is an act of literary reflexiveness more than reference to a verifiable reality in Ireland's landscape for the reader to recognise. Consequently, Trevor's narrative performs its own deflection of historical encounter, which mirrors the erasure of Ireland's spatial heritage and does not posit itself as an ideal alternative access to the real-time period in which Lahardane is set.

The opportunity in this episode to gesture to a material reality is actively frustrated by Trevor. This results in the ruin of Mitchelstown not performing the historical communication that it does in Bowen's hands. Bowen uses detailed narrative to describe the Castle so that, even though it

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[19] Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*, p. 12.
[20] Ibid.

has been demolished, it still becomes a site for access to the past. Her characterisation produces a sense of nostalgic connection to the Castle's history, written to stage, in Mary Leland's phrase, an 'elegiac visitation'[21] of the pleasurable scenes of Anglo-Irish life she recalls there. The stark image of the ruined structure that Bowen provides allows a reader a location in space despite its subsequent erasure. Trevor's echo of Bowen, however, does little to salvage what the ruin's story was, and does not make such evident commentary on whether its removal was culturally appropriate. *The Story of Lucy Gault* provides no narrative about the Castle, before or after its ruin, beyond the statement that 'nothing remained'. It is true that Captain Gault's report of an 'eccentric family [...] those poor mad Kingstons' (p. 173), while brief, creates an affectionate characterisation of the family who lived there. They are the Kingstons, rather than the 'Earls of Kingston', and fallibly idiosyncratic rather than tainted by excess or ancestral guilt – this presents the house's ruin as a human tragedy rather than political event. Nonetheless, there is a sense of suppression in the narrative's presentation of a ruin that could otherwise be emblematic of Lahardane's experience in Ireland's historical context.

By refusing to provide a tangible reference point with which to resist ideological interpretations of the past, Trevor not only draws attention to the absences in Ireland's memorial landscape, but also queries the role of fiction in providing an alternative access to the world outside the text. Withholding unequivocal historical location demands that a reader remain suspicious of any invitation to engage with history, even if it is posited as

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[21] Leland, *The Lie of the Land*, p. 164.

radical decay, an alternative to established heritage discourse. Directing the reader to Bowen's text further corrupts the opportunity to evade this discourse, for her elegiac presentation of Mitchelstown and her perspective on its ruin is prejudiced in favour of Anglo-Irish life. *The Story of Lucy Gault* mounts a critique of Ireland's heritage but, by providing only reflexive traces and scant gestures towards the novel's context, also questions the ability of literature to provide an alternative which might bring Ireland's revolutionary past into the open, for honest examination.

5. Ruin as a Revelation

With Lahardane continuing as a never-ruined, perpetually preserved and 'stilled' space of memory, and the historical context of destroyed Big Houses a far from reliable backdrop, Captain Gault's phrase 'Ireland of the ruins' might seem less congruent with the environment actually depicted by the text. Yet the novel's refusal to provide the trope of a Big House ruined in the War of Independence, either at Lahardane or elsewhere, does not mean that the capacity of ruined structures to unsettle historical metanarratives through radical decay is entirely absent. Such ruin is present, but it is less conspicuous than in texts such as *Troubles* and *The Last September*. In particular, let us recall that the house's potential ruination remains in the text as an idea, an imagined event for the would-be arsonist Horahan who Captain Gault shot. While the physical wound in his shoulder gains him celebration 'as an insurrectionist' from Republican sympathisers (p. 75), this symbolic injury is eventually replaced by a much deeper and less respected psychological disturbance. This manifests as a dream in which Lahardane did

become a ruin, one which Horahan personally instigated and which caused Lucy's death:

> In his dream the curtains of the house had blown out from the windows, blazing in the dark. There was the lifeless body of a child. […] In his dream it was he who laid down the poison for the dogs; he who, before he was wounded, broke the window-glass and trickled in the petrol; he who struck the single match. One afternoon, when he was whitewashing the stones around the station flowerbeds he saw, as clearly as in his dream, the curtains blazing. (p. 76)

Horahan changes jobs when these dreams begin and becomes a house-painter, but is disappointed in his hope that the move will prevent him from 'brooding' (p. 77). The description of his activity restoring and improving houses is set against the image of the ruin from his dream; the contrast makes the latter starker and pressing, rather than less real. Although the dream he repeatedly suffers is a tormenting re-living of the past – an inability to escape from the suffering caused by the events that took place that night – the visions that become his reality are also emphasised as a changed experience of the past. Both in terms of the events that transpired and their emotional connotations, the dreams undermine his previous understanding of how history happened. His father's assertion that the Gaults' family estrangement was deserved punishment now causes him 'distress, as it never had in reality' (p. 76). His altered emotional encounter with memory when perceived in a dream is accompanied by an increasing struggle 'to establish reality' (p. 77). This new, traumatic encounter with a ruined past makes his sense of history and the present increasingly insecure.

The ruin that assaults Horahan's imagination resembles Sigmund Freud's concept of 'the uncanny', and is thus able to express things about Lahardane's story that are repressed in the 'real' narrative of events with which Horahan initially lives. Freud describes the significance of an experience in which the familiar is encountered in an unfamiliar way so that is becomes 'uncanny and frightening'.[22] The experience is emotionally charged in this way because it involves the return of what has been repressed in the past. This unwelcome recurrence often comes, according to Freud, in the form a 'double' image which carries new associations previously censored from consciousness. This takes place in a highly-charged 'vision of terror' which instils 'the helplessness we experience in certain dream-states.'[23] The double is both familiar and strange because it represents apparently new things, which have in fact been present in the individual's psyche all along: 'for this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed.'[24] Meeting the uncanny is thus a process of recognition and reacquaintance, even though its familiarity is deeply disturbing. The ruined Big House of Horahan's imagination is a double-image of Lahardane's unchanged material reality. The uneasy tension between the familiar and unfamiliar is palpable in the narrative's description of the dreamed ruin. The details of the destruction and capacity are recounted as if they were historically real in a list of the arsonist's actions: 'in his dream it was he who laid down the poison for the dogs; he who, before he was wounded, broke the

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[22] Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 121–61 (p. 124).

[23] Ibid., p. 144.

[24] Ibid., p. 148.

window-glass and trickled in the petrol; he who struck the single match' (p. 76). This description offers a sequence of events, complete with aesthetic detail, which begins with a real event (the poisoning of the dogs) before slipping into the invented and becoming hard to distinguish.

As Horahan descends into madness, it becomes impossible for him to separate real and imagined events. Yet even though the reader retains a secure hold on Lahardane's un-ruined material reality by following Lucy's story, the alternative history expressed by the house's ruined double still provokes insight into the difficult relationship between events and their later commitment to memory. The dreams trouble Horahan's certainty about the narrative of the past, suggesting history is not as simple as a visible and conscious reality. He repeats the events that actually took place – the house's escape from ruin – but is persistently disturbed by the uncanny sense that things went differently: 'All this he insisted to himself, knowing it to be the truth, but still the contradiction was there' (p. 76). In his repeated witnessing of Lahardane's ruin and Lucy's death, Horahan becomes aware of certain aspects of the real events here that he did not initially acknowledge, including feelings of 'distress' and guilt at what happened. A great deal of anxiety and uncertainty about responsibility was apparently hidden from his account of the past and did not come to light before he saw the ruin in his dream. Horahan himself emphasises how the nightmares were the source of personal revelation. According to his own admission when he meets Captain Gault, these dreams revealed something about his relationship with the past: 'I didn't get the truth of it until the dreams. I knew the truth of it then, sir. I was never easy since. I'd be frightened of the dreams, sir' (p. 185). He is

unable to articulate this new understanding completely, but it centres on the knowledge that after the events at Lahardane, 'I was never settled since, sir' (p. 184). After the unsuccessful but still tragic attempt to destroy the Big House, Horahan never experienced mental peace, even though his disquiet and its origin did not become evident till later in his life, when the image of a ruin returned to unsettle his previous historical certainties.

In addition to Lucy's life of waiting, preserved in the past, Horahan's passage into both historical revelation and madness (after dreaming Lahardane's ruin) becomes a further indication of how memory operates in post-Independence Ireland. Both the Gaults and Horahan remain trapped in the circumstances of the War of Independence, and in this they are potentially symbolic of the continually traumatic Irish and Anglo-Irish experience that the arrival of the Free State did nothing to end. As Hermione Lee argues: 'Both of them are victims of Ireland's politics. The inextricable link between the Catholic boy brought up to be a revolutionary and the isolated Protestant girl, both "petrified" in their past, could be read – if Trevor was that sort of explicit commentator – as metaphors for a colonial history.'[25] However, Horahan's direct confrontation of the colonial past and 'the truth of it', albeit without sanity, appears to set him apart from post-Independence Ireland, rather than make him emblematic of it. He describes his Irish society as fiercely repressed when it comes to articulating something he has been forced to understand in his dream:

> 'There's no one would say it, sir. The girl you were
> going with wouldn't say it to you on account it was too

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[25] Hermione Lee, 'Myths that Linger in the Mind', *Guardian*, 31 August 2002, p. 9.

terrible to say to any man. The same as there's people in
Enniseala wouldn't say it yet. In a shop they wouldn't.
Nor the lads above at the Camp. There isn't a man
working for Ned Whelan would say it out, sir.'

  'And would you tell me what they won't say, Mr
Horahan?' (p. 186)

Horahan does not 'say it out' explicitly either, but it connects to the sense of
guilt and anxiety about the treatment of the Gaults which the vision of ruin
brought to light for him. The society surrounding him in post-Independence
Ireland is not, in Trevor's depiction, forced into such a painfully open
relationship with the past but continues by refusing to face history, and
erasing its ruins.

        The development of Horahan's experience of ruin therefore
registers the inadequacy of Irish cultural memory, by illustrating guilt that
was initially suppressed in Horahan's experience and which remains
unacknowledged by his surrounding society. However, although the question
of responsibility for the physical and emotional violence of the revolutionary
period is a primary concern in Trevor's novel, and the image of Lahardane's
ruin troubles any exculpatory version of events, no simple verdict is offered.
Bernard O'Donoghue recognises that, like Bowen's *The Last September*, *The
Story of Lucy Gault* makes relationships between social groups 'morally
unclear' but argues that 'Trevor's version of these is much softer than
Bowen's; *Lucy Gault* ends with a full cast of hapless people who are punished
by fate and nothing else. Nothing is anybody's fault.'[26] Yet Horahan's
persistent experience of ruin makes the text resist such sweeping

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[26] Bernard O'Donoghue, 'House of Troubles: The Bleak Morality of William Trevor', *Times
Literary Supplement*, 30 August 2002, Issue 5187, p. 3.

conclusions. The events that separate Lucy from her parents are impossible to separate from 'chance' (p. 36), but they do not confirm innocence either.

Consequently, the novel embodies a profound ambiguity about the attribution of blame that contrasts with the more straightforward responsibility for ruin that Horahan takes on in his dreams. The central characters seek to resolve this ambiguity in order to make sense of their traumatic historical experience, but find it impossible to do so. When Horahan comes back to the house to try and offer atonement, Captain Gault looks into his eyes 'and saw there only madness. No meaning dignified his return; no order patterned, as perhaps it might have, past and present; no sense was made of anything' (p. 191). The image of Lahardane's ruin brings Horahan a revelation of guilt, altering the way he remembers the past to make his responsibility for it clear, but this is indistinguishable from psychosis. As a result, ruin in the novel is presented as a highly problematic vehicle of memory because it exists in an ultimately mad consciousness. Despite providing a powerful indication of suppressed anxieties about the role of revolutionary sentiment in Ireland's national narrative, ruin also risks the collapse of historical meaning. Such an intrinsically ambiguous presentation contrasts with the practices of memory found in authorised heritage and its presentation of physical sites which can be used to produce a supposedly objective understanding of the past. In *The Story of Lucy Gault*, ruin becomes a critical but highly insecure space in which to engage with history, bringing hidden aspects of the past to light, but also fostering an inescapable sense of memory's fragility.

Chapter 3. Degeneration in a Free State

'A Broken World': Stasis and Decay in Post-Independence Cultural Geography

1. The Free State 'full of ruins'

In Chapter 1, a careful analysis of the role given to ruin in 'Midsummer Night Madness' revealed moments of fracture and instability in Ó Faoláin's presentation of nationalism during the revolutionary period. In the second of his stories that I will consider, 'A Broken World', Ó Faoláin seeks to reflect not only on revolutionary nationalism, but also on the reality of the Irish state that it brought into being. 'A Broken World' appears in Ó Faoláin's second collection of short stories *A Purse of Coppers*, published in 1937, the last year of the Free State before the adoption of Éamon de Valera's Constitution and the declaration of a de facto Republic. The first story of the volume, it delivers a critical reflection on the kind of nation produced in the wake of independence. Irish society is shown to be 'full of ruins',[1] overrun by abandoned and decaying structures. I argue here that Ó Faoláin uses this desolate environment to draw attention to a more fundamental form of ruin within the state itself. Numbed and divided, Ireland is left trapped in the 'perpetual dawn' (p. 173) of revolution, unable to create a unified nation from the remnants of the old.

The story is set during a train journey across Ireland in winter. The narrator finds himself sharing a railway carriage with a farmer and a

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[1] Seán Ó Faoláin, 'A Broken World', in *The Collected Stories of Sean O'Faolain: Volume I* (London: Constable, 1980), pp. 163–73 (p. 166). Further references to 'A Broken World' within this chapter will be to this edition, and will be given in the text.

priest. The latter initiates a discussion about the landscape they travel through. He describes Ireland as 'broken', lacking in 'moral unity' and 'common thought' (p. 163). Although the narrator does not appear riveted, the priest proceeds to illustrate this broken state by describing his parish in County Wicklow. His own community, made up of local Irish people, has witnessed poverty and emigration, eventually becoming 'full of ruins […] in scores on scores, with, maybe, a tree growing out of the hearth, and the marks of the ridges they ploughed, still there, now smooth with grass' (p. 166). By contrast, the neighbouring parish contains 'the good land' and is far more prosperous (p. 167). Here, too, ruins now flourish, but only since the War of Independence, and the grandeur that the Anglo-Irish once enjoyed there is still visible in what remains. Seeing these two extremes in the quality of land and the life it permits, the priest suggests that before the War of Independence, 'the whole thing had worked, hung together, made up a real unity […] that parish and my parish made up a world, as neither did by itself' (p. 169). After this conclusion, the narrator, confused and angered by its implications for his nation, asks whether Irish society, now rid of its English gentry, will be able to generate a similar unity to create 'a complete world of their own' (p. 169). The priest shakes his head, gesturing at the ignorant indifference of the farmer who accompanies them, and the narrator is left disconcerted.

At first glance, Ó Faoláin presents an illustration of a far calmer, more unified nation here than the one navigated by the characters in 'Midsummer Night Madness'. Rather than a narrative driven forward by the threat of impending arson, 'A Broken World' involves a sedate conversation

which takes place at some remove from the ruins it describes. As Paul A. Doyle remarks, *A Purse of Coppers* in general portrays a very different Ireland to that established in Ó Faoláin's first collection. Now, he argues:

> The years of 'the Troubles' and Civil War have ended, and the period under consideration in this volume is, in contrast to the turmoil described in *Midsummer Night Madness*, a quiet, almost sleepy era in which Eire is recuperating, taking stock of itself, and facing economic and governmental decisions.[2]

It is certainly true that 'A Broken World' lacks the open conflict and fraught violence which Ó Faoláin addresses in his earlier publication. However, characterising the Ireland portrayed in 'A Broken World' as 'a quiet, almost sleepy era' risks underestimating the restless presence ruins have within the text. While the landscape the priest describes is in a peaceful state, experiencing the slower development of decay and the reclamation of space by the natural world, Ó Faoláin reveals this superficially pacific environment to be deeply politicised. He illustrates fundamental failures in the national vision of post-independence Ireland. The desolation, and underlying absence of 'unity', is shown to be a symptom of nationalistic promises that have remain unfulfilled in the Free State. As a consequence, Ireland's national identity remains deeply problematic, and dependent upon the ingrained power structures established under colonialism, which are now maintained in a condition of stasis that is enforced further by ecclesiastical authority.

I will argue that Ó Faoláin's emphasis on the ruins which proliferate through the landscape elaborated in 'A Broken World' is provides

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[2] Paul A. Doyle, *Sean O'Faolain* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1968), p. 77.

material contradiction to the claims made by the state regarding Ireland's supposed achievement of an idealised national identity. It reveals that, as an Irish author in a post-revolutionary world, Ó Faoláin began to articulate social criticism in a manner which runs contrary to his own earlier revolutionary idealism. In his 1948 critical work *The Short Story*, Ó Faoláin reflected on this change, which he identifies as common among writers who oversaw Ireland's somewhat tortuous movement towards an independent state:

> There was hardly an Irish writer who was not on the side of the movement for Irish political independence; immediately it was achieved they became critical of the nation. This is what makes all politicians say that writers are an unreliable tribe. They are. It is their metier.[3]

A Purse of Coppers represents an attempt by Ó Faoláin to confront this personal shift from a loyal supporter of political independence to the vocal, and at times in this story even hostile, critic of what revolution had achieved. In 'A Broken World', this effort is realised in part through a nuanced deployment of ruin.

In the following analysis, I will explore how Ó Faoláin uses decayed spaces as a resource to enact his 'metier' within 'A Broken World'. This begins with an examination of how the story illustrates the ruins left by emigration to create a characterisation of rural Ireland which diverges from the romanticised ideal. I will then discuss how the ruins of Anglo-Irish territory are developed to illustrate an ironic lack of underlying political

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[3] Sean Ó Faoláin, *The Short Story* (New York: Devin-Adair, 1951), p. 7.

change, and Ó Faoláin's emphasis on the presence of restrictive boundaries within Ireland's environment – boundaries which cannot be unsettled through the deployment of any radical decay. Finally, I will explore the position of the priest, who has himself been reduced to a state of human ruin by the Church's move to suppress his subversive aspirations for Irish identity.

This reading of Ó Faoláin will build upon the critical interrogation of Irish nationhood developed by Colin Graham in *Deconstructing Ireland* (2001). Graham's argument rests on the contention that 'Ireland' is an unstable, continually shifting entity. It exists as an 'impossible cultural geography',[4] not a set pattern of stable signifiers but rather a dependent on a 'chain of supplementation',[5] moving always towards a 'future (always future) moment'[6] in which this 'plethora of signifiers'[7] will at last become stable. Graham uses this conceptual image to scrutinise specific attempts at stabilising this endlessly-deferred definition of 'Irishness' into a coherent set of signifiers – and the restrictions that such attempts impose. In the analysis which follows, I will suggest that Ó Faoláin is staging his own critical interrogation of the attempts to stabilise Ireland's 'cultural geography' in the wake of independence. The ruins within 'A Broken World' – which might in other circumstances be ideal materials for the embodiment of the dynamic, unstable signification Graham describes – are the sites of authoritarian efforts to impose fixity on Irish identity. This argument will identify how Ó

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[4] Colin Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland: Identity, Theory, Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), p. 1.

[5] Ibid., p. xii.

[6] Ibid., p. 6.

[7] Ibid., p. x.

Faoláin positions ruins as critical resources with which to register restriction and discontent in post-independence Ireland. However, this role remains observational, rather than active. Decay reveals a structural failure in the Free State; it is not deployed as a resource capable of forming an *alternative* conception of Irishness. Ó Faoláin can use ruin to initiate a critical illustration of repressive claims regarding Ireland's cultural geography. But it is a tool of revelation, not repair.

2. 'Then there was emigration': An Abandoned World

Ó Faoláin offers ruin as a means to begin eroding nationalistic certainties regarding Irish identity in the postcolonial state. This strategy results in an image of Ireland overrun by absences and vacancy, almost more populated by ruins than people, with 'scores and scores' of empty dwellings (p. 166). Although these houses appear to be so damaged that their history becomes unclear, the priest makes some effort to place their existence within an overarching narrative of Irish history. He describes how emigration has left a dramatic impact on his parish:

> 'Then there was emigration. In the five years I spent there I had one solitary marriage. I had sixty schoolchildren on roll when I went there. I had thirty-five when I left. Last year I heard they were reduced to eleven, and five of those were all one family. No wonder the county is full of ruins. You come on them in scores on scores, with, maybe, a tree growing out of the hearth, and the marks of the ridges they ploughed, still there, now smooth with grass.'
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> 'Begobs, then, they're here too, father,' said the old farmer. (p. 166)

The priest situates emigration as a fundamental part of Ireland's history, and uses the decay it has left behind to represent this exodus. The farmer's earnest response – 'begobs, then, they're here too' – indicates that the priest's local experience in County Wicklow may be repeated elsewhere throughout the country. Departure, and the ruins that remain as its signifier, are a part of what Graham terms Ireland's 'cultural geography' – and hence, according to the priest, its national identity. This development is an unsettling articulation of such an identity, because Ó Faoláin's ruins are reduced and vacated to such an extent that they signify little more than absence. Writing on the persistent phenomenon of Irish emigration, Fintan O'Toole argues that because 'the people and the land are no longer co-terminous [...] the map of Ireland is a lie'.[8] The nation must be reconceived as 'a set of contours shaped, not by geography, but by voyages. The shape of the island is the shape of all the journeys around it that a history of emigration has set in motion.'[9] The priest's narration here, however, refuses to provide any expanded conception of Ireland. His narration is factual and basic, acknowledging 'emigration' as a phenomenon but not the developing life that it realised. Rather than attempting to follow and rediscover the identities of those who have disappeared, and so overcome the sense of social vacancy in Ireland itself by, as O'Toole advocates expanding the nation's boundaries, 'A Broken World' replicates their absence in ruin.

Ó Faoláin's suggestion that the entire Irish nation is 'full of ruins'

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[8] Fintan O'Toole, *Black Hole, Green Card: The Disappearance of Ireland* (Dublin: New Ireland Books, 1994), pp. 18–19.

[9] Ibid., p. 18.

contradicts the idealistic claims of the Free State. The ruins' presence is a means of directing critique towards post-independence Ireland, particularly the nation's continued reliance upon a sanctified image of the rural landscape as a symbol capable of creating social unification. 'A Broken World' was written against the backdrop of an uneasy national debate regarding the use of this trope. Published in 1937, *A Purse of Coppers* predates de Valera's infamous 1943 declaration that 'the ideal Ireland' consists of joyful 'fields and villages', 'bright with cosy homesteads [...] and the laughter of happy maidens'.[10] However, the attempt to define Ireland in similarly problematic, confining terms was in official circulation during this story's composition. A provisional draft of de Valera's 1937 Constitution presents a striking claim regarding Ireland's supposedly intrinsic relationship with 'rural life'. Article 41.8 declares that 'the State shall have regard for such distribution of the centres of industry that, while an opportunity is given for necessary development, the *traditional preference of our people for rural life* may be duly fostered and maintained.'[11] This Article promulgates the myth of a pristine Irish countryside, in need of preservation from its central source of threat, 'industry'. Its attempt to establish a 'traditional preference' for rural life is an effort to bring Ireland's impossible cultural geography into a fixed condition, so that Irishness is anchored and, in Graham's phrase, 'ready to submit to scrutiny'.[12] It erases any reference to the landscape of ruins created alongside rural Ireland's history, and attempts instead to articulate a stereotype of bucolic experience – and then cement it as a permanent

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[10] De Valera, 'On Language and the Irish Nation', p. 466.

[11] Dermot Keogh and Andrew McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution, 1937: Bunreacht Na HÉireann* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007), p. 238. Emphasis mine.

[12] Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 1.

signifier of Irish identity.

It is valuable to consider this cultural context in order to continue exploring Ó Faoláin's characterisation of a nation 'full of ruins', because the latter image reveals an attempt in 'A Broken World' to disrupt the use of pastoral imagery to signify an original and ideal national identity – in Catherine Nash's terms, 'the idea that there is only one true Irishness and that this depends on a stable and secure relationship to place'.[13] Ó Faoláin infiltrates this 'stable and secure relationship' with the presence of ruin, thus working to destabilise – or at least unsettle – the 'typical pastoral myth'[14] propounded by romantic nationalism. He was not alone in attempting to overcome this fantasy. As part of a thorough commentary on the draft Constitution containing Article 41.8, James J. McElligott, writing on behalf of the Department of Finance, took issue with the reality behind the document's claims regarding the 'traditional preference of our people for rural life'. McElligott answers that: 'traditional preference is open to doubt. The Irish emigrants to the U.S.A., for instance, have shunned rural life'.[15] As this objection points out, mass emigration is clear evidence that the life of Irish people is not intrinsically embedded within Irish land. Ó Faoláin's use of ruin advances further in articulating this criticism, with spaces that provide a visual articulation of the empty realities behind Ireland's pastoral myth. Characterising the county as 'full of ruins' creates not only a representation of emigration, but an image of the social decline that has

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[13] Nash, p. 109.

[14] Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation*, p. 59.

[15] 'Department of Finance's Response to the First Draft of the Constitution', 23 March 1937, in Keogh and McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007), p. 127.

accompanied their appearance, with 'one solitary marriage' and school numbers declining by half. Regardless of the state's claims, decay is present here, and it provokes query regarding the practical commitment of Irish people to their land. Ruins are physical proof of the desire to be elsewhere.

The use of decay to unsteady the restrictive cultural identity promulgated by the Free State's use of myth results in a subtle political criticism here. As well as providing tangible evidence of the priest's factual claims, the images of vacant homes and fields have deeper implications regarding the relationship between Irish people and their rural environment. As Article 41.8 indicates, this ostensibly 'stable and secure' relationship[16] is one of spiritual co-dependence, and it must be protected from modernisation and corruption by the 'necessary development' of industry. The ruins in this passage of 'A Broken World', however, make this interconnection between land and people more precarious. The priest demonstrates the status of these spaces as 'ruins' by describing the encroachment of the natural world into an environment once maintained by humans, with 'a tree growing out of the hearth, and the marks of the ridges they ploughed, still there, now smooth with grass' (p. 166). This decay is 'natural', and reveals the organic state that actually advances in any environment without people to undo their work. The image of plough furrows, still legible but now made 'smooth with grass', illuminates a tension in this landscape between the imprint of agricultural labour and the environmental progress that takes place without it: slowly erasing all human traces.

The priest's description of emigration and its ruins, brief though it

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[16] Nash, p. 109.

may be, indicates that hallmarks of 'rural life' are as artificial as the modern industrial development from which the above constitutional Article sought protection. As Schama comments, pastoral arcadias have 'a conscious element of artifice at work, simultaneously evoking natural forms but making sure they are corrected to eliminate the unsightly or disturbing.'[17] In County Wicklow, the ability to produce this crucial correction of 'natural forms' has been undermined by emigration, and the disquieting picture of decay that emerges reveals a lack of authenticity in rural life. In the priest's characterisation of his abandoned parish, he emphasises that Ireland's relationship with the land is dependent upon material conditions, and it is thus impermanent: without enduring signifiers. According to the priest, then, any 'cultural geography' located in the physical landscape will exist in a process of transience with ruin as its endpoint, regardless of myth. As demonstrated by telling description of emigration, Ó Faoláin portrays a 'broken world', 'full of ruins', in order to contest the fixity of the signifiers conscripted into representing 'Ireland' – including in the mythology of idyllic rural life. In this, Ó Faoláin's story uses decay as a site in which to voice social resistance within the Free State.

3. 'The good land': Stasis and Decay

As the story develops, however, it becomes clear that this method of resistance has limitations. The next ruins that the priest illustrates are used to facilitate an engaged identification of post-independence Ireland's flawed cultural structures. But their critical productiveness as sites of radical decay

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[17] Schama, p. 530.

is also constrained. After describing his own community, the priest recounts his impulsive visit to the adjacent parish. He discovers 'the good land' (p. 167) which includes the remains of abandoned Anglo-Irish Big Houses and the quality farmland they once oversaw. Although there is ruin here, Ó Faoláin demonstrates the presence of a social stasis that cannot be disrupted, even through the epistemological transience which, according to Benjamin, advancing material collapse may grant. The result is a cynical conclusion regarding Ireland's inability to realise any progressive cultural identity characterised by fluidity rather than repression.

This *failure* of radical decay as a resource for unsettling ideologies can be better understood with a return to Graham, who develops his analysis of Ireland's 'impossible cultural geography' into a critique of postcolonial nationalism and its divisive teleological assumptions – in particular, a reliance upon 'the "national" as the primary (and often only) level at which the postcolonial is relevant to Ireland'.[18] This reliance, while sustained by a moral position, depends upon an inescapable distinction:

> An essential component of postcolonial criticism has been its evolution as an ethical criticism. In that it is diagnostic of a political and historical situation, postcolonialism makes the crucial identification of who is the coloniser and who the colonised – it also morally evaluates this colonial relationship as one of fundamental inequality, in which a wrong is done to the colonised, whose integrity, space and identity is taken over and controlled against his/her will.[19]

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[18] Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 81.
[19] Ibid., p. 82.

The 'crucial identification' of colonised and coloniser creates problematic limitations. As Graham continues: 'to allow the nation to monopolise the postcolonial field is to withhold the Irish case from a more radical interrogation by the difficult ethics of the colonial encounter'.[20] Dependence on a nationalistic teleology – whether by a politician, writer, or critic – risks inescapable restriction within a reductive understanding of the colonial relationship. There is a need, then, to realise this 'more radical interrogation' of imperialism and its boundaries.

The effort to produce a 'radical' approach to the ambiguously termed 'colonial encounter', and by doing so to escape a teleology reliant upon the concept of a 'nation' as the only desirable resolution of nationalism, is registered with some unease in 'A Broken World'. By narrating his excursion to 'the neighbouring parish' (p. 167), the priest reveals that Ireland's nationalistic struggle has resulted in the Anglo-Irish leaving, and their long absence is attested to by advancing ruin. However, the postcolonial condition that this vacancy has supposedly facilitated remains dependent upon a restrictive distinction between colonised and coloniser, which – according to the priest – prevents post-independence Ireland from achieving 'real unity' in a world which 'worked' and 'hung together' (p. 169). In this section, then, Ó Faoláin deploys ruins as signifiers with limited ambiguity. They offer insight into a wider social paralysis, but also embody it themselves. Neither the ruins nor the wider landscape offer any flexibility in cultural identity. Despite the destruction and abandonment brought to many Anglo-Irish properties during the revolutionary period, closer inspection of

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[20] Ibid.

these spaces reveals that they have not been restyled by post-independence Ireland to produce anything other than an ingrained cultural division.

Ó Faoláin begins this critique by emphasising the quality of the environment in comparison to his own parish. The terms he uses to establish the difference between ruin and prosperity rely upon a concept of imperial separation. While Ireland is 'full of ruins' which signify a history of discontent and emigration, prosperity is an English condition:

> Do you know, the contrast was amazing! When I climbed down to the valley and the good land! […] The farm-houses, too. They were large and prosperous with everything you might expect to find in a sturdy English farm – barns, ducks in the pond, thick-packed granaries, airy lofts, a pigeon-croft, a seat under an arbour, fruit-gardens. (p. 167)

In characterising the postcolonial Irish landscape, the priest chooses to reference the idea of an 'English farm', using this landscape to suggest that a distinction between colonised and coloniser remains appropriate within Irish thought. The priest's descriptive resources imply that his own nation's identity can be best articulated when set against Englishness. There is a certain tragedy in this because, following independence, Ireland endured considerable reluctance on the part of Britain to acknowledge their former colony's new status; as de Valera reportedly remarked in frustration, 'if they wish to keep on saying that we are in the Empire, we cannot stop them.'[21] In this story, the perpetuation of the colonial relationship is set up to result from Irish voices also. The priest's terms of reference in distinguishing

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[21] M. J. MacManus, *Eamon de Valera* (Chicago: Ziff Davis Publishing Company, 1946), p. 251.

prosperity from ruin reinforce the significance of colonialism within Ireland's post-revolutionary cultural geography, suggesting that this unwelcome continuance of imperialism is still present in Ireland's attempt to articulate its own identity.

The association of this 'good land' with Englishness continues as the priest moves further into the parish and into the ruins of Ascendancy property. His description of its condition becomes characterised by a tense ambiguity regarding the supposed absence of the colonial representatives who once maintained this space and accessed its 'powerful view' of the rest of Ireland (p. 168). He tells his audience:

> 'I climbed lower still and came to the gates of the houses where the gentry used to live.'
> 'Used to?'
> 'Used to. I should have expected it, but somehow it hadn't occurred to me. It's funny how we all forget how time passes. But there they were – the gate-posts falling. The lodges boarded up. Notices. *For Sale*. Fifteen years of grass on the avenues. You see? "Owns ten thousand acres in Ireland. Address, Grosvenor Square, London."' (p. 168)

At first glance, the portrayal of these ruins confirms the irrelevance of the Anglo-Irish to contemporary post-independence Irish identity, for their land's ruin exemplifies its owners' absence. This is confirmed by the priest's guide, who states that the gentry who lived in these houses are now 'scattered [...] to the four winds. And they'll never come back' (p. 168). The scenery presents signs of a final, irreversible change, not only in its boarded up structures and the collapsing gateposts receding into oblivion, but in the

priest's explicit statement that this condition represents the passage of time: the 'grass on the avenues' signifies the precise number of years that have elapsed since the houses' owners left. Ruins do have an innate aptitude to demonstrate temporal elapse; as Robert Ginsberg comments, they are associated with 'time's passage',[22] a condition which suggests that their identity as structures '*shifts* or *switches*', changing 'the order of its unities [...] The ruin is not once-and-for all present. It comes into presence over time and in shifting ways. We sense this, too, as motion'.[23] The temporal distance between the present and the events which precipitated the Anglo-Irish exodus (referred to by the priest only by the euphemistic phrase 'troubled times', p. 168) is apparently confirmed by their buildings' state. The ruins appear to provide material evidence of a social change, implying that the violent revolutionary period has produced a shift in 'unities', made visible and irreversible in decay.

Closer scrutiny of this space, however, casts doubt on the idea that an imperial presence has been safely consigned to the past. This in turn questions whether, if the nation is still influenced by a colonial relationship, Ireland is capable of any more dynamic self-determination. The idea that Ascendancy's time in Ireland has been consigned to history, emphasised by the firm, abrupt restatement that they 'used to' live here, is an attempt to place the Ascendancy's presence in this space firmly in the past. But the narrator's need for confirmation is a telling indication that this may not be entirely secure. 'Fifteen years of grass' demonstrates how the space's condition reveals the passage of time, but the decay overcoming these big

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[22] Ginsberg, p. 490.
[23] Ibid., p. 158. Emphasis in original.

houses does not necessarily signify that their control has been compromised at a fundamental level. Ó Faoláin complexifies the accepted signification produced by decay. This is continued by the priest's guide, who articulates both the past and future of this landscape:

> 'They must have had good times here, once?' I said to the man who was with me. 'The best, father!' says he. 'Oh, the best out. The best while they lasted. And there were never any times like the old times. But they're scattered now, father,' says he, 'to the four winds. And they'll never come back.' 'Who owns the land, now?' I asked him. 'They own it always, but who wants it?' says he. 'The people here don't want it. They'd rather live in the towns and cities and work for wages.' (p. 168)

This annotation on ruin, compressed into a single paragraph as though to minimise its impact, reveals that although the Anglo-Irish may no longer live in this parish, they retain a presence and signification within the landscape. The 'For Sale' notices show that there has been no legal change of possession here – the land is abandoned, but 'they own it always' (p. 168). This *lack* of tropological connection between advancing ruin and the loss of social control distinguishes 'A Broken World' from other texts discussed in this thesis – such as Farrell's *Troubles*, which relishes a link between the Big House's collapse and the spiralling failure of imperialism. In this parish, by contrast, the ruin's capacity to produce the shift in 'unities' described by Ginsberg has not taken place.

Thus Ó Faoláin's portrayal of the ruins produced by 'the troubled times' (p. 168) implies that the landscape's transformation and abandonment have failed to enact the fundamental reversal in power that is the aspiration

of any revolution. Ó Faoláin's implication here is that the revolutionary period may have created material ruin, but this did necessarily alter Ireland's deeper political identity with complete success. Indeed, the ruins here illustrate a form of colonial preservation, worthy of the ideological monument envisaged by Speer. Despite superficial decay, the underlying structure of the land – and the pattern of power and subservience it dictates – remains secure. This new parish offers 'a magnificent view, a powerful view' across the rest of Ireland (p. 168), and despite the ruin that has overtaken the land the perspective it offers has not been damaged. The priest is able to make new sense of his own home only by placing it within an Ascendancy perspective – and hence within the epistemological order of colonialism, which remains the framework capable of offering 'my people' (p. 168) purpose within a spatial and social unity.

The failure of post-revolutionary Ireland to replace this order with any other coherent cultural geography is indicated by the Ascendancy's continued legal ownership of the land. But Ó Faoláin demonstrates that it exists on another level also. The structure of colonialism extends into the consciousness of rural life. This is shown in particular by the guide, who glosses the priest's experience of the parish with a picturesque description of how 'the Lord used to have tea-parties and dances there long ago' (p. 168). He reveals nostalgia for the 'good times' – presumably, though it is not said explicitly, those facilitated by colonial occupation. By describing the Anglo-Irish lifestyles as 'the best while they lasted', the man uses the houses' present, ruined condition to articulate continued loyalty to a stereotypical image of Anglo-Irish culture. This relationship to the past bears some

resemblance to the assessment of Big House fiction propounded by Seamus Deane in 1987. Deane contends that this tradition is 'an anachronism', solidified by Yeats's poetry in particular, which perpetuates a fantasy of 'refined aristocracy', 'surrounded by the unruly tenantry'.[24] The Ascendancy's parish in 'A Broken World' certainly retains the 'powerful view' that, according to Deane's criticism, is produced by an anachronistic cultural tradition. Ó Faoláin appears to advance a similar cultural appraisal here, implying that the guide's simplistic reverence is based on a myth of 'good times' which plays a role in supporting the Ascendancy's tyrannical imposition, reducing the Irish people to servants. This mythology persists, suggesting that the destruction of 'the troubled times' has not extended to the Anglo-Irish cultural image identified by Deane. Although its state reveals this repressive dependence, the parish is not a site of radical decay, for its materials are not used to secure an epistemological shift that could unseat deep-set mythologies. The decay transforming these properties thus contrasts ironically with the underlying stability of the colonial structure which predated the War of Independence.

Although this portrayal is in dialogue with Deane's verdict, 'A Broken World' offers a different explanation of this culturally ingrained imperialism. Rather than targeting Anglo-Irish writers for slavish replication of a Yeatsian cliché, Ó Faoláin implicates the ideology of nationalism in conserving a commitment to the restrictive idea of a 'refined aristocracy'[25] and failing to supply any alternative cultural geography. The nostalgia

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[24] Seamus Deane, *Celtic Revivals: Essays in Modern Irish Literature, 1880–1980* (London: Faber & Faber, 1985), pp. 31–32.

[25] Ibid.

inspired by the Ascendancy's ruin can be read as a criticism of the revolutionary ideals which, in 'A Broken World' at least, have failed to deliver. As Dan Mulhall argues:

> O'Faolain's passage from early idealistic excitement to deep frustration and dissatisfaction was matched by many others, but he was the man of letters closest to the action [...] Revolutionaries are driven by their dissatisfaction with existing realities, but tend to lack a clear conception of the kind of society they want to create. As O'Faolain viewed it, the Irish revolution had not been the product of any political philosophy, but rather of an 'heroic attitude' which after 1916 'overwhelmed the entire population'.[26]

Of course, the author was himself intimately familiar with such idealism; but this ruinous landscape reveals that by the time of the publication of *A Purse of Coppers*, Ó Faoláin's support for a 'heroic attitude' had been replaced by an advanced criticism of its limitations. Ó Faoláin demonstrates that neither these buildings nor their attendant myths of Ascendancy life have been overcome by the revolutionary impulses which brought ruin to this space during 'the troubled times'. Fifteen years on, the abandoned houses risk implying the ultimate inadequacy of all 'idealistic excitement'[27] not supported by a 'clear conception of the kind of society they want to create'.[28] Such excitement might be enough to change the environment's surface and appearance, but not to produce a ruin deep enough to erase its underlying

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[26] Dan Mulhall, 'Sean O'Faolain and the Evolution of Modern Ireland', *The Irish Review*, 26.1 (2000), 20–29 (pp. 22–23).

[27] Ibid., p. 22.

[28] Ibid., p. 23.

structural enforcement of imperialist power. The parish's ongoing decay continues without intervention, highlighting the problematic features of nationalistic thought which has been unable to reform Ireland's cultural geography into an alternative, dynamic source of self-determination.

Ó Faoláin's use of ruins to indicate paralysis forms a critique which to some extent runs counter to other historical assessments of the Free State's development (or lack thereof). Thomas Bartlett, for instance, argues that Fianna Fáil's 1932 election victory, which made de Valera President of the Executive Council, led to a period of 'change within continuity' in which de Valera initiated 'a number of symbolic alterations in the Anglo-Irish relationship' – although he admits that this progress was 'scarcely earth-shaking'.[29] Echoing the perception of social change, Declan Kiberd writes that during the late twenties and thirties 'the country was slowly recovering from the devastation of war'.[30] After the 1932 election de Valera achieved 'the legitimation of state institutions', with 'fewer and fewer dissidents' among erstwhile republicans. 'After decades of high theory and violent practice,' argues Kiberd, 'Ireland was in no mood for ideological fanaticism: a pragmatic government which could knock down some Dublin slums and build housing estates in their stead seemed a preferable option'.[31] Both these writers acknowledge the presence of social repression during the Free State, including the influence of Catholicism and the subjugated role allotted to women; but neither extends this into a judgement of national stasis. Indeed, by drawing attention to the replacement of slums in Dublin with new

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[29] Thomas Bartlett, *Ireland: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 440.
[30] Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 359.
[31] Ibid., p. 360.

structures, Kiberd uses the spatial environment to support a narrative of gradually solidifying pacifism which then facilitated progress, both in the national landscape and in its politics.

The ruins of 'A Broken World' show Ó Faoláin taking issue with assertions of socio-political change within the Free State. Ó Faoláin's perspective is far more cynical than either of these judgements. In this it can be read in light of the theoretical proposals of *Deconstructing Ireland*, and Graham's identification of the 'teleology of nationality'[32] and its moral evaluation of the binary 'colonial relationship'.[33] As Bartlett indicates, the Free State functioned by relying upon the belief that progress in the task of national self-realisation could be gained by 'symbolic alterations in the Anglo-Irish relationship'.[34] In particular this involved renegotiating the 1921 Treaty which defined Ireland as part of the 'Community of Nations known as the British Empire'.[35] The nationalist effort within postcolonialism is, as Graham describes, rooted in a desire for an 'ethical criticism'.[36] Yet the resultant teleology, a driving force between the Free State's focus on 'the Anglo-Irish relationship', risks perpetuating a dependence even in the effort to escape it. I argue here that Ó Faoláin's ironic use of physical decay to indicate cultural paralysis can be interpreted as a critique of de Valera's insistent pursuit of 'deanglicization',[37] which placed attention to the Anglo-

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[32] Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 83.

[33] Ibid., p. 82.

[34] Bartlett, p. 440.

[35] 'Treaty between Great Britain & Ireland. Signed 6th December 1921', in *National Archives of Ireland* <http://treaty.nationalarchives.ie/document-gallery/anglo-irish-treaty-6-december-1921/anglo-irish-treaty-6-december-1921-page-1/> [accessed 29 May 2019].

[36] Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 82.

[37] Kiberd, p. 359.

Irish relationship as the only means of realising national identity. The ruins of emigration and troubled times that dominate the priest's portrait of Ireland are unlikely to be knocked down and replaced in the treatment of 'Dublin slums' that Kiberd cites as proof of social change. Ó Faoláin's ruins are entrenched within the landscape, and nationalistic idealism has provided no alternative to the cultural structure that they signify.

4. The Uncrossed Threshold

A prohibitive dependence upon the rigid colonial encounter is a concern lodged thoroughly in existing postcolonial debate. Smyth describes how 'as part of the programme to develop a consistent and coherent resistance to colonialism', Ireland's ideological aspirations preceding revolution were 'structured in terms of similarity (Irishness) and difference (Englishness) during the period leading up to the revolution'. Concern persists, he continues, that 'this oppositional structure [...] was not modified after the withdrawal of colonial power, but remained the principal device whereby post-revolutionary Irishness was defined and characterised'. [38] The identification of an 'oppositional structure' underlines Graham's criticism of dependence upon the 'teleology of nationality'.[39] The latter critic goes on to propose a conceptual means of averting this problematic structure. This relies upon the idea of liminality: in Graham's definition, 'marginal areas, where the ultimate opposition of coloniser and colonised breaks down

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[38] Smyth, *The Novel and the Nation*, p. 4.

[39] Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 83.

through irony, imitation and subversion.'[40] As my own theory of radical decay proposes, ruins can provide a literal location for conceptions of liminality. Offering uneasy transitions between presence and absence, meaning and oblivion, ruins embody the concept of the threshold, and so may facilitate the incursion of scrutiny and subversion across restrictive cultural boundaries. Ó Faoláin's short fiction explores the capacity of ruins to foster this liminality – and the opportunity it may provide to challenge nationalism. However, the realisation of such potential is not necessarily followed through within 'A Broken World'.

It is useful here to formulate a comparison between this text and 'Midsummer Night Madness'. In Ó Faoláin's earlier story, the narrator begins by endorsing a philosophy of nationalism predicated on a hostile opposition between his own status as a colonised revolutionary and Henn's role as 'one of the class that had battened for too long on our poor people'.[41] But as the narrative develops, this simplistic articulation of romantic nationalism is challenged by the environment of Henn Hall itself. Henn's ruinous state, his drawing-room 'battered and unkempt like a tramp', drinking glasses 'brown with the encrustations of years',[42] appears at least partly to alter the narrator's perception of the Anglo-Irish class that he represents. He identifies the landlord as 'ruined', and this conceptual status permits this colonial encounter to become more nuanced and sympathetic. The narrator uses the description to argue that Henn is 'part of Ireland as

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[40] Ibid., p. 86.

[41] Ó Faoláin, 'Midsummer Night Madness', p. 12.

[42] Ibid., p. 21.

much as us'.[43] Ó Faoláin deploys ruin to complicate the assumptions regarding the 'inequality' of the relationship between colonised and coloniser which supports the simplifications of romantic nationalism.

The process of ideological reconfiguration illustrated at Henn Hall is facilitated by the drawing-room it takes place in – for this ruinous space creates liminality. Ó Faoláin uses it to realise – at least partially – the definition of this term developed by Victor Witter Turner: a condition that is 'ambiguous, neither here nor there, betwixt and between all fixed points of classification'.[44] In other words, it is a space which resists a final definition, existing in a state of continued transience and evading fixity within a schematic 'classification' (such as 'colonial', and the nationalistic connotations expressed by this attribution). Henn Hall is perhaps not ambiguous enough to be characterised by Turner's phrase 'neither here nor there'. The narrator retains awareness of his location within the space of the Ascendancy, and he announces in his first impression that the drawing-room is 'just as I expected' (p. 21); yet the extensive presence of ruin works to belie his expectations of imperial grandeur, and so shifts his nationalistic understanding of his enemy's identity. Ó Faoláin's deployment of these characteristics moves to fulfil Graham's aspiration that liminal spaces can alter the colonial encounter to resist 'simple cultural dichotomy', including by seeing the Anglo-Irish 'figured as neurotic and uncertain rather than bombastic and unshakeable'.[45] Indeed, Ó Faoláin develops this figuration of Henn further than Graham suggests: he is able to inspire empathy, and even

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[43] Ibid., p. 23.

[44] Victor Witter Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), p. 232.

[45] Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 85.

a sense of shared national identity, through the revelation that ruinous suffering may be a mutual experience. In such scenes of this, Ó Faoláin is able to develop liminality within spatial environments to create tentative ideological rapprochements.

The ruinscape presented in 'A Broken World' is different. Given how physical change is revealed to signify political stagnation in 'the neighbouring parish', it seems less likely that any of the ruins described by the priest could be a source of liminality. Ó Faoláin thus frustrates any possibility that features in the landscape might facilitate interrogation or subversion of the 'oppositional structure' which, as Smyth suggests, continues to organise post-independence Ireland. The tension between temporal progression and political inertia revealed in the decaying state of the Big Houses is used to spatialise, and hence make visible, the problematic dependence of the postcolonial nation upon a repressive colonial structure. The paralytic restrictiveness of this cultural geography is visible in the ruins of the Ascendancy's parish (which will never belong to anyone else). But it is also evident in the overarching image of Ireland as 'a broken world' which drives the priest's conclusions. The two areas featured in the story are separated by a boundary that is very rarely crossed. Even the priest undertakes his solitary journey 'after three years without stepping out of the parish' (p. 167). He implies that his parishioners are barely aware that this boundary exists, for they have no sense of their condition being 'lonely' (p. 167) or incomplete, and perhaps, as in the farmer's eventual exit from the train, move through their land based on 'animal magnetism' (p. 172) rather than conscious awareness of its parameters.

The border's apparent impermeability, unchallenged by an ignorant populace, prohibits its renegotiation into a space of 'common thought' (p. 164). It is a threshold, but does not resemble the liminal state described by Turner as 'neither here nor there' in a way capable of rendering 'all fixed points of classification' unsettled.[46] The division between the two parishes forms a physical inscription of the foundational distinction between coloniser and colonised, but, unlike in 'Midsummer Night Madness', Ó Faoláin demonstrates little claim to overcome the boundary in order to realise the 'potentiality' Turner ascribes to liminal space.[47] The opportunities of introducing liminality into what Graham calls the 'colonial encounter' are inhibited in this story because the landscape's structure largely prevents any such encounters taking place. Indeed, the structure of the narrative itself reinforces a sense of geographical and historical separation in the way it presents their respective forms of ruin. This condition is said to overcome both parishes, but neither manifestation of decay is constructed to produce liminality. The priest establishes two sources of ruin ('emigration' and 'the troubled times'), but despite the innately confined space of a short story, these historical experiences remain discrete. The reader is restrained from formulating any lateral connection between them, so that Ó Faoláin prohibits the apprehension of shared experience used to challenge the colonial encounter within 'Midsummer Night Madness', and instead perpetuates an entrenched disunity without reconciliation, even through knowledge of ruin.

Again, the meaning of the landscape in 'A Broken World' fails to

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[46] Turner, p. 232.

[47] Quoted in Mihai I. Spariosu, *The Wreath of Wild Olive: Play, Liminality, and the Study of Literature* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 38.

be threatened by its advancing decay. In this, Ó Faoláin's story produces an active criticism of the Free State and its claims to support an idealised definition of Irishness. De Valera's attempts to establish a national identity – one genuinely independent from that produced by British imperialism – relied upon achieving control of the island's boundaries. As R. F. Foster comments, 'when de Valera entered power and began dismantling Ireland's connection to the Commonwealth, he saw it as a redefinition of boundaries on all sorts of spiritual as well as geopolitical levels'. Despite such ambitions, Ireland remained characterised by an ongoing 'incongruence between theoretical national identity and the effective borders of the state'.[48] The most glaring source of this 'incongruence' remained (and has arguably never ceased to be) the border with Northern Ireland, a conflict hardly resolved by the 1937 Constitution's declaration that 'the national territory consists of the whole island of Ireland, its islands and the territorial seas'.[49] Ó Faoláin himself struggled to navigate personal discontent as 'a Republican anxious for a united Ireland' on the question of the Northern Irish border,[50] and the pressured awareness of a geographical restriction, beyond the control of either nationalistic declarations or subversive renegotiations, is figured in 'A Broken World'. Ó Faoláin's stress upon the existence of a social divide that is maintained, rather than ruined, draws attention to the 'incongruence' Foster identifies between an idealised concept of post-independence identity and

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[48] R. F. Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch: Connections in Irish and English History* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 92.

[49] 'Article 2', *Constitution of Ireland – Bunreacht Na hÉireann* <https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Ireland_(original_text)> [accessed 10 February 2019].

[50] Seán Ó Faoláin, *De Valera: A New Biography* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1939), p. 158.

the inconvenient reality of the state's actual, impermeable boundaries. However, he appears unable to take this social criticism further by formulating ruins with productive liminality that might decay 'radical' enough to disrupt a space's ingrained signification. Consequently, Ó Faoláin's landscape underscores the priest's eventual conclusion: the attempt to formulate a flexible, liberated cultural geography is destined to fail.

5. The Ruined Priest

The sense of defeat that permeates Ó Faoláin's attempt to produce radical decay within the framework of 'A Broken World' is developed in a further area. After the priest has disembarked the train, the conversation between narrator and farmer sees the narrative turn to another topic – and another source of ruin. Ó Faoláin focuses upon a means of revealing the prohibitive influence of the Catholic Church within Irish life, and its role in repressing any attempt to establish an alternative cultural geography. In his vague responses, the farmer reveals that the eccentric priest who has now departed is 'silenced': barred from carrying out sacerdotal functions, including preaching.[51] According to the farmer this was for 'politics':

> 'He wanted the people to have the land.'
> 'What land?'
> 'The land. The gentry's land.'
> I leaned to him eagerly –
> 'But isn't that what ye want? Isn't that what the whole
> trouble is? Isn't that what the Government wants?'

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[51] Ellen Badone, 'Introduction', in *Religious Orthodoxy and Popular Faith in European Society*, ed. by Ellen Badone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 3–21 (p. 19).

'Aye. I suppose it is, you know? But he wanted it to be a sudden business. […] Sure, he took ten or twenty foolish young lads and, one night, he thrun down the walls of Lord Milltown's estate. He started some sort of a League, too.' (pp. 170–71)

At the opening, we are led to believe that the priest's ideas may be merely eccentric – he is 'a local "character"' (p. 165). By the close, however, they are shown to risk sedition. Only through this exposition, delivered reticently, does an image of the priest's own role as a historical actor in 'the troubled times' (p. 168) of the Irish revolutionary period emerge. With it, readers are provided with a sense of the national division regarding the prospect of giving 'the people' full ownership of Ireland. The priest has made efforts to energise his parishioners into more active nation-building, both by attempting to reclaim the land of an Anglo-Irish estate, and by beginning a farmers' league and demanding their rights in hiring halls. This attempt to bring about Irish autonomy as 'a sudden business' has led to punishment, not by the Anglo-Irish, but by his own Church. The priest's story suggests that attempting to redefine the Irish nation through any political change in a manner judged in conflict with the theocratic state's prevailing ideologies will prompt an oppressive response from ecclesiastical authorities – even if, without that change, Ireland might face collapse into further ruin.

Through this reference to the concept of 'silencing', Ó Faoláin registers that the Catholic Church enacts harsh measures in response to dissident conceptions of Ireland's ruinous state. In doing so, he offers the reader a glimpse of the Church's deep political involvement in the emerging Irish nation. Although it remains only a glimpse in 'A Broken World', the

brief sighting of the Church's authority allows for potentially critical reflection regarding its reactionary policies. Ó Faoláin expressed his own position on the part played by Catholicism in independent Ireland at greater length in his 1939 biography *De Valera*. The criticisms produced in this later text are striking, not least in their distinction from the muted suggestion of social oppression provided by the priest's treatment in 'A Broken World'. In *De Valera*, Ó Faoláin acknowledges the possibility that in a country struggling to establish 'self-government', the Church's political influence might provide a desirable source of 'leadership and guidance' that 'is not to be wholly deplored'.[52] However, this purposefully naive preface is followed by a stridently critical appraisal of the clerical 'leadership and guidance' actually provided. Censorship, practices in juvenile detention, and the treatment of unmarried mothers mean that, in Ó Faoláin's verdict, 'this indirect power of the church [...] must always be remembered as an annotation on the degree of freedom in action enjoyed by De Valera, or any other Irish statesman.'[53] The open hostility in this assessment, not only towards the Church's policies but the statesmen who have allowed their own 'freedom in action' to be limited by it, is very different from Ó Faoláin's attempt to resist Ireland's 'puritanical'[54] climate in 'A Broken World'. The comparative muteness of the latter work stymies open reference to oppressive Catholic practice. While the story represents an attempt to confront such practices, it also registers the difficulty of performing such a confrontation from a subjective position within Irish culture.

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[52] Ó Faoláin, *De Valera*, p. 168.

[53] Ibid., p. 169.

[54] Ibid.

Ó Faoláin's apparent struggle to venture far into the priest's 'silenced' state is therefore significant. On hearing that 'he's silenced' the narrator notes that 'there was a touch of dread in that word, "silenced"' (p. 170). This 'touch of dread' suggests that the very *prospect* of the priest's experience is a matter of recognisable social anxiety. The narrator does not explain the presence of this emotion further, and in this failure he replicates the same censorship imposed upon the priest. The brevity of the encounter with clerical policy risks limiting any use of the priest's condition to stimulate critical reflection on how the Church works to circumscribe Irish identity. It is not developed into a more targeted critique of the institutions (clerical or otherwise) which restrict and dominate life within the Free State. However, Ó Faoláin certainly provides resources with which to reflect on the priest's 'silenced' condition and what it reveals about power in Ireland. In a final monologue, he tells us that he has been reluctantly persuaded by the controversial vision of national ruin his temporary companion has offered: 'I could not deny to the wintry moment its own truth, and that under the white shroud, covering the whole of Ireland, life was lying broken and hardly breathing' (p. 173). The narrator's struggle to provide any explicit articulation of Irish culture to match what the priest has been silenced for is manifest here. Although accepting of the priest's vision of national fracture and rural decay, he does so through a retreat into a metaphor (the snow is as a 'white shroud'), without making an attempt to extricate himself from this conceit by examining the authorities which keep this 'broken and hardly breathing' paralysis in place. Yet the evident persuasiveness of the priest's argument about the 'broken' condition of life in Ireland is enough to leave him not only

disheartened, but also desperate to formulate an 'image of life that would fire and fuse all' (p. 173), constituting a form of cultural repair. These reflections indicate the radical potential behind the priest's observations, which is itself suggestive of the nature of his silencing, enacted not just because the priest's 'politics' deviate from those sanctioned by the state, but because his ideas might be able to provoke an active response in an audience, threatening the control of Church and state over Ireland's national identity by inspiring the search for a new 'image of life'.

The connection between the priest's silencing and the vision of a flawed cultural geography that he has elaborated is underlined further. Ó Faoláin suggests a relationship between the Church's authority – responsible for the punishment enacted on its erstwhile representative – and the inevitable failure to remedy Ireland's broken existence. Having heard his fellow passenger's ideas, the narrator asks whether 'now that the gentry are gone, won't the people [...] begin to make a complete world of their own?' (p. 169). For answer, the priest looks towards the farmer and lets out a 'cold, cackling laugh' (p. 170) ending in a groan of despair. The implication of this response is that the farmer, and the peasant class he represents, is incapable of even conceiving of this task of cultural self-repair, let alone completing it. Although this moment is not linked explicitly with the Church's social dominance, it is followed by a telling illustration of how Ireland relates to the priesthood. The reader can form an association between this behaviour and the inability to repair its ruinous landscape. As the priest leaves the train, the narrator describes how

> A manservant, touching his cap, took the bags. The station-master touched his cap to him. The porter receiving the tickets touched his cap to him. The jarvey, who was waiting for him, bowed as he received the bags from the manservant. Black, tall, thin, and straight as a lamp-post, he left the lit, snow-bright station with every down-looking lounger there bowing and hat-touching as he passed. (p. 170)

In the compressed space of a short story, the use of repetition to structure this description is felt sharply here. The three identical gestures of cap-touching, one following the next without interruption or commentary, create a sense of automated and uniform response to the presence of the Church. This develops into a wider portrait of social behaviour in response to the priest, with 'every down-looking lounger' making a subservient gesture. Adding to the sense that this image can be taken as a broader image of the Church's operation, the priest himself has lost the distinct features of a local 'character' now that he has left the intimate environment of the train compartment, becoming instead a rigid and inhuman figure, 'straight as a lamp-post' in the black costume of the priesthood.

This picture of humility in response to religion relates to the Irish people's apparently inevitable failure to save themselves from a 'broken' existence in their independent nation. The subservience on display confirms the priest's thesis that 'the people' (p. 169) will never repair the state of ruin he has illustrated. As Richard Bonaccorso comments, though the character is presented with 'a show of respect', 'his peasants do not understand this rebel

priest, nor do they understand or even hope for a better life.'[55] But Ó Faoláin's characterisation of the peasants is not merely an attempt to exemplify their ignorance, for it has deeper social implications in relation to the Church's role in postcolonial Ireland. Ó Faoláin suggests here that the Catholic Church has been emboldened by the Free State to embody and re-inflict the oppressive authority of imperialism. As the passive and idealistic preservation of the Ascendancy's ruins demonstrates, Ó Faoláin seeks to illustrate that independence has not liberated rural Ireland from the subservient role imposed on its people by the structure of colonised and coloniser. The scene as the priest departs provides a physical illustration of an earlier criticism that the priest has directed towards his parishioner's passivity, describing them as 'too respectful – tipping their hats to everybody. They were always making what we call "the poor mouth" – a mendicant habit of centuries, I suppose' (p. 166). This identity is a 'habit of centuries' – and its repetition as the priest disembarks suggests that in post-revolutionary Ireland, rather than working to create a truly reformed and liberated cultural geography, the Church has replicated the authoritarian social structure which preceded it. Irish citizens are maintained – and maintain themselves – in the same 'down-looking' position orchestrated by the British Empire.

The intensely restrictive social landscape of Ireland, which Ó Faoláin has revealed through a presentation of physical ruin, is thus given a latent connection to the oppressive 'theological mentality'[56] evident within 'A Broken World'. This means of facilitating scrutiny of the Church is enhanced

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[55] Richard Bonaccorso, *Sean O'Faolain's Irish Vision* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1987), p. 56.

[56] Ó Faoláin, *De Valera*, p. 149.

by a further use of ruin to formulate resistant social commentary regarding the forbidding consequences of deviant conceptions of Irish identity. In this case it is the experience of human ruin which has overcome (or been imposed upon) the silenced priest. This ruin is palpable in his physical appearance. The narrator describes how he is 'a skeleton of a man, and the veins of his temples bulged out like nerves' (p. 179), suggesting that he is unattractive and unwell. For the rest of his train journey, the narrator attempts to relate this state to the priest's political thesis, and attributes explanations for his poor condition which would also prevent the narrator having to accept the bleak political vision that the priest has expressed:

> For those two hours I tried to refute the talk of that priest [...] thinking that the thin cheeks and the throbbing nerve of the man were nothing but the sign of twenty years of self-corrosion, and that even when he was a young man in his first parish, his heart must have been so bitter and vain that, like a leech, it began to destroy everything to preserve itself [...] But, though that might be all true, I could not deny to the wintry moment its own truth, and that under that white shroud, covering the whole of Ireland, life was lying broken and hardly breathing. (p. 173)

In an attempt to conserve his own more optimistic ideals, the narrator toys with the idea that the priest has conceived of Ireland's broken cultural geography in order to carry out a perverse act of self-preservation. By claiming that his temporary companion must have a 'bitter and vain' heart, with a consciousness driven to 'destroy everything', he attempts to characterise the priest's ruinous condition as purely personal, a private

corruption not demonstrative of any oppressive political context. This attempt remains unconvincing, and the narrator eventually identifies a bleak correspondence between the 'self-corrosion' of the man he has met and the priest's vision of 'the whole of Ireland' – both are broken, reflecting each other's damage.

The priest's condition, then, extends beyond physical and emotional frailty: he is 'silenced', and in this has lost his public role and the ability to articulate a philosophy in an official capacity. His broken, skeletal state bears some resemblance to the form of human ruin discussed earlier in this thesis – that developed by William Trevor in *Fools of Fortune*. In Trevor's novel, Willie's mother Evie experiences lifelong trauma after the actions of the Black and Tans. Her emotional suffering is mapped onto her own identity, as she becomes an alcoholic and ruminates continually on her losses. A comparison between Trevor and Ó Faoláin's different renditions of ruined selves is profitable here, for it reveals a distinct characteristic in the priest's personal destruction. In contrast to Evie's traumatic emotional experience, the latter figure has been ruined at the level of spirituality. In a rather understated summary, Doyle argues that through the priest's example Ó Faoláin seeks to characterise the Free State as 'a time when even kindly, progressive, and well-intentioned clergymen, who seek the improvement of the people's lot, meet resentment and opposition – not only from their clerical superiors but from the very people whom they seek to benefit.'[57] Resentment and opposition are evident in the reaction that the priest received for his agitative 'politics', but the response he has undergone has

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[57] Doyle, p. 78.

been far more extreme. Although the reader is provided with little indication of this man's nature before his silencing, the ruined figure that he has become by the time of this story is not recognisable as 'kindly,' 'progressive', or 'well-intentioned'. He now bears a 'hellish, pedagogic look' (p. 164) which indicates that the priest's instinct to provide instruction has been changed by his official censorship into a more demonic and aberrant style. The narrator concludes that the multiple personal explanations for his cynical, degraded condition 'might be all true', but it is the dread status as 'silenced' that has left his previous identity – a figure of authority, able to speak – in ruins.

Ruin as Revelation in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*

1. Part of the Landscape

'A Broken World' reveals an attempt by Ó Faoláin to reflect upon cultural geography within post-independence Ireland, drawing attention to ruins in order to express criticism of a society within which he was deeply involved. The second half of this chapter considers a text which also focuses upon the consequences of Irish independence and life within the Free State – albeit at a considerable temporal difference. Like 'A Broken World', Barry's novel draws attention to ruinous landscapes which otherwise go unrecognised. Indeed, *The Secret Scripture* (2008) demands that ruin be acknowledged. The numerous instances of decay and degeneration which infiltrate the text's portrait of Ireland make it impossible to maintain an idealised national image. De Valera's vision of a nation built upon 'cosy homesteads', with 'sturdy children', 'athletic youths' and 'comely maidens' all living in 'frugal comfort'[1] is determinedly undermined, prompting confrontation of the deeply gendered corruption and brutality which the myth of a pastoral nation conceals. From the outset, Roseanne's account of her 'cold' Sligo town reveals the traces of social aspects that Ireland does not wish to recognise:

> The river also took the rubbish down to the sea, and bits of things that were once owned by people and pulled from the banks, and bodies too, if rarely, oh and poor babies, that were embarrassments, the odd time. The speed and depth of the river would have been a great friend to secrecy.[2]

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[1] De Valera, 'On Language and the Irish Nation', p. 466.

[2] Sebastian Barry, *The Secret Scripture* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008; repr. 2015), p. 3. Further references to *The Secret Scripture* within this chapter will be to this edition, and will be given

By portraying the landscape from the novel's outset as complicit in 'secrecy', Roseanne establishes the attitudes of Ireland's society towards its children, its dead, and its 'embarrassments'. Deceased people and babies are considered part of the general social detritus and 'rubbish' to be carried out to sea and forgotten. The description of 'rubbish' and 'bits of things' pollutes the idea of a cosy, unblemished pastoral existence in rural Ireland, which, it is suggested, can only be maintained by the systematic erasure of what is culturally unacceptable. The river's depth and blackness imply the obfuscation and wilful ignorance that the novel will show to be characteristic of Ireland's attitudes to its 'embarrassments'; the euphemistic language ('the odd time') demonstrates the difficulty of articulating things so deeply repressed with the clarity that Roseanne's surname, Clear, ironically demands. The struggle to make things 'clear' is particularly difficult in regard to Ireland's past treatment of women. The asylums and institutions to which Roseanne is confined were socially accepted spaces of the everyday. In 2002, after the release of Peter Mullan's film *The Magdalene Sisters*, the *New York Times* interviewed a viewer from rural Tipperary who described how 'he had always considered the asylums part and parcel of the landscape; never had he thought to question their existence'.[3] The idea that asylums for supposedly disobedient women were an everyday part of 'the landscape', so that ordinary Irish men and women could be aware of them but unable to engage critically with their status, is explored and exposed through Barry's narrative. His

in the text.

[3] Sarah Lyall, 'Irish Recall Sad Homes for "Fallen" Women', *New York Times*, 28 November 2002 <https://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/28/world/irish-recall-sad-homes-for-fallen-women.html> [accessed 17 May 2019] (para. 4 of 26).

deployment of ruin works to reveal the suffering experienced by marginalised individuals in Ireland, and demands a revisiting of Ireland's historical landscape to understand what the nation became after independence.

The Secret Scripture is set at the beginning of the twenty-first century in a decayed psychiatric hospital named Roscommon. The narrative is told both by Roseanne Clear, a patient who was admitted many years previously after bearing an illegitimate child, and her psychiatrist Dr Grene, who is composing a 'commonplace book' to accompany his effort to discover the condition and histories of his patients before Roscommon Regional Mental Hospital is demolished and a new hospital is built. Roseanne's 'testimony of herself', and Dr Grene's investigations into the hospital's archive, gradually unfold the story of her youth in Ireland during the War of Independence – in which her father, an officer in the Royal Irish Constabulary, was murdered – and in the Free State, when her marriage to Tom McNulty in forcibly annulled. Roseanne becomes pregnant by her husband's brother Eneas (who returns briefly from Barry's earlier novel *The Whereabouts of Eneas McNulty*, 1998) but her child is given up for adoption on the orders of the town priest, and Roseanne is institutionalised. Dr Grene meanwhile discovers her history and eventually finds that he himself, adopted in Ireland but brought up in England, is her biological son. As both narrators endeavour to create honest documents regarding Ireland's present and past, Barry provokes reflection on the difficulties inherent in formulating an authoritative history that adequately acknowledges the experiences of figures typically marginalised by Ireland's authorised national narrative. Dr Grene discovers his birth mother's story and his own identity but is left with

considerable scepticism regarding the authenticity and objectivity of historiographic practice.

In the rest of this chapter, I will examine the way Roscommon Hospital is described and utilised as a site, contending that its ruined qualities are developed by Barry to provide ways of resisting the supposedly impartial metanarrative of Irish heritage, in order to illuminate and, to a partial extent give voice to, the identities of those the nation has oppressed and exiled. Barry also uses the hospital's ruin to contest how the manifold institutions in Ireland, termed an 'architecture of containment' by James M. Smith,[4] have not been acknowledged sufficiently by the nation's contemporary heritage practices. Roseanne's story is tied to the site which imprisoned her, and is given voice by the opportunities for radical decay within its ruin – but this history is also shown to be under threat. In exploring how Barry establishes resistance to Ireland's dominant heritage agendas, I will examine several manifestations of ruin within the text. First, I consider the processes of expression and destruction at work within written documents in the novel, examining how authoritative discourses are countered through archival ruin. The epistemological insecurity resulting from the official hospital archive's decay precipitates Dr Grene's more sceptical inquiry into Roseanne's past, as well as giving Roseanne's account its own authority. After this, I examine the physical functioning of Roscommon Hospital, evaluating it against Foucault's concept of 'heterotopia', and arguing that the decay present in the building is used to both reveal and resist its oppressive functioning, providing Barry with the

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[4] Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, passim.

resource to construct a dissident cultural history of what took place in Ireland's institutions. Finally, I assess how the text reflects critically on the building's memorial function and the wider context of memory in twenty-first century Ireland, exploring ruin as both a threat to the survival of the past, and a means of destabilising the heritage authorities who seek to overwrite it.

2. Archives of Ruin

Barry's effort to register and preserve parts of cultural memory which have been systematically erased from public view begins through an unsteadying of memory and its sources. The hospital of Roscommon appears to function through documentation and official record, yet the failure of these records is evident in their ruinous physical condition. Dr Grene's quest for information about Roseanne is precipitated by inadvertent damage to her files, a loss which is connected to the decrepit state of the asylum in general. Dr Grene admits this to Roseanne when he begins to question her:

> 'Well,' he said, 'unfortunately a great swathe of our archive in the basement has been used, not surprisingly, by generations of mice for bedding, and it is all quite ruined and unreadable. Your own file such as it is had been attacked in a most interesting fashion. It would not shame an Egyptian tomb. It seems to fall apart at the touch of a hand.' (p. 27)

Physical decay and epistemological insecurity are connected directly here, as the archive's evident fragility and its 'ruined' state make the details of Roseanne's past and admission unknowable. Memory is suggested to be (at

least officially) dependent upon certified documentation, a resource assumed necessary in order to know the truth of the past. In *Troubles* (a text which, as I will argue below, Barry engages with indirectly in *The Secret Scripture*) Farrell describes how the Major has a 'defective memory' after WWI which 'would cause whole blocks of facts to submerge for a while, only to reappear somewhere else later on, rather like certain volcanic islands are reputed to do in the South Seas'.[5] This denotes his lack of control over the past and reality – not a complete loss, but an inability to keep his memories in an orderly sequence. In *The Secret Scripture*, however, the 'facts' of Roseanne's past are presented as a physical ruin, beyond repair or access, liable to 'fall apart at the touch of a hand'. The official version of Roseanne's history has been sent down to a basement archive, but, unlike in Farrell, it has not been 'submerge[d] for a while' ready to reappear. Neglect has made it into a lost artefact which has undergone ruin beyond recovery.

Yet this ruined state and loss of knowledge also becomes an opportunity for a socially resistant intervention in the formulation of Roseanne's history. It enables Roseanne to develop her own narrative of the past – which, it is eventually revealed, reaches the reader because Dr Grene discovered it and chose to interpolate it with his own 'commonplace book'. This contests the fragments of her 'official' history which the psychiatrist does manage to source, particularly the indictment which led to Roseanne's institutionalisation, written by Father Gaunt, the priest in her town: 'the remnant of some sort of deposition, mostly eaten away by mice and crawling with silverfish, like some ancient scroll of the desert' (p. 126). Just as Dr

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[5] Farrell, p. 12.

Grene compared Roseanne's case to 'an Egyptian tomb', her deposition is afforded the status of a relic from another historical era (a somewhat blithe assumption on the doctor's part about the distant nature of Irish history, and one which Roseanne's contemporary writing contradicts). In his metaphor, Dr Grene affords Gaunt a privileged, insightful power over Roseanne's past. Ciara Breathnach notes that 'Catholic ideologies dominated the ethos of all legislative public health reform in Ireland and, by natural extension, hospital administration.'[6] Although *The Secret Scripture* contains no polemical indictments of the Church's influence in de Valera's Ireland, the authorship of this document, and the respect that Dr Grene gives it, denote the intense presence of the Catholic Church in the lives of women such as Roseanne – and in the resources available to tell their history. Describing the deposition as an 'apocryphal gospel', Dr Grene considers it an 'educated effort' (p. 126) and later admits that Father Gaunt's style and language make him give it more credence, 'because he writes well in a sort of classical way, no doubt taking his syntax and his skills from his training in Maynooth' (p. 158). The Church has attempted to write Roseanne's life conclusively and Father Gaunt has had apparent persuasive success.

However, the ruined nature of the deposition document, while potentially giving it automatic weight as a historical artefact (hence inspiring Dr Grene's almost reverential archaeological and Biblical metaphors), also permits its overwriting. It does not, at least, remain the sole source of historical knowledge. While Dr Grene attempts to find and decipher written

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[6] Ciara Breathnach, 'Medicalizing the Female Reproductive Cycle in Rural Ireland, 1926–56', *Historical Research*, 85.230 (2012), 674–90 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2281.2011.00585.x> (p. 679).

'gospels' of Roseanne's life, the text interleaves his account with her own memories, allowing for a secondary voice to challenge the imposition of the documents which have led to her lifelong imprisonment. When he discovers Roseanne's furtively written 'testimony of herself' at the novel's close, Dr Grene affords it respect, reading it 'like a scholar of her life' (p. 288), and allowing it to create a formal and perspectival disjuncture through shared narrative space. Grene suggests that attempts to vindicate or dismiss the account on the grounds of factual truth alone are insufficient: 'The one thing that is fatal in the reading of impromptu history is a wrongful desire for accuracy. There is no such thing' (p. 290). Roseanne's alternative narrative has a personal intimacy and a 'sincerity' (p. 289) which runs counter to the moralistic claims of Father Gaunt and the complicit medical profession. Its status as 'impromptu history' resists the 'apocryphal gospel' written by the priest. The ruination of the archive ensures that Gaunt's writing can be recognised as 'apocryphal': flawed. It does not prevent the Church's epistemological control stretching into Roseanne's contemporary life, but it does provoke historical reflection and permit her previously unheard voice to emerge – a technique Barry works towards through the text as a whole.

Roseanne's testimony is able both to contest facts and command a sincerity which lends her authority even when she appears to be factually wrong. Its ability to do so is developed gradually as her account progresses. Dr Grene's hindered passage through the remnants of Ireland's archives allows Roseanne independent narrative space and emphasises the partiality of those accredited sources, both in terms of their practical fragmentation and their manipulative ideological perspectives. The original version of

Roseanne's deposition is not immediately available, and this temporary narrative vacancy allows her own story to unfold while Dr Grene attempts to gain access to a copy not gnawed by silverfish. When he does acquire it, he acknowledges that it offers 'a sort of landscape to put behind the figure I know in the bed' (p. 141), but by this time he appears to have become cautious about relying on the official record and 'educated' voice of social authority:

> As she herself continues unforthcoming, I had also a great frisson of entry to read it, as if I were getting the answers I sought from her, but of this I must be very wary. The written word assumes authority but it may not have it. I must not necessarily let her silence be filled with this, although it is a great temptation, because it is a shortcut, or a way around. (p. 141)

Though eager to consult written documents about Roseanne, whose unwilling account he only attempted to draw out because of archival failure, Dr Grene is also wary of being too ready as a reader to grant the written account 'authority' over the landscape of historical and personal identity. Michel Foucault emphasises the way that written notes assert the power of the medical profession, arguing in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973) that 'it is description, or, rather, the implicit labour of language into description, that authorizes the transformation of symptom into sign and the passage from patient to disease and from the individual to the conceptual.'[7] Official, medical truth is not given but rather emerges through what Foucault calls

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[7] Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, trans. by A. M. Sheridan ([London]: Tavistock, 1973; repr. London: Routledge, 2003), p. 140.

'total description', [8] in which doctors connect 'the random field of pathological events' with 'the pedagogical domain in which they formulate the order of their truth.'[9] In Barry's story, both doctors and the Church are responsible for this domain. The decay of the materials by which this omniscient truth is established from the 'random' events allows that truth to be questioned. Even though he is able to source a more legible form of the 'nearly destroyed' duplicate in the archive of Roscommon Hospital, the fragmentary nature of Roseanne's file has already established its status as 'apocryphal', rather than any undisputable truth from an all-knowing judge. In *The Secret Scripture* the linguistic authority of repressive power in post-independence Ireland is made questionable in that writing's physical ruin.

3. Roscommon Hospital: Decay as Revelation, Ruin as Resistance

The textual conflicts which mark Roseanne's life are not the only locations of ruin in the novel. Her story is also determined by contestations of physical space, and Barry deploys ruin here. He uses Roscommon Hospital's decayed state to draw new attention to the workings of a space that would otherwise be accepted and ignored by society – stylising the hospital with images of ruin that reveal fundamentally oppressive processes at work – and to provide an actual means of subverting the authorities which control Roseanne through her confinement. Roseanne's 'social' admission to Sligo Mental Hospital, and afterwards Roscommon, can be seen as an example of the Free State's reliance upon institutions to maintain Ireland's political and moral

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[8] Ibid., p. 142.
[9] Ibid., p. 140.

integrity. In order to examine Barry's use of ruin in engaging with this history, it is of value to first establish the contextual reality of Ireland's institutional culture. Foucault's theorisation of space, in particular the idea of 'heterotopia', provides a valuable conceptual structure with which to dissect this spatial control, and hence the way Barry illuminates and challenges this power.

In 'Of Other Spaces' (1986), Foucault describes spaces of otherness and liminality which can moderate boundaries and offer an artificial environment in which to process specific encounters or transgressions. Unlike utopias, these are:

> real places [...] which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality.[10]

Though it can be found in an actual location, the heterotopia's function is 'outside' and distinct from the rest of the world. Heterotopias exist in order to perform identifiable functions. Psychiatric hospitals and prisons, for instance, can serve as a foil to the rest of society in order to emphasise how the latter exemplifies only 'normal' conduct. Foucault described these as 'heterotopias of deviation', designed to house 'individuals whose behavior is

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[10] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), 22–27 <https://doi.org/10.2307/464648> (p. 24).

deviant from the norm.'[11] In doing this, the limits of acceptable conduct are defined and transgressors isolated.

This concept of a space intended to police social norms is apposite in the context of the network of institutions established in post-independence Ireland. Allegedly opened to protect vulnerable women, these spaces can be seen as heterotopian projects, designed to set down the boundaries of the permissible in order to regulate society and secure a national identity not tainted by immorality. In the argument of one priest writing in 1924, sexuality and female behaviour should be regulated in order to 'set up a national public standard of morality, in complete harmony with Irish Catholic ideals.'[12] The hospitals in which Roseanne is confined, as well as the prisons, laundries, mother and baby homes, and other designations, proliferated across Ireland's landscape, with some managed by the state and many others in private hands. This resulted in a social oppression which Fintan O'Toole argues became even more intimate than that of colonialism:

> Institutional Catholicism had such formidable power because its oppression was thoroughly internalised. The church formed Irish society, and Irish society loved and obeyed its church. It is one thing to have an invader or external oppressor, a nasty, alien power that can be thrown off in a single act of liberation; it is quite another to have a form of oppression that goes very deep into your own bedroom, your own loves and loyalties, your own notion of that most intimate of all

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[11] Ibid., p. 25.

[12] Richard Devane, 'The Unmarried Mother: Some Legal Aspects of the Problem' (1924), in *Coercive Confinement in Ireland: Patients, Prisoners, and Penitents*, ed. by Eoin O'Sullivan and Ian O'Donnell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 52–58 (p. 58).

institutions, the family.[13]

Colonialism was followed by a Free State which exerted a different, but more personally invasive control. The State became indissociable from such 'intimate' sexual and psychological reach. This resulted in the punishment and confinement of those found to be in breach of spiritual principles, particularly women. De Valera's deeply misogynistic conception of 'comely maidens' and 'cosy homesteads'[14] was allied to this effort, for it was sustained by the circumscribing of any woman who contradicted his ideal. This is a collusion indicated subtly by Barry when Dr Grene meditates on Father Gaunt's desire for 'the banishment of women behind the front doors of their homes, and the elevation of manhood into a condition of sublime chastity and sporting prowess' (p. 142). He describes the priest's philosophy of 'moral domination' in terms which echo de Valera's vision; but the latter's pastoral rhetoric is darkened by knowledge of the female oppression it involves. Unspoken in this is the reality: that those who refused to accept banishment 'behind the front doors of their homes' (in order to play the part of 'comely maidens' in their 'cosy homesteads') were routinely banished into institutions.

Barry's structural establishment of a previously occluded voice in Roseanne allows for an alternative expression of how these harsh standards of social respectability affected both the identities and consciousness of those who lived through the time. Dr Grene's rhetoric is articulate but

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[13] Fintan O'Toole, 'We Are Still Living within a Mindset Forged by the Church', *Irish Times*, 14 March 2017, p. 14.

[14] De Valera, 'On Language and the Irish Nation', p. 466.

focuses on de Valera's ideals in this passage, not the existence of what failed to meet them. Roseanne, however, exposes the nature of those who were socially taboo. Eoin O'Sullivan and Ian O'Donnell state that the behaviour deemed reason enough for admission ranged 'from madness or mental deficiency to immorality, delinquency or serious crime',[15] and Roseanne expresses the distinction between those fit to live in Irish society and those removed from it by characterising the flawed nature of asocials like herself in material terms, so that they seem guilty of bringing corruption and ruin to the pristine pastoral environment of romantic nationalism. She describes how causalities of the War of Independence were 'tinkers and tramps' and much as soldiers and policemen:

> People that were dirtying up the edges of things, these people that stood at the edges of photographs of nice places and in certain people's eyes were starting to stink them up. [...] Somewhere in my heart, in the passport of my heart, if you opened it, you would see my real face – unwashed, seared by fire, terrified, ungrateful, diseased, and dumb. (p. 201)

Roseanne uses images of physical degradation and destruction to illustrate these individuals' – and her own – most intimate nature. Seen as corrupting Ireland's national image (the 'photographs of nice places') these people were denied a place in 'the delightful landscapes of ordinary life' (p. 202). Her language here uses images of space, either idealised or damaged, to show the distinctions by which individuals were granted a place in Irish society, or else

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[15] Ian O'Donnell and Eoin O'Sullivan, 'Setting the Scene', in *Coercive Confinement in Ireland: Patients, Prisoners, and Penitents*, ed. by Eoin O'Sullivan and Ian O'Donnell (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 1–41 (p. 4).

removed from it in war or institutionalisation.

Roseanne's use of visceral physical ruin as imagery with which to convey the deeply-felt social standards dominating post-independence Ireland is one of several ways Barry draws upon decay to make a historical reality palpable. In order to draw attention to those parts of Ireland placed out of knowledge and 'ordinary life', Barry focuses on certain ruinous qualities at the hospital as evidence of its fiercely maintained alterity. This includes the way residents and staff react to the threat of destruction which the building's state precipitates. The boundary of the hospital is revealed by these circumstances to be intensely restrictive, a characteristic of heterotopias to which Foucault draws attention. He states that they are 'not freely accessible like a public place', with rituals and regulations for entering or leaving.[16] At Roscommon, the border is rarely crossed at all, even when the building becomes dangerous for the residents, as when the east wing catches fire. Although the hospital is burning, 'safety' does not involve going to the ground floor and going outside. Instead Roseanne is led to a 'long dark ward [...] There was smoke coming up from below, but this place was deemed to be safe' (p. 32). Even when the building is at evident risk of imminent destruction, leaving is apparently unconscionable.

This commitment to a hazardous space is connected to the hospital staff's ability to accept a problematic environment without feeling the need to refer to other authorities. As Dr Grene says on discovery that a woman has been raped, 'it would shock an outsider the level of things going wrong we feel we can tolerate, even of catastrophe [...] Things are best

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[16] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.

handled in-hospital' (p. 171). The threat of catastrophe in as immediate and dangerous a form as a fire, or in the evident knowledge that a member of staff is abusing patients, is not enough to open a border to the outside world. This extreme state actually contrasts with the typical operation of fictionalised, heterotopian hospitals. According to Alice Street and Simon Coleman, hospitals are often represented as 'cut off and isolated from everyday social space', but in practice the boundary is shown to be incomplete, as 'the events taking place in the hospital's wider spatial arena transgress its boundaries, transported by patients, soldiers, politicians, or missionaries, who intrude on the tightly structured and ordered world of the hospital, introducing new social rules and cultural values'.[17] Roscommon Hospital, however, does not see intruders who might contest the cultural values it embodies, and its division from 'everyday social space' remains in place, apparently unconditionally. Barry's illustration of these catastrophes and the introverted response they draw shows that the asylum's threshold maintains a closed social order, the strength of which is tested and not overcome by the threat of fiery ruin.

This sealed system also operates – at least partly – at the level of time. Foucault's description of heterotopias details the peculiar operation of time within these spaces. He requisitions the term 'heterochrony' to describe the different 'slices of time' they can exhibit. While some spaces, such as museums and libraries, involve 'indefinitely accumulating time', modernity is characterised by a totalised accretion of time that does not develop, instead becoming 'a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to

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[17] Alice Street and Simon Coleman, 'Introduction: Real and Imagined Spaces', *Space and Culture*, 15.1 (2012) 4–17 (p. 5).

its ravages'.[18] Time accumulates in an 'immobile place.'[19] The enclosure of space in a heterotopia of deviation is thus accompanied by a restriction of time, which is present but permitted no 'ravages' that could affect the 'immobile' environment as physical change; ruin does not make progress.

As I will show below, the heterotopian ability to control time in order to establish a space never subject to temporal ravages is one that Barry systematically disrupts. Nevertheless, the hospital does involve experiences which suggest its inhabitants live subjected to an 'eternal, continuous' condition without natural temporal change (p. 16). The building of Roscommon is permeated with dust. John Kane remarks on his eternal task of cleaning the hospital: 'I don't know where all this dust comes from,' he said. 'I sweep it every day and there is always dust, by God there is, ancient dust. Not new dust, never new dust' (p. 34). This 'ancient' residue that can never be cleared creates a strange environment which displays the evidence of degeneration but is also stilled. Dust has particular associations in humanity's relationship with space, because it indicates that ruin has infiltrated a building's life. Celeste Olalquiaga comments that it makes 'the elusive passing of time' materially evident, promoting 'the transformation of reality from unitary to fragmented, from continuous to chaotic, along with a shift in the way we perceive, which goes from ritualistic to a pragmatic apprehension.'[20] Olalquiaga's claim makes dust alone a substance capable of impairing the functioning of heterotopias; the rituals and continuity which

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[18] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 26.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Celeste Olalquiaga, 'Dust', in *Ruins*, ed. by Brian Dillon (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2011), pp. 32–35 (first publ. in Celeste Olalquiaga, *The Artificial Kingdom: A Treasury of the Kitsch Experience* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1998), pp. 140–46).

sustain these 'other spaces' can be seen to decay along with the physical proof that they are transient. But the 'ancient dust' of Roscommon is not performing this move away from control just here. It is a substance endemic to the patients' experience, but never removed or added to, and so registering no historical progress. It is not an example of the 'irresistible decay' which Walter Benjamin identifies as the evidence that 'history has physically merged into the setting.'[21] The dusty environment is capable of reinforcing (and revealing) the hospital's heterochronic immunity to time, but not of undoing it.

This timeless dilapidation reinforces the unchanging state of social disgrace imposed upon Roseanne by her committal. In language which recalls her description of asocial 'tinkers and tramps' guilty of 'dirtying up the edges of things' (p. 201), she expresses the moral position in which living in asylums has placed her:

> My own story, anyone's own story, is always told against me, even what I myself am writing here, because I have no heroic history to offer. There is no difficulty not of my own making. The heart and soul, so beloved of God, are both filthied up by residence here, how can we avoid it? [...] I suppose therefore God is the connoisseur of filthied hearts and souls, and can see the old, first pattern in them, and cherish them for that. (p. 56)

Roseanne again judges her own spiritual identity with an image of physical contamination, but this time it appears to be a state imposed by life within the hospital (though she stresses responsibility for her own state, writing, in

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[21] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, pp. 177–78.

a conclusion readers may disagree with after reading her story, that 'there is no difficulty not of my own making'). Nonetheless, Roseanne believes she is unavoidably 'filthied up' spiritually from the environment in which she is held. This corrupt state disqualifies her from any 'heroic history' which might give her a place within a romantic or nationalist Ireland. The unfailingly dusty space of the hospital embodies the degradation that the circumscribed space imposes on its transgressive residents. Despite John Kane's best efforts, he cannot remove the 'ancient dust'; instead it is maintained and recirculated to indicate Roseanne's continuous state of impurity, which enforces the idea that it is not a condition that can evolve or weaken over time. Roseanne hopes for an omniscient God whose perceptions are not controlled by the internalised logic of the puritanical nationalism, and who is thus able to see past the temporal and spatial judgement enacted in Roscommon.

Yet despite the power of this insular system to govern identities and perception, there are more earthly means of resistance within the hospital. Barry deploys ruin as a subversive force which can both illuminate and challenge the oppressive exile taking place there. Active decay (as opposed to 'ancient dust') threatens the state's ability to maintain the space's ideological functions. Whereas the ruin of the Majestic Hotel in *Troubles* is a tangible signification of the British Empire's failing control over Ireland, so the profound structural ruin which overtakes Roscommon Hospital threatens the Irish state's ability to sustain it as a space which circumscribes social deviation. The psychiatrist's narrative is more cautious in detailing this than is the narrator of *Troubles*, who charts direct encounters with decaying rooms

of moth-eaten washing hung up years before,[22] and doomed ventures into the cat-controlled territory armed with revolvers.[23] Dr Grene seeks few close confrontations with the ruin developing around him, providing a fairly vague reference to the building's 'terrible condition' (p. 15) which is only laid out fully in a surveyor's report beyond the reader's reach. It does become clear that the state of decay has advanced far enough to put much of the hospital out of use. Barry offers suggestive glimpses of this advancing decay to indicate that the asylum has progressed beyond the control of its guardians, although Dr Grene's perspective also restricts the intimacy of our engagement with its decay in comparison to other writers addressed in this thesis. While Dr Grene forms part of the text's wider cultural intervention, he does not precipitate it, and his commentary on the institution he governs must be read as a partial, secondary communication regarding a hospital to which the reader never gains less restricted access.

Dr Grene's hesitant attempt to convey its condition indicates that Roscommon Hospital is defying not only their ability to halt its decay but also to know and describe it authoritatively. He generally refers to the building's ruin only in the context of the new hospital scheduled to replace it, which results in the state of decay being set against a positive conception of the future ('a very fine site I am assured', p. 45), yet never quite managing to deflect attention away from the existing building's vast decrepitude. He describes how

there are rooms here just with beds, not because we

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[22] Farrell, p. 126.
[23] Ibid., p. 335.

> could not fill them, but because the rooms have gone
> beyond the beyonds, with the ceilings endangered,
> horrible swathes of dampness up the walls. Anything
> iron, such as bedsteads, rusts away. (p. 45)

Dr Grene's vague term 'beyond the beyonds' suggests that the ruin has claimed areas which are past his knowledge, resulting in an inability to articulate their condition. Through its collapse, the hospital has eluded the grasp of his language, and he is left noting only that the appearance of decay is 'horrible'. Foucault's note that 'it is description, or, rather, the implicit labour of language into description, that authorizes the transformation of symptom into sign and the passage from patient to disease and from the individual to the conceptual'[24] applies here too in Dr Grene's struggle to identify the extent of the decay within an operable discursive framework. Both material and conceptual ownership of Roscommon Hospital are placed under threat by the building's failing structures.

This failure to bring the asylum under control not only undermines the hospital's authorities, but also works to register the continued existence of people and identities erased from social consciousness, compromising the heterotopian claim to exist 'outside of all places'.[25] Ruin attests to a specific, obstinately present reality which works to counter the use of the hospital to put those social deviants out of Ireland's consciousness and history. It contrasts to the absence that Father Gaunt wills upon Roseanne in his deposition, which is 'like a forest fire, burning away all traces of her, traversing her narrative and turning everything to ashes and

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[24] Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, p. 140.
[25] Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', p. 24.

cinders. A tiny, obscure, forgotten Hiroshima' (p. 238). This image of 'burning away', intensified by its contrast with the paper document which provides it, seeks to remove 'all traces of her'. Yet the state of ruin that proliferates at Roscommon asylum is a means of resisting such removals, drawing attention to the ongoing existence of substance and traces in the residents. Although their suffering is hardly hopeful, the patients' continued presence denies the ability of social authorities to reduce their narratives 'to ashes and cinders'. Roseanne details this when she enters a female ward during the fire:

> There were maybe fifty beds there, a long thin room with curtains drawn everywhere. Thin ragged curtains. Old, old faces, as old as my own now. I was astonished. They had lain there not too far away from me and I did not know. Old faces that said nothing, lying in stupor like fifty Russian icons. Who were they? Why, they were your own people. Silent, silent, sleeping towards death, crawling on bleeding knees towards our Lord. (pp. 32–3)

The atmosphere is oppressive, and certainly confirms that this is a space where people have been placed to be forgotten by the outside world; the curtains are drawn and the patients in a 'stupor'. That their faces 'said nothing' implies not only the women's verbal silence but also the silence of their appearance; despite making them into 'Russian icons', their ruined state seems to articulate no message. Yet Roseanne's account registers these people's presence and identity, regardless of their stupor. Although they are only 'traces', overcome by ruin, they are also given palpable materiality. By describing them as 'your own people', Roseanne also denies their separation from the rest of the Irish nation. Even though they have been placed out of

sight, they are not gone.

In this mute display of presence, the difficulty of speaking for the figures who are marginalised and silenced beyond any means of self-expression is foregrounded. The scene demonstrates Barry's awareness of this problem in representing subaltern identities without claiming to speak for them. Tara Harney-Mahajan expresses concern that Barry may be making the latter claim in his representation of Roseanne, which leads to 'ethical minefields', because Roseanne both reaches a far more comfortable resolution than many other institutionalised individuals and 'seems, potentially, to speak for those that cannot speak.'[26] However, the glimpses of ruined spaces like the one cited above suggest that Barry is intensely conscious of how the asylum contains stories that can never be represented. To ignore such incidental passages and instead read Roseanne's testimony as a successful claim to give all her fellow patients voice is to overestimate the confidence with which Barry incorporates her narrative into the text.

Nevertheless, the glimpsed existence of these bedbound, voiceless women produces a subversive historical articulation by detailing their ruinous state. Ruin is a movement towards absence that has only been partially completed. These negative outlines of de Valera's 'comely maidens' are caught midway between absence and presence, signifying the attempt by Irish social authorities to erase such undesirable people, but contesting this with enduring existence. Rather than being complicit in society's attempt to wash away what has been deemed a stain on national identity, Barry draws attention to these figures' recalcitrant materiality. He demonstrates that

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[26] Tara Harney-Mahajan, 'Provoking Forgiveness in Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*', *New Hibernia Review / Iris Éireannach Nua*, 16.2 (2012), 54–71 (p. 61).

marginalised figures have been placed within a heterotopia away from public consciousness, and works to restore insight into what has been done to them and what still survives. Furthermore, this passage demonstrates *The Secret Scripture*'s employment of ruin to register developing time in a manner denied by a heterochrony. The passage of time moves us toward absence, but also leaves corporeal marks that it has done so. Roseanne draws upon this sense of progressive temporality by describing their silent, bedridden 'sleeping towards death' as a purposeful movement forward. Even suffering, physical ruin and death become defiant tangible possessions with which the claims that they have been erased from history without a trace can be disproved. Barry illustrates a ruined but substantive presence with which to counter the systematic removal of individuals from national consciousness.

4. A Ruined Space of Memory

Ruin is deployed by Barry to challenge the thresholds established within institutions: those between presence and absence, morality and vice, individual deviance and national identity. But as well as providing a means of revealing the oppression which underpinned de Valera's Ireland, ruins also provoke reflection on problematic practices of memory in present-day Ireland. Barry induces a proximity between his contemporary readership and Ireland's guilty history of incarceration, with the asylum's ongoing degeneration questioning the relationship between past and present. The novel suggests that ruin can offer an accommodating space in which to meet dissonant narratives, but also that ruined status places a building and its memories under threat of erasure. To investigate how Roscommon Hospital

is posited as a space in which a potentially uncomfortable past can be recognised and understood, it is helpful to draw upon Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* or 'places of memory' here. Nora, who has finessed his term in a three-volume project, describes these sites as 'remains, the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness'[27] where 'memory crystallizes and secretes itself.'[28] Volatile buildings which are predominantly viewed as hazards rather than national monuments, such as Roscommon, are developed in Irish fiction as settings for 'memorial consciousness'. In their cultivation of what I have termed radical decay, authors who establish ruins as *lieux de mémoire* can utilise a tension between transience and substance in order to offer a dynamic confrontation with Ireland's past.

I argue that Barry develops (or erodes) the hospital from its intended design – a heterotopia facilitating Irish society's desire to isolate and forget social deviance – into a threatened site of memory. Its degenerated fabric provides the means for this site to contest normative historiography. As Joep Leerssen comments in a discussion of cemeteries, 'the public spaces that commemorate the past' can be used to project the triumph of particular groups or eras – but rivalling memorial acts can also coexist in public space.[29] That 'various types of memory cultivation coexist in one and the same society' is 'the driving insight behind Pierre Nora's project'.[30] At Roscommon Hospital, the possibility that a *lieu de mémoire* is a location where rival claims

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[27] Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, 26 (1989), 7–24 (p. 12).

[28] Ibid., p. 7.

[29] Joep Leerssen, 'Introduction', in *Free Access to the Past: Romanticism, Cultural Heritage and the Nation*, ed. by Lotte Jensen, Joep Leerssen and Marita Mathijsen (Leiden: Brill, 2010), pp. xv–xxii (p. xx).

[30] Ibid., p. xix.

to memory 'coexist' is placed by Barry within the context of Ireland's suppressed history of marginalisation and containment. Roseanne's prison does not provide a space such as a cemetery in which 'struggling oppositions of the past are encapsulated'.[31] She begins her testimony with concerned awareness that she will have no headstone when she dies, and links this to the denial of any place for her in Irish cultural memory: 'No one even knows I have a story [...] There will never be a stone at my head, and no matter' (p. 4). The hospital is designed to further Father Gaunt's 'burning away all traces of her' (p. 238) by creating a space with no historical record beside the documents created by authoritative social figures such as Gaunt.

However, in *The Secret Scripture*, both the hospital and the narrative space permit memory to become heterogeneous. This opening of a memory site to accommodate competing histories is facilitated by ruin. Roseanne is able to hide the testimony which counters Father Gaunt's deposition within the hospital's damaged fabric. She describes how she has managed to begin constructing her history:

> I have a bundle of paper that I found in a store cupboard among other unwanted things, and I have a floorboard loosened where I hide these treasures. I write out my life on unwanted paper – surplus to requirements. I start with a clean sheet – with many clean sheets. For dearly I would love now to leave an account, some kind of brittle and honest-minded history of myself, and if God gives me the strength, I will tell this story, and imprison it under the floorboard, and then with joy enough I will go to my own rest under the Roscommon sod. (p. 5)

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[31] Ibid., p. xx.

Roseanne stresses the 'unwanted' in this passage, but also establishes that its status as unwanted is a hidden resource, enabling her to coordinate ruin and writing in order to preserve her testimony. That which is overlooked, fit to be discarded, can be appropriated in order to register her own otherwise discarded history. Her stealthy reuse of these 'unwanted things' escapes official notice. It is the building's chaotic state – the loose floorboard, the availability of abandoned materials – and Roseanne's intimate knowledge of it that allow her to make Roscommon asylum a site of Irish memory which includes her history. The same dilapidation which makes the official archive fail here also gives Roseanne the space to preserve her rival representation, challenging received epistemological practices.

It is not only Roseanne's side of the narration which finds the material for resistance within Roscommon's failing structures. Dr Grene is in charge of shepherding the hospital towards demolition, and so towards the erasure of the histories that its subversive space encloses; yet his narrative, almost unintentionally, refuses to reduce either building or patients to the status of 'the "detritus" of the system', in the phrase used by another member of staff (p. 255). His 'commonplace book' strays beyond the boundaries of professional observation in describing the hospital's state and its residents, and he finds himself drawing upon images of ruin in his representation of the latter. This both produces critical reflection on their state, and provides them with an idiosyncratic identity that resists their dismissal. Dr Grene notes that separating patients and place with not be easy, asking 'how can we prise many of the patients out of here, when their very DNA has probably melded

with the mortar of the building?' (p. 16). He characterises Roscommon Hospital's draughty state as integral to patients' identities, musing that 'the very moaning of the wind in the corridors, even on still days […] will be missed as the tiny background music of their dreams and "madnesses"' (pp. 16–17). This more eccentric reflection on his charges provides a means of expressing the wider culture of extended residence within Ireland's psychiatric hospitals (a 2001 census found that 54% of residents were 'long-stay' and 36% were 'old long stay').[32] Yet his reflections also bring him to realise that the loss of a building which so closely embodies and supports its inhabitants will prove a destructive act – indeed, one that could bring about 'their ruin' (p. 46). The move towards the new away from a place of memory is contested by Dr Grene's ability to draw upon lyrical self-expression, rather than restricting himself to the 'pedagogical domain' Foucault references, so that ruin infiltrates his perspective and relationship with his patients possessing valuable histories.

The Secret Scripture queries whether a site can function as a truly radical place of memory without the presence of this decay to weaken thresholds between damaged structure and the identities it supports. When Dr Grene visits a Bexhill orphanage to find the truth of his parentage, he speculates that the environment of the institution, characterised by 'bleakness' but still fully functioning, is able to offer resistant access to the stories of what has taken place there:

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[32] D. Walsh, A. Daly, and R. Moran, 'The Institutional Response to Mental Disorder in Ireland: Censuses of the Irish Asylums, Psychiatric Hospitals and Units 1844–2014', *Irish Journal of Medical Science*, 185 (2016), 761–68 (p. 765).

> It seems I am fated to record the dismaying bleakness
> of institutions. It is a constant, unwaveringly. Nazareth
> House Bexhill was no exception. Their stories seem to
> be in the very mortar like those ancient seashells, the
> very redness of the bricks. You could never wash them
> out, I thought. The very silence of the place suggested
> other silences. (p. 297)

Dr Grene suggests here that the orphanage's wholeness and structural integrity facilitates historical communication: stories are part of the 'mortar' cementing the walls, and can be seen in the bricks' undamaged (still red) appearance. This suggests that what has taken place there is written permanently into the building even though the environment is 'silent' and continues to function. However, it can be seen that this space functions differently as a source of memory to the Irish hospital. Whereas at Roscommon decay has become imbricated with the patients' identities, causing Dr Grene to stray beyond clinical parameters in articulating their history, his sense here of 'other silences' remains euphemistic, gesturing towards unspoken traumas that are no closer to being voiced after an encounter with the building. The orphanage has 'institutional grimness' but this does not yield historically specific narrative, and Dr Grene can only discover his identity through the willingness of nuns to divulge it; his past, along with many others', remains protected by a written archive – in 'cabinets that people would need lawyers to get at, if even then' (p. 298) – that is not decayed and made problematic like the records of Roscommon. Memory is present, but its actual details are under control and may even be beyond legal reach. This issue of access continues to constrain investigative and empathic efforts with regards to Irish religious institutions, for as James M. Smith

notes, 'religious congregations also refuse to provide access to their records, thereby perpetuating the suffering for survivors who seek superficial acknowledgement of their institutionalization [...] a climate of obstructionism impedes this process.'[33] The different relationships between space and memorial consciousness at Roscommon Hospital and Nazareth House Bexhill reveal the continuing threats to cultural memory when its physical setting remains an undamaged heterotopia, under the complete control of its social authorities. The fabric of an institution which has undergone no threat offers less opportunity for historical engagement than the wayward ruin of Roscommon.

The central place of 'radical decay' as a catalyst for (partially) apprehending alternative histories is thus tied intimately to the building of Roscommon acting as a *lieu de mémoire* in which memory 'crystallizes and secretes itself'.[34] Yet this capacity, always in danger (decay is an inherently vulnerable state with which to form a site of cultural memory), is shown to be under severe threat in the contemporary Ireland Barry portrays. The narrative produced through the hospital is developed in tension with the building's move towards evacuation, complete dereliction, and finally demolition at the state's hands. The decision to close the hospital and hence destroy a 'place of memory' results in criticism of present-day Irish society's relationship with its own uncomfortable past in *The Secret Scripture*. There are several aspects of Barry's portrayal of Roscommon Hospital which call for reflection on the heritage agenda orchestrating the destruction of unattractive, but historically dynamic, sites of cultural memory: whether or not their removal is enacted to

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[33] Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, p. 186.
[34] Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', p. 7.

neutralise the ruinous capacity to preserve a narrative which contests dominant historiography, and, if that is the case, whether Barry's text itself is capable of standing in for ruined places of memory after they have been demolished. It is helpful here to analyse the moment of the asylum's destruction in some detail in order to evaluate the critique of cultural memory mounted through it.

The method of demolition is cast as an aberration in any ongoing recovery of history at the site because it contrasts sharply to the slower progression towards ruin developed up to that point. Until the moment of destruction, Roscommon's ruin has worked to demonstrate how social authorities have lost control over the site and the stories that it tells, allowing a reader to gain purchase on suppressed histories. The description of the hospital's demolition, however, suggests the re-establishment of that control. Dr Grene emphasises that the environment is dealt with in a planned and orderly manner even while it is demolished:

> They decided to do it by controlled explosion, so that the top four floors would collapse when the ground floor was blown away. That morning it was like going out to see my life being erased, with wires and dynamite and beautiful calculations. We all stood back on a little hill, about a quarter mile from the building. (p. 308)

This formula of ruin arranged as a demonstrative spectacle turns the building's end into a reassertion of authority over space that has previously gone 'beyond the beyonds' (p. 45). Whereas the end of Farrell's *Troubles* situates the Majestic in flames as an image of the final ending of imperial authority in Ireland, Barry's rendition of a ruinous denouement shows the

Department of Health regaining authority over their hospital and its resistant histories via a 'controlled explosion'.

The use of 'beautiful' technology here associates the Department's actions with a trend towards disinterest in the past that accompanies modern technological societies. It offers the materials to potentially have resemblance to Nora's accusation that *lieux de mémoire* are at risk from 'the acceleration of history', in which 'a movement toward democratization and mass culture on a global scale' has brought about 'a fundamental collapse of memory'. [35] According to Nora, society is 'hopelessly forgetful',[36] 'deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal […] values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past.'[37] O'Toole evaluates Ireland's boom during the Celtic Tiger as an embrace of precisely the self-renewing, forgetful instincts Nora describes, and argues that it had an impact on Ireland's relationship with the built environment, leading to a scorn of the historic:

> During the Tiger era there was only the present: the past was another country and the future was just going to be an endless projection forward of current conditions. The great cultural symbol of the Tiger was the driving of a motorway through the Tara valley: feck my connection to the millennia, what about my commute to Dublin?[38]

The engineering skill that Dr Grene describes in the demolition of

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[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid., p. 8.

[37] Ibid., p. 12.

[38] Fintan O'Toole, 'Hold on Tight: Why the Past Will Be a Model for our Future', *Irish Times*, 27 November 2010, p. 8

Roscommon Hospital demonstrates that this event is also an achievement of Ireland's technological modernity, styling the ruin as a symbol of progress, rather than the entropic movement towards absence signified by natural decay. Dr Grene appears to accept this rhetoric, repeating that the building will be a 'nice new place' (p. 252) and a 'very fine site' (p. 45), but his note that 'it was like going out to see my life being erased' (p. 308) also registers the loss of memorial consciousness caused when a society advances itself by overwriting the putatively obsolete architecture of the past.

However, the destruction of memory that takes place at this demolition is not necessarily just an apolitical yearning for modernity on behalf of a newly wealthy nation. Smith, discussing the Magdalen laundries, describes how sites are regularly purchased and redeveloped: 'the historical traces of this chapter in Irish history – convent archives, survivor testimony, human remains, and concrete remnants – are slipping away on the tide of post-Celtic Tiger economic development and newfound cultural confidence.'[39] But this 'cultural confidence' is more than financial and technological excess; in the context of demolishing highly difficult histories like those found in religious institutions, 'cultural confidence' suggests a determined ability to remove uncomfortable narratives which threaten national identity. In this the removal of Roscommon and its radical decay can be read as a more directed political intervention intended to produce a sanitised cultural geography, where the institutions once accepted as 'part and parcel of the landscape' are not maintained as heritage sites which might promote social reflection on their practices, but are instead eliminated in

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[39] Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, pp. xviii–xix.

order to maintain an idealised national narrative in the present. Roscommon's removal is an active, if unspoken, intervention in the memorial challenge posed by the hospital and the stories its decay makes palpable. For survivors, and those who witnessed their experience, the redevelopment of a space in which they endured confinement and brutality does not necessarily reduce its associations; Patricia Burke Brogan, who was present when Taoiseach Enda Kenny planted a tree at the site of a convent and laundry, describes how the suffering she once witnessed there is 'still in the memory of that very earth'.[40] But for those less acutely aware of what took place there, what Smith terms 'chosen forgetfulness'[41] may prevail through scheduled demolitions of this kind.

The decision to replace the asylum thus facilitates wilful ignorance of the past, and can be read as a fictional representation of existing prejudices within Irish heritage. The hospital's treatment illustrates that as a place of memory it jars which what Laurajane Smith terms the authorised heritage discourse, the prevailing system of values and practices which 'continually legitimizes the experiences and worldviews of dominant narratives about nation, class, culture and ethnicity', privileging certain 'experiences and identities' over others.[42] Because this discourse is such a predominant feature of many Western cultures, heritage sites which stimulate dissonant, countercultural readings of the past – including the

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[40] Lorna Siggins, 'Domestic Violence Refuge Planned for Magdalen Convent in Galway', *Irish Times*, 22 November 2014 <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/ireland/irish-news/domestic-violence-refuge-planned-for-magdalen-convent-in-galway-1.2010540> [accessed 17 May 2019] (para. 3 of 18).

[41] Smith, *Ireland's Magdalen Laundries*, p. 115.

[42] Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, p. 299.

multiple ways in which radical decay is at work in Barry's narrative – are at risk. Upon hearing that Roscommon is to be destroyed, Roseanne is immediately afraid that her story, preserved within the building's decay, will be lost along with it: 'I was suddenly frantic, because I was thinking of these pages under the floor. How would I gather them and keep them secret if I was to be moved?' (p. 253). Her story is saved, and given its own conservation within the novel itself, so that Barry's text produces a supplementary heritage space in which to recover and maintain what has been removed from Ireland's actual landscape. Yet this literary salvaging is only partial; as noted above, when the building is ruinously active it contains many histories, caught between presence and absence, that Barry does not claim to articulate; and these mute sources of resistance to Ireland's authorised heritage are lost upon the destruction of the building's fabric.

The Secret Scripture works to demonstrate that the behaviour that will be erased in this action is not distant history. Dr Grene confides that the hospital's end will create an epistemological absence regarding more recent practices. After describing how a patient's rape has been discussed at a staff meeting – with no further action taken other than the conclusion that 'we must simply all be vigilant' – Dr Grene comments that such incidents will dissipate upon Roscommon's closure: 'Very strange to remind oneself that soon all of this, these individuals, these very rooms, these very matters, will be dispersed to the four winds at the demise of the hospital' (pp. 170-71). His commentary here binds up knowledge of these 'matters' (institutionally tolerated abuses) with the physical structure of the building, and suggests that the former will be 'dispersed' along with the latter's demolition. This

will be to the benefit of Ireland's present-day authorities as well as the legacy of those responsible for it in past times; as the anecdote suggests, no clear line can be drawn between past and present in regards to patient treatment here. Dr Grene's opening commentary on the hospital's history acknowledges the harmful practices that characterised 'the first part of the last [i.e. twentieth] century, with its clitoridectomies, immersions, and injections' (p. 15), but in doing so he creates an implicit separation between that time's psychiatric methods and his own. Yet the epistemological 'dispersal' which accompanies the physical erasure at Roscommon Hospital will see the erasure of far more recent events than those prior to 1950.

In his stylisation of Roscommon's last moment, Barry works to register the loss of memory that is taking place. He indicates that, however much a text may seek to offer itself as an alternative heritage site, it cannot rescue everything. Nevertheless, Barry does not permit the hospital's demolition to be an entirely successful erasure of this *lieu de mémoire*. Dr Grene's initially straightforward account of the managed demolition develops into a far more subversive and historically potent spectacle than that which the Department's 'beautiful calculations' worked to produce. He describes how

> At the appointed hour the engineer pushed down on the box, and after an eternal second we heard a massive noise and saw the underside of the building dissolve in a fiery crown of mortar and ancient stone. The huge edifice immediately headed earthward, leaving only a hanging memory of its old positions against the sky line. Behind it was an angel, a great man of fire the height of the asylum, with wings spread from east to

west. It was evidently John Kane. (p. 308)

The lexis that develops Dr Grene's initially more prosaic description becomes dramatic and imaginative here. Styling the building as a 'huge edifice' of 'ancient stone' emphasises the building's status is that of a major historic object, even if it has not been acknowledged officially and preserved as such, and the 'fiery crown', inappropriate in a controlled explosion, replaces calculation with more rebellious energy that moves beyond its factual physical reality. The demolition's consequent status as a countercultural event in which to celebrate what Marianne Hirsch calls the 'forgotten or disposable lives and stories'[43] even as their physical location is removed. Roseanne, considering herself 'filthied up by residence' in the hospital (p. 56), believes that her identity in the context of Irish history is not only forgotten, but also disgraced and dirty; yet in the final glance at this condemned space, the hospital is transformed into sublime vision that provides the materials for celebration.

Rather than submitting to the removal of memory, then, Barry's account centralises the marginalised count-cultural forces discovered through *The Secret Scripture* - in particular by dramatising the figure of the orderly who has looked after Roseanne, John Kane, as presiding over the event in a now angelic form. Kane's significance is not evident through most of the text, but he is a character crucial in facilitating the survival of Roseanne's testament, recovering it before it is consigned to destruction along with the hospital that has harboured it (p. 277), as well as, long before,

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[43] Marianne Hirsch, 'Presidential Address 2014: Connective Histories in Vulnerable Times', *PMLA*, 129.3 (2014), 330–48 (p. 335).

saving her child from being washed out to sea along with the other 'embarrassments' that Roseanne remembers the Ireland of her childhood working to erase. As Terry Phillips argues, a key theme in Barry's recent novels has been the representation of 'marginalised people', 'whose personal histories place them outside what has become Ireland's agreed national narrative'[44] – and in this final spectacle Barry both represents how heritage erases space to secure that national narrative, and defies this by giving a historical exile dominance over the moment of erasure. Kane's actions to save a suppressed history are not recognised by his society, which has in fact blamed him for its crimes out of prejudice, yet Barry awards him tentative angelic status (tempered by Kane's earlier assertion that 'I am not no angel', p. 305). Although Dr Grene reminds himself that this experience must be a hallucination, concluding that it was 'grief that saw the angel' (p. 308), the vision prevents the hospital's demolition being an uncontested demonstration of Irish authorities' control over space and the historical narratives it can be made to produce.

These angelic and 'fiery' anomalies in a supposedly controlled event complicate the cultural significance of the now 'hanging memory' further. Barry not only gives a previously insignificant, disliked figure angelic status, but also makes several furtive references to other discordant histories – including the prominent infernos of Anglo-Irish Big Houses. Indeed, the scene's description, transforming a scheduled demolition into a 'fiery crown of mortar and ancient stone', has suspicious similarities with the theatrical blaze which concludes Farrell's *Troubles,* destroying the Majestic Hotel with

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[44] Terry Phillips, 'Sebastian Barry's Portrayal of History's Marginalised People', *Studi irlandesi*, 3 (2013), 235–56 (p. 235).

a fire of 'blinding magnificence', flaming cats hurtling out of windows like 'fiery demons pouring out of the mouth and nose of a dying Protestant.'[45] I argue here that Barry's rendition of his own ruin's demise consciously echoes Farrell's – but in a purposefully divergent fashion. The level of manic horror is subdued considerably in Barry's moment of ruin; yet there are further parallels. In this midst of Farrell's inferno the butler Murphy appears 'a hideous, cadaverous figure [...] framed for an instant, poised on the roof, his clothes a cloak of fire, his hair ablaze: Satan himself!'[46] As with Murphy, the building's physical transformation is able to change John Kane into 'a great man of fire', a gigantic and unreal figure with religious connotations. The doctor perceives Kane as an angel, however, not an embodiment of Satan, a status bringing with it connotations of grace and benevolence, rather than farcical malevolence. Furthermore, instead of contributing to the image of a 'dying Protestant', the angel Kane's wings 'spread from east to west', suggesting a spiritual presence which reaches across Ireland, embracing rather than leaving it. This far more compassionate vision results in Roscommon's ruin offering not a conclusive statement of the nation's policy of exclusion and disenfranchisement, in which those excluded from Irish society are now erased from its past, but instead an image of a re-engagement with the nation by those whom it has rejected.

By drawing out the relationship between the ruins in both texts – *The Secret Scripture* and *Troubles* – this image can be clarified. Barry uses resources from a very different (though also repressed) historical period to facilitate interpretation of his own ruin and its painful history. The scene

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[45] Farrell, pp. 450–51.

[46] Ibid.

draws upon the wider tradition of resistant historical fiction and radical decay as a resource with which to resist the removal of memory at Roscommon Hospital, but the usage also creates a link between supposedly disparate historical times: post-independence Ireland's built landscape of social confinement, and the oppressive architecture of colonialism in which Farrell sets his narrative. The oblique association allows for a deployment of what Hirsch terms 'connective' memory practices. She advocates seeking '"connectivity" instead of "comparison"': 'cautious connective practice, accountable to historical and cultural specificities and to differences that cannot be bridged, might enable us to develop some of the flexibility needed to confront retrenchment and other threats.'[47] The risk of 'retrenchment' in cultural memory – of separating different strands of history too firmly, and denying the insights that might be discovered when more dynamic interactions are permitted – is struggled against by Barry's evocation of *Troubles* here. The connection creates an association between heritage practices: between Farrell's target, the gaze of imperialism and its refusal to acknowledge its ruinous oppression of Ireland, and Barry's, the reluctance of contemporary Ireland to recognise its architecture of containment. Two different but equally problematic ruins are brought together in an intertextual movement to suggest how destruction must be viewed as a moment of crisis which demands renewed and self-reflective engagement with cultural memory.

Barry's complex radicalisation of the moment Roscommon Hospital is destroyed demonstrates concern that sites of memory are easily

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[47] Hirsch, p. 334.

lost, and that an active repurposing of ruin is required in order to resist the comfortable amnesia that allows their removal and supports Ireland's authorised heritage discourse. Dr Grene's glimpse of the angel is an assertion of defiant presence, but it is also brief, and relies upon visual experience, which the psychiatrist distrusts. A further, more tangible moment of encounter with marginalised history comes with Dr Grene's confrontation of a different ruin at the text's very close. Barry develops a conclusion which demonstrates the possibility of reconnection with memory, even against a prevailing tide of background demolitions and redevelopments taking place in contemporary Ireland. He drives to Sligo and finds the ruin of the corrugated iron hut in which his birth mother was exiled. He sees the dancehall adorned with 'an architect's sign that said there were going to be apartments built in due course' (p. 311) – the phrase 'in due course' adding an ironic note of inevitability and rightfulness to the destruction of outdated spaces. Roseanne's hut is still there, however, having reached a state of erosion where it is no longer recognised as a development opportunity:

> There was nothing to see but in my mind's eye I could see everything, because she had supplied the ancient cinema of this place. Nothing except a neglected rose bush among the brambles, with a few last vivid blooms. [...] I could feel the brambles tearing at my legs, and pulling at my jacket like beggars, but suddenly I knew what I was doing. I carefully peeled off a sprig as recommended in the books in the chapters on propagation, and slipped it in my pocket, feeling almost guilty, as if I were stealing something that didn't belong to me. (pp. 311–12)

This space is only meaningful if the viewer is aware of its story, but Roseanne has secured its continued availability in her 'testament' which, in a metaphorical movement from a written story to a visual experience, supplies the space with 'ancient cinema'. Dr Grene's almost intrusive intervention into the remains by taking a rose has symbolic significance: it is an active preservation of the memory site and a conscious refusal to release the past. Beata Piątek argues that Barry shows how 'Irish writers need to critically interrogate the hidden wounds of the nation's past before they can move on and engage with the present.'[48] By taking the rose in order to propagate it in his own garden, Dr Grene signifies the need to not only interrogate but actively cultivate Ireland's 'past' wounds and the spaces which still attest to them – thus treating memory as an ongoing task.

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[48] Beata Piątek, 'Irish History in the Novels of Sebastian Barry', *Studia Litteraria Universitatis Iagellonicae Cracoviensis*, 6 (2011), 157–67 (p. 158).

Chapter 4. Ruin and the Emergency

Vocal Decomposition: Textual Ruin and Historical Commentary in Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille*

1. Frozen in Limbo: Ó Cadhain in World War II

History finds an uneasy resting place in the landscape of *Cré na Cille*. Written in Irish and published in 1949, Máirtín Ó Cadhain's novel (translated into English as *Graveyard Clay*)[1] is set during the Second World War, in the local cemetery of a village in the Connemara Gaeltacht. The narrative, which takes place entirely below ground, purports to record the voices of the dead, who use their time to gossip, bicker, and respond to news of the living world (information which comes only through the arrival of fresh corpses). Though comic in its way, the novel presents an unsentimental illustration of the Irish peasantry's consciousness, with which Ó Cadhain was on intimate terms.[2] This lack of sentimentality can be interpreted productively as a resistant response to saccharine romanticisations of Ireland's relationship with the land: what Declan Kiberd terms the 'myth of a rural nation' developed in the twentieth century by 'nationalists in Dublin'.[3] Placing the text alongside the 'realism' of works such as Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and Myles na gCopaleen's *An Béal Bocht* (1941), Kiberd argues that, through its depiction of rural characters, Ó Cadhain's novel marks the point at which 'the

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[1] Two complete translations of *Cré na Cille* have been published: *Graveyard Clay*, translated by Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robison (2016) and *The Dirty Dust*, translated by Alan Titley (2015). Unless otherwise indicated, quotations used in this chapter refer to Mac Con Iomaire and Robison's translation.

[2] Aindrias Ó Cathasaigh, 'A Vision to Realise: Ó Cadhain's Politics', in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 34.1 (2008), 18–27 <https://doi.org/10.2307/25515701> (p. 18).

[3] Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland*, p. 481.

revivalist myth of the saintly western peasantry was exploded by a challenge from within the community'.[4] This reading passes mettle, for Ó Cadhain does not flinch from using the conversations of his corpses to illustrate the bleak prospects of life 'above ground'[5] in the rural west. The graveyard's motley residents reveal continual battles with poverty, and exhibit a bathetic antagonism towards one another which contrasts sharply with the simplified, brittle images of Irish experience supplied in the ideals of W. B. Yeats and Éamon de Valera. Despite the accuracy of this broad observation, however, the cultural provocations Ó Cadhain registers in *Cré na Cille* are more complex than a defiant assertion of 'realism' with regards to life in the Gaeltacht. In particular, Ó Cadhain's decision to set *Cré na Cille* during World War II (referred to in Ireland at that time as 'the Emergency') extends the author's critical examination of rural consciousness to include Ireland's problematic experience of the Second World War – a conflict supposedly kept distant by neutrality. Significantly, Ó Cadhain infiltrates the graveyard clay with politicised forms of ruin which disturb characters' seclusion from knowledge of the war, producing an uneasy intervention in cultural memory of the Emergency.

Ó Cadhain himself spent the Second World War imprisoned without trial in Curragh Camp, Kildare, 'vanished into internment' after his arrest for membership of the IRA (declared illegal by de Valera in 1936).[6] He

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[4] Ibid., pp. 481–82.

[5] Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. by Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robison (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 6. Further references will be to this translation and edition unless otherwise indicated, and will be given in the text.

[6] Cian Ó hÉigeartaigh, 'Máirtín Ó Cadhain: Politics and Literature', in *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 34.1 (2008), 28–32 <https://doi.org/10.2307/25515701 (pp. 29–30).

composed *Cré na Cille* in the war's aftermath, between 1945 and 1947.[7] The text does not include direct autobiographical disclosures regarding his own experience as an internee or republican activist. Instead, it consists almost exclusively of a strange, fantastical dialogue between the graveyard's motley and steadily growing community of corpses. The character with most to say is Caitríona Pháidín, a seventy-one-year-old widow who, as the narrative opens, is the cemetery's most recent arrival. She is survived above ground by several sisters and her son Pádraig, married to the daughter of her long-term (already buried) adversary Nóra Sheánín. Expecting to find 'peace' after death, Caitríona's thoughts are instead interrupted by the voices of other corpses 'squabbling in the graveyard clay' (p. 7). She is greeted by Muraed, her neighbour in life and now death, who provides assurance that little has changed:

> life's the same here, Caitríona, as it was in the 'ould country,' except that all we see is the grave we're in and we can't leave the coffin. You won't hear the living either, or know what's happening to them, apart from what the newly buried dead will tell you. (p. 7)

As the narrative continues, the voices of other corpses become recognisable; they include the local schoolmaster, an enthusiastic short-story writer who persists in irritating his illiterate neighbour with literary discussion, and a French pilot who died after crash-landing in Galway Bay. Living characters referenced by the dead appear one-by-one in the graveyard themselves,

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[7] Liam Mac Con Iomaire, 'An Introductory Note', in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, trans. by Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robison (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), pp. vii–xxxiv (p. xvi).

providing news of the world left behind, including sporadic reference to the progress of the war. The text ends with disordered news that the Normandy landings have taken place, followed by the far more sensational and celebrated word that Caitríona has been given a much-desired cross above her grave.

Although the novel is set during World War II, the war may appear at first glance to be little more than a backdrop, with limited impact on the consciousness of corpses who are generally concerned with other, more local matters. Alan Titley argues that 'all these dead voices [...] are concerned only with the immediate quotidian – the stolen seaweed, who is marrying whom, a donkey's trespass, what somebody's will contains, how the publican robbed them'.[8] Titley concedes that national politics and the Second World War do have a presence within the text, but claims that these forces are heard only as 'distant echoes'.[9] The war does often appear almost inaudible; even characters above ground, not reliant on burials for knowledge of current affairs, have little coherent grasp of (or interest in) such foreign affairs. The most detailed source of information is Billyboy, the last corpse to arrive in the graveyard, who informs his new companions that 'the British and the Yanks are back into French territory again' (p. 299). But even this knowledge is suspect and likely out of date, for he admits that 'it's nine months now, neighbour, since I've been able to read a newspaper, and I don't know exactly how they're faring' (p. 299). In these moments of confused reconnection with a wider historical narrative, Ó Cadhain illustrates Ireland's ingrained lack of

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[8] Alan Titley, 'Translator's Introduction', in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *The Dirty Dust*, trans. by Alan Titley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), pp. vii–xvi (p. viii).
[9] Ibid.

knowledge regarding the Second World War's progress.

The suggestion that Ireland experienced the war from a position of mental detachment, particularly in relation to the suffering taking place elsewhere, resurfaces in subsequent reflection regarding the Emergency. In 'Settings', Seamus Heaney returns briefly to the nation's wartime experience from a position of hindsight to articulate the same comfortable indifference to history. He describes Ireland's encounter with war as a time of ironic innocence, maintained through a manipulated impression of the war's material violence:

> Terrible history and protected joys!
> Plosive horse-dung on 1940s' roads.
> The newsreel bomb-hits, as harmless as dust-puffs.[10]

These lines register the existence of 'bomb-hits', but this 'terrible history' is perceived from a 'protected' distance which renders the events into an entirely different, 'harmless' experience. Bombs, existing only as images in newsreels, can be expressed and sublimated through simile into 'dust-puffs' on roads. In factual terms, Heaney's portrait is certainly an oversimplification; Ireland did experience bombing by Germany a number times during World War II, with the mostly deadly attack falling on 31 May 1941, in which thirty-four Irish civilians were killed in Dublin.[11] Nevertheless, the critique embodied in Heaney's lines – that Ireland enjoyed 'protected joys' without comprehending the full realities of the 'terrible history' taking place

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[10] Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber and Faber, 1991), p. 76.
[11] Robert Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the Price of Neutrality, 1939–45* (Brandon: André Deutsch, 1983), p. 434.

elsewhere – continues to be a source of contention in attempts to evaluate Ireland's ideological position during World War II. His lines represent a distilled articulation of a debate regarding national insularity during a period of global devastation (rather than an exact historical claim). Ireland remained neutral through the conflict, a decision which can be understood on a practical level as an act of necessity: the fledgling nation was effectively defenceless at the outbreak of the war. Given its profound lack of military resources, states Dermot Keogh, 'De Valera had no other policy choice than to declare the country's neutrality' on 2 September 1939.[12] Popular feeling in Ireland supported the decision.[13] The public's view was rooted not only in practical concerns regarding defence, but also in the rejection of an alliance with Ireland's former coloniser. The belief that the British fought in service of their Empire, rather than a moral struggle against German fascism, was expounded most forcefully by the IRA but shared also by many in the wider population.[14]

However, the ideological connotations of taking a neutral position in a war against Nazism became increasingly problematic as the war progressed. Thomas Bartlett writes that not only had the military threat to Ireland from the Axis powers been 'removed by 1942', but 'by 1943 the morality of the war, unclear in 1939, had been firmly resolved in the Allies' favour'.[15] Bartlett describes de Valera facing 'mounting and irrefutable

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[12] Dermot Keogh with Andrew McCarthy, *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Revolution and State Building* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2005), p. 111.

[13] Clair Wills, *That Neutral Island: A History of Ireland During the Second World War* (London: Faber and Faber, 2008), p. 5.

[14] Wills, p. 39.

[15] Bartlett, p. 463.

evidence of the true nature of Nazi rule' and identifies 'wilful blindness' in his relation to fascism, an attitude expressed most disastrously in de Valera's decision to pay Ireland's official condolences to the German legation on the death of Hitler in 1945.[16] In light of these judgements regarding de Valera's 'wilful blindness', the issue of perception and intellectual proximity to the reality of war within the rest of Ireland becomes acute. This is the issue interrogated throughout *Cré na Cille*: using a form of ruin, Ó Cadhain questions the extent to which the violent horror of World War II existed in a reduced and sanitised state within Irish consciousness, with 'bomb-hits' rendered harmless 'dust-puffs', and whether or not this manipulated perception can be considered *wilful*.

Despite Titley's confident claim that politics and World War II sound only as 'distant echoes' in the text,[17] the distance between the Emergency and the vocalisations of characters both living and dead in *Cré na Cille* is made far more ambiguous. The lack of sustained engagement with war that typifies the speech of principal characters such as Caitríona and (in a telling irony) the writer of Irish fiction, reflects the Irish experience of being, to use Heaney's term, 'protected' against the material violence of war. This experience is shown to be enforced at least in part by the restricted access to information about events: Billyboy states that he has not 'been able' to access a newspaper for nine months (p. 299), which suggests his active desire to find out more. Though Bartlett points to the 'mounting and irrefutable evidence' of Nazi atrocities, it is important to note that any newspapers which made their way to the Conamara Gaeltacht were likely to have been subjected to

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Titley, 'Translator's Introduction', p. viii.

heavy censorship in their presentation of the war, including photographs of its ruins.[18] Elizabeth Bowen, as we shall see, admits that her own desire to escape these scenes was compromised by access to a wireless radio; but in the majority of rural Ireland access to a working set was very rare.[19] Knowledge of the war was thus restricted regardless of the level of 'wilful blindness' caused by an individual's ideological position. The distinctly stringent informational restriction to which residents of the graveyard clay are subject – being dependent on new deaths for news – embodies living people's enforced protection from historical awareness during neutrality.

The characters' marginalised economic position, as well as their narrowed media landscape, also appears to limit their political insight, and Clair Wills contends that their impoverished circumstances result in an ingrained distance from the war. Irish attitudes in the graveyard, she argues, reveal 'a gulf between worlds' – created not by characters' choice, but instead because they are 'walled in' by rural hardship:

> The calls of the pro-Allied intelligentsia, of anti-fascists, to join a war in the name of democracy and freedom, fall quite literally on barren ground. [...] The villagers are frozen in their limbo-like existence, confined by their poverty, by the lack of opportunities except those promised by emigration. Though the attitude of Ó Cadhain's characters to the war may seem like wilful ignorance or culpable moral disregard, it is surely far more a reflection of their powerlessness. They are simply playing the cards that life – and death – have

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[18] When the war came to an end, censorship was lifted and the *Irish Times* was able to picture images of London ruins during the Blitz for the first time. ('Censorship and Many Emergency Restrictions Abolished', *Irish Times*, 12 May 1945, p. 1).
[19] Wills, pp. 202–03.

dealt them.[20]

According to Wills, the material conditions *imposed* on rural Ireland keep them 'frozen' in a state of limited historical knowledge. The 'impassioned internationalism'[21] of the French airman's attempts to discuss the war serve only to emphasise the small-minded limitations of those he is now buried beside: 'in so far as the war does matter to some in the novel, it does so because of concerns about its impact on the economy, given Ireland's dependence on the English market'.[22] If it is understood as the consequence of a punitive social reality, the characters' acceptance of a 'gulf' between their nation and the global war can be viewed in an exculpatory light: it is involuntary. Post-independence Ireland's economic vulnerabilities constrain the preoccupations of Ó Cadhain's characters and deprive them of the choice to develop more diverse understandings of the war's moral and political narratives.

This argument does offer a means to at least clarify Titley's claim that the war exists only in 'distant echoes', for it illustrates that the corpses' existence within the 'immediate quotidian' of the Gaeltacht is to an extent politicised through deprivation, with some characters aware that their fragile pastoral landscape will be changed by the war's outcome. Their intellectual engagement is restricted because post-independence Ireland's economic vulnerabilities constrain the preoccupations of Ó Cadhain's characters and deprive them of the choice to develop critical understandings of the war's

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[20] Wills., pp. 342–43.
[21] Ibid., p. 342.
[22] Ibid., p. 341.

moral and political consequences.

I argue, however, that the judgements of both Wills and Titley require revision. *Cré na Cille* uses ruin at the level of literary form as a resource with which to challenge the assumption that global history exists at a detached remove from rural Ireland. Ó Cadhain certainly represents quotidian concerns, and acknowledges the restrictive impact external pressures such as economic fragility and censorship have on characters' political awareness. Yet the textual sites in which the war emerges within *Cré na Cille* are unstable, dynamic, and exhibit levels of perspectival divergence and deliberation by characters – which suggests that epistemological isolation is *not* a given condition of Emergency-era Ireland. The novel's extreme fragmentation at the levels of form and language employs ruin as an aesthetic strategy to facilitate the emergence of dissident (although in some cases troubling) voices, and to propose characters who engage with the war's moral and political consequences.

In evaluating Ó Cadhain's use of ruin to create resistive impulses against Ireland's prevailing isolationism, I will firstly read the text's chaotic vocal environment in light of Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia, using this theory to explore how characters' perspectives on the war are subverted and contested through productive dialogic interaction. However, heteroglossia is ultimately unable to account for the tendencies towards disintegration and absence which Ó Cadhain's narrative displays, so I will explore how Ó Cadhain's use of punctuation, particularly ellipsis, registers ruinous absences within characters' communication even while dialogue takes place. These marked omissions reveal that characters use speech within *Cré na Cille* to

deliberately obstruct historical communication; but they also offer an opportunity for the reader to engage with the ambivalent historical traces that remain.

Kiberd may declare with confidence that *Cré na Cille* 'exploded' romantic myths regarding Irish peasantry, but Ó Cadhain's intervention in the narrative of neutrality demands a more measured metaphor. The text seeks to *unsettle* – rather than explode – the idea of epistemological detachment and moral security. By giving the war an unsteady presence within the novel in the two forms identified above, Ó Cadhain, to a crucially guarded extent, allows graveyard clay to become heterogeneous: a site of radical decay capable of re-introducing the history of a brutal global conflict into Irish consciousness.

2. 'Squabbling in the graveyard clay': Ruin as Textual Fragmentation

Undamaged though Conamara may be by the tanks and bombs of World War II, several sources of ruin proliferate through *Cré na Cille*. Their presence is palpable at the level of Ó Cadhain's writing. Ruin appears as a structural matter through openly declared incoherence and absence: the book consists of 'interludes', not chapters. It also pervades the text's language, which emerges as fragmented, ellipsis-riddled passages of dialogue without the synthesis provided by narratorial guidance. Brian Ó Broin describes how a 'cacophonic and multi-voiced argument' awaits Caitríona in the graveyard clay,[23] and argues that *Cré na Cille*'s form reveals 'sub-narratives' that 'can only

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[23] Brian Ó Broin, 'Máirtín Ó Cadhain's "Cré na Cille": A Narratological Approach', *Irish University Review*, 36.2 (2006), 280–303 (p. 280).

be pieced together by paying close attention to the fragments of conversation between residents of the graveyard.'[24] While multiple, careful readings of the novel can provide a greater sense of narrative cohesion, its fragmentary nature presents ambiguity and disruption that cannot be completely resolved. Ó Cadhain's decision to make the text itself embody irreparable disorder and decay at the level of structure creates a challenging task for readers – one which risks making the text unpopular, or even obsolete. [25] Yet the consequences of this literary mode of ruin extend a productive influence over the impact of references to the Emergency within the narrative's space. Rather than allowing the war to be kept at a constrained distance, as in the images of bomb-hits Heaney presents as sublimated so easily into 'dust-puffs', *Cré na Cille* gestures towards the conflict from within a chaotic narrative environment. Different voices and forms contest each other, so that opposing perspectives on war prevent the text operating as a stable site in which the presence of history might be controlled or displaced.

A central source of the textual ruin within *Cré na Cille* is its presentation of multiple, rival voices. Caitríona's complaint that 'you can't hear a finger in your ear in this place' (p. 11) identifies a noisy disorder which is extended to the level of the text. Residents are responsible for making their own voices heard, and do so with variable success, resulting in a narrative in which some voices are privileged over others. The writer of short-stories gives

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[24] Ibid., p. 284.

[25] The text's difficulty is noted by early reviewers. David Greene, for instance, describes the text favourably as 'racy of the soil and pitilessly true to life', but comments on his struggle to understand its language and presentation of dialogue, concluding with despair that 'the structure of the book cannot sustain this wealth of words.' (David Greene, 'Talk of the Dead', *Irish Times*, 27 May 1950, p. 6).

advice on composing Irish literature, and is indeed insulted as a 'windbag' (p. 20) who has driven his neighbour Cóilí (the unwilling participant in these discussions) 'demented' (p. 109). Meanwhile, 'the first corpse in the graveyard', a veteran of the First World War, can express little more than his desire to be heard, crying repeatedly for 'permission to speak…' (p. 30). Just as the corpses find themselves interred whenever there is room for them to be 'squeezed' (p. 60) into a crowded graveyard, so their voices vie for room on the page. Nonetheless, within this volatile narrative environment are found voices determined to discuss the Second World War. These include the French casualty who has died in the conflict, and a supporter of Nazism who insists repeatedly that 'Hitler is my darling' (p. 6, 19, 171). These references to the Emergency cohabit in uncomfortable *proximity* with the more 'quotidian'[26] concerns expressed by characters such as Caitríona and her neighbour Muraed. With no narrative authority willing to excise or subordinate discordant voices, their evident mental detachment from war exists, through textual ruin, beside ideologically charged voices that are determined to make history heard.

We can understand Ó Cadhain's use of this narrative structure, I argue, as a form of radical decay. It creates perspectival collisions that critique the isolationist policies of post-independence Ireland by transgressing the boundary between the war and the lives of rural Irish people. There is a resemblance here to the use of ruin as a narrative strategy in J. G. Farrell's *Troubles*: in that novel, interruption of the text by news articles works to create a similar incongruity, fostering unexpected

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[26] Titley, 'Translator's Introduction', p. xviii.

geographic and thematic associations in order to disrupt authorised and hegemonic readings of Irish history. In Ó Cadhain's graveyard clay, however, fragmentation is far more advanced. Farrell's press clippings do not always present a clear dialogic relation to the story they intrude upon, but as materials they retain a reasonable level of formal coherency: each 'article' is written in complete sentences, often with a title to make its subject clear, and is usually separated from the main body of the text with an asterisk. Farrell facilitates new readings of events in Ireland by locating them in relation to anti-colonial and revolutionary happenings elsewhere, but his text introduces these in discrete, intercalated vignettes. In *Cré na Cille*, contrariwise, discursive boundaries are much less distinct and tidy. Corpses impinge onto others' turf, overhearing, overtalking, and usurping the language of their rivals, with scant intervention to organise stability at the level of structure. Voices like that of the Hitler supporter bring the war into the text, but they interrupt conversations without warning or clear thematic subordination. The result is a radical challenge to historical certainties, threatening the distance between the Conamara graveyard and the war beyond.

This relationship between fragmented narrative and the ambiguous presence of history in *Cré na Cille* can be read productively in partial relation to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia'. Bakhtin introduces the term in his 1934–35 essay 'Discourse in the Novel', and uses it to posit the idea that our everyday social experience of language is diverse rather than unitary. Speech is characterised by the presence of multiple 'languages', a term defined here as 'specific points of view on the world, forms for conceptualizing the world in words, specific world views, each characterized

by its own objects, meanings and values.'[27] This heteroglot state is represented in the novel, with languages – different vocabularies, ideologies, and perspectives – opposed to and intersecting with each other without resolution. As Bakhtin describes, languages

> may be juxtaposed to one another, mutually supplement one another, contradict one another and be interrelated dialogically. [...] As such, these languages live a real life, they struggle and evolve in an environment of social heteroglossia. Therefore they are all able to enter into the unitary plane of the novel, which can unite in itself parodic stylizations of generic languages, various forms of stylizations and illustrations of professional and period-bound languages, the languages of particular generations, of social dialects and others [...] They may all be drawn in by the novelist for the orchestration of his themes and for the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values.[28]

Prose, Bakhtin argues, is a profoundly varied substance: constituted by rival voices which enter and disrupt a text's 'unitary plane'. Novels can work to intensify the difference between rival languages, opposing them in 'unresolvable dialogues'.[29] This is a portrait of linguistic interaction with striking resemblance to the anarchic exchanges of dialogue within *Cré na Cille*, which, as we shall see in the example below, are used by Ó Cadhain as moments of narrative dislocation capable of indicating divergent perspectives on the Emergency – and, in doing so, they create a space in which historical certainties can be disrupted. By fostering heteroglossia and its juxtaposition

[27] Bakhtin, pp. 291–92.
[28] Ibid., p. 292.
[29] Ibid., p. 291.

of languages in 'unresolvable dialogues', Ó Cadhain's textual experimentation provides World War II with an entry point and dynamic influence in the graveyard's epistemological landscape.

An immediately noticeable 'language' capable of creating this unstable proximity to history is that of the anonymous supporter of Nazism who declares that 'Hitler is my darling' (p. 6, 19, 171). His[30] voice appears early; in fact, it is the first to interrupt Caitríona, and brings the realisation that her afterlife will not play out in a space of 'peace' (p. 7). Before this intrusion, Caitríona has opened the text with a monologue, the substance of which supports Titley's claim that the Second World War exists in 'distant echoes' in comparison to 'immediate quotidian' concerns.[31] While considering the flaws of the family who survive her at length, Caitríona actually refers to the conflict, speculating that her sister Baba, living in America, may 'get itchy feet again when this war is over, if she's still among the living' (p. 6). This indicates Caitríona's awareness of ongoing history and its casualties, but her thoughts return swiftly to her relatives, so that the Emergency is subordinated to her interest in family relationships and is expressed with little emotion.

Yet this historical distance is not long maintained, for although it is true that, as Liam Mac Con Iomaire describes, *Cré na Cille* 'consists entirely of dialogue',[32] Ó Cadhain's reporting of the dead's conversations is characterised by a tension between extended monologue (which *summarises*

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[30] The clearest indication that the Nazi supporter is a male is given in Interlude Eight, when Little Cáit describes attempting to prepare the corpse for burial and making a desperate attempt to scrub off the Swastika tattoos: '"He can't be let go in the condition he's in," said I. "Isn't he as pockmarked as a stray letter! Put another pot of water on the fire, in the name of God."' (p. 239).

[31] Titley, 'Translator's Introduction', p. viii.

[32] Mac Con Iomaire, 'An Introductory Note', p. 23.

unheard dialogue) and fragments of direct conversation. This disruption in narrative style emerges to challenge Caitríona's perspective on the war through heteroglot juxtaposition:

> —… Hitler is my darling. He's the man for them …
> — If England is beaten this country will be in bad shape. We've already lost the market …
> — You Breed of the One-Eared Tailor, it's you who left me here fifty years before my time. The One-Ear Breed was always ready with the foul blow. Knives, stones bottles. You wouldn't fight like a man, instead of stabbing me …
> —… Permission to speak! Permission to speak …
> — Jesus, Mary and Joseph!—Am I alive or am I dead? Are these here alive or dead? They're all giving out as much as they did above ground! (p. 6)

A monologic presentation of Caitríona's perspective is broken into without warning. Different speakers in quick succession give volleys of their own 'language': the Nazi sympathiser advances his feeling of emotional intimacy with Hitler, endorsing the German war effort by idolising what the dictator can do for 'them'; then another character responds to query these certainties, raising the pragmatic issue of the ruin that would likely overcome Ireland if their neighbour was defeated, and changing the first voice's grand suggestions by returning focus to the local ('we've already lost the market'). Rather than developing the sentiments of either voice beyond fragments into a full, coherent argument, this conversation is superseded by the voice of a corpse cursing his murderer (this figure is later revealed to have died during the Civil War, 'fighting for the Irish Republic' while his attacker and now neighbour in the grave 'fought for the Free State', p. 15). Finally, the plaintive

cry for 'permission to speak!' emphasises the sense of unstable textual disruption already on display. This communicative disruption – what Eoin Byrne summarises as 'the fragmented and splintered nature of the narrative'[33] – introduces ruin at the level of form, allowing multiple voices to make themselves heard within the narrative.

Not all of the voices who engage with the war do so in a way that challenges Irish isolationism. Ó Cadhain demonstrates that the conditions of rural life in post-independence Ireland create restricted perspectives on the conflict. Wills' assertion that the Emergency touches their anxieties 'because of concerns about its impact on the economy'[34] can be traced back to the voice of a particular resident who repeatedly relates to the war on these material terms. The anonymous speaker appears first in the cacophony of voices that interrupts Caitríona's opening monologue, responding to the cry that 'Hitler is my darling' by arguing: 'if England is beaten this country will be in bad shape. We've already lost the market …' (p. 6). The metaphor of physical hurt used to indicate England's potential defeat – 'beaten' – is passed over swiftly in favour of Ireland's hypothetical suffering. The speaker continues, revealing that this 'bad shape' will be financial in nature, with 'the market' for English trade already lost. A later passage reveals that this attitude is driven by their own personal circumstances as much as concern for vulnerable countrymen:

> —… When Hitler invades England he'll make them eat
> dead cats …
> — Indeed, the world will be at its worst ever then. Not a

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[33] Eoin Byrne, '"Éistear le mo ghlór!": Máirtín Ó Cadhain's *Cré na Cille* and Postcolonial Modernisms', *Irish Studies Review*, 26.3 (2018), 335–46 (p. 339).

[34] Wills, p. 341.

> cow nor a calf will be worth a penny. May God help the
> poor if the price of cattle falls any further. I have a bit of
> land at the top of the village and it'll never be beaten for
> fattening cattle. It'll go to waste, I'm afraid, if the price
> of stock slumps … (p. 47)

Again, the voice engages with the implications of an Axis powers victory only in terms of the local economic consequences that it would entail. He or she adds further detail to gloss their understanding of what this 'bad shape' would look like: 'the poor' will suffer from the devaluing of cattle, but (perhaps more importantly) the corpse's own 'bit of land' will be rendered valueless. The speaker responds to the Hitler supporter, who has provided a unconventional image of English defeat (forced to survive on 'dead cats' when they lose) by returning focus to Ireland, and bringing references to animals back to the firmly literal level experienced by a rural populace forced to depend on agricultural economics and the price of cattle in order to survive. The evident obsessive concern behind this speaker's refusal to engage with history on any level wider than fiscal impact supports Wills' argument that residents' narrow outlook on the war is constrained by the 'powerlessness' that results from their destitute position, 'simply playing the cards that life – and death – have dealt them'.[35] While the corpse's practical appreciation that the war will impact Ireland fractures the myth that it continued as a secure idyll, safe within 'protected joys' in Heaney's phrase, this realism does not extend to concern for the suffering or motivations of those actually fighting the war, nor does it accommodate an image of Ireland as a nation with international loyalties or commitments. It is an engagement that preserves an underlying

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[35] Ibid., p. 343.

(and, according to Wills, unavoidable) insularity in perspective.

Yet, while this voice and its solipsistic perspective is heard frequently within *Cré na Cille*, the text also provides resources at the level of form to question how far it is an outlook enforced by circumstance. Ó Cadhain's use of structural ruin contests the claim that characters share a common perspective on the war, dictated by united experience of hardship. Dialogic fragmentation admits competing perspectives on the Emergency into the novel. Presented in a disordered amassment, characters' voices are, in Bakhtin's image, 'juxtaposed to one another',[36] able to supplement and contradict their neighbours. This makes textual ruin a means to partially contest reductive understandings of global history within the Gaeltacht. Evaluating divergent references to the war within *Cré na Cille* reveals that Ó Cadhain works to undermine the supposedly given link between immersion in the local environment (with its genuine material anxieties) and an inability to engage with wider international arguments regarding the war.

In his elaborations of heteroglossia, Bakhtin actually brings forward a conceptualisation of isolated rural existence that resembles the image of ideological restriction Wills describes within the 'frozen' consciousness of *Cré na Cille*.[37] Bakhtin suggests that the condition of an 'illiterate peasant' emblematises a 'closed environment' incapable of heteroglossia. This hypothetical individual lives 'miles away from any urban center, naively immersed in an unmoving and for him unshakable everyday world'. There is no dialogic interaction between the different discursive languages he employs, and this preserves a state of secure, comfortable

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[36] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 292.
[37] Wills, p. 343.

'inviolability', 'completely off the maps of socio-ideological becoming'.[38] When heteroglossia enters the scene, his 'closed' inner world is disturbed:

> As soon as a critical interanimation of languages began to occur in the consciousness of our peasant, as soon as it became clear that these were not only various different languages but even internally variegated languages, that the ideological systems and approaches to the world that were indissolubly connected with these languages contradicted each other and in no way could live in peace and quiet with one another – then the inviolability and predetermined quality of these languages came to an end, and the necessity of actively choosing one's orientation among them began.[39]

Once an individual becomes an active participant in a 'critical animation of languages', argues Bakhtin, language use and its ideological impositions are no longer predetermined, and the peasant is no longer precluded from discursive autonomy. This elaboration of heteroglossia offers a means of critiquing Wills' argument regarding characters' 'powerlessness' in regard to their perspectival limitations in *Cré na Cille*. Figures within the novel express their fervent desire to achieve 'peace and quiet' (p. 98), but the graveyard does not actually provide this in terms of sound or ideology. Bakhtin acknowledges in a rather necessary footnote that his analogy involves 'deliberately simplifying' the real linguistic dimensions of the Russian peasant's life, which in reality do exhibit linguistic heterogeneity 'to a certain extent',[40] and in *Cré na Cille* the text's fragmented vocal space is developed to demonstrate the

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[38] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 295.
[39] Ibid., p. 296.
[40] Ibid.,

same: an often limited, yet still crucially evident, capacity of individual consciousness to 'actively orient itself amidst heteroglossia'.[41] Through this, characters can countenance different attitudes to the Emergency. By exploring the potential capacity of textual ruin to produce a heteroglot environment, Ó Cadhain suggests that Irish isolationism, and the failure to engage with the war at a level beyond self-interest, may be a matter of choice as much as necessity.

This state of affairs can be seen in the patterns of linguistic division and interaction that different characters create within *Cré na Cille*'s vocal environment. The ruinous fragmentation of competing voices that Ó Cadhain uses to unsettle the 'closed environment' of rural Ireland results in a text characterised by rapid disjunctures, not only in subject matter (as when Caitríona's opening monologue is broken into by competing references to multiple subjects, including WWII), but also in style. Through the unstable collage of fragmentary articulations in *Cré na Cille*, sharply varying registers are placed into discordant proximity, diversifying the 'languages' of historical interpretation within rural Ireland and potentially creating the 'unresolvable dialogues'[42] of which Bakhtin speaks. This is not just performed by the French pilot in his 'impassioned internationalism' as Wills claims;[43] other speakers participate also. In critically disinterring and further scrutinising the contributions of the graveyard's resident Nazi supporter, and the relationship of his speech to that surrounding it, we discover a strategy of stylistic discomposure taking place between Irish characters:

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[41] Ibid., p. 295.
[42] Ibid., p. 291.
[43] Wills, p. 342.

> —… Hitler is my darling! When he comes over the England! … I think he'll shovel that same England down to hell altogether: he'll sweep away that scuttering bloated pig of an England like the donkey that was carried away by the wind: he'll place million-ton mines under her navel …
>
> — May God save us! …
>
> — Faith then, England is not to be condemned. There's great employment there. What would the youth of Donagh's Village do without her, or the people of Mangy Field, or Sive's Rocks?
>
> — Or this old gadfly over here who has a patch of land at the top of the village that can't be beaten for fattening cattle … (p. 171)

The concern for 'prosperity and livelihood'[44] that Wills reads as the text's prevailing approach to historical interpretation is certainly present here. The third speaker supports England because it offers the 'great employment' necessary to sustain social equilibrium, and while they extend their concern beyond the infamous 'patch of land at the top of the village', the war's significance remains at an extremely local level. In both ideology and tone, this corpse demonstrates the 'inviolability and predetermined quality' that Bakhtin ascribes to consciousness without heteroglossia. Two flat sentences – 'England is not to be condemned. There's great employment there' – indicate passive resignation to their own opinions. The use of a rhetorical question that follows automatically eliminates the possibility of a dissenting opinion on the feasibility of their community's life 'without her', and expresses the state of frozen dependency on Ireland's pastoral landscape that underpins

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[44] Ibid., p. 341.

their relation to England; their erstwhile oppressor's other historical engagements are exiled as an irrelevance.

However, in *Cré na Cille*'s ruinous narrative environment, this ideological 'peace and quiet' is subjected to the challenge of radical decay, and the supposedly inviolable consciousness that Bakhtin ascribes to his hypothetic secluded peasant becomes open to disturbance. In the sweeping vision of English defeat above, the Hitler supporter's energy and metaphorical dexterity disrupts the authority of the conservative, passive-toned corpse arguing for 'employment'. The recognisable slogan '… Hitler is my darling!' acts as a verbal identity card in lieu of a name or narrative introduction, but this declarative motif is pressed forward into a wild historical prophecy that moves past a static refrain. Employing mixed metaphors to orchestrate surreal collisions of imagery and scale, the speaker's predictions are recorded in a mounting up of successive clauses separated by colons, each structured around Hitler's actions ('he'll shovel […] he'll sweep […] he'll place'). After a collision of fantastical metaphors, the final claim that this scene will be brought to pass by the planting of 'million-ton mines' combines the language of outlandish excess (sizeable weapons indeed) with the disturbing technological reality of war. Although the scene he portrays is one of obliteration and death, this speaker's register allows him to unfold his ambitions for the war with liveliness, vigour, producing the spirit of 'revival and renewal' that Bakhtin identifies within the carnivalesque.[45] The aghast plea let out in response – 'May God save us! …' – suggests that at least one neighbouring cadaver has been shaken from the comfort of emotional

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[45] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 7.

detachment in regard to history. Imposing a passage of this speaker's verbal animation utilises the text's splintered form to fracture the passive, suppressively flat language of historical indifference voiced by the adjacent corpse who speaks on behalf of England. The result is morally troubling, but it questions the prevailing assumption that land and employment are the only lenses through which global affairs can be viewed in Ireland.

Hitler's advocate in the graveyard reveals his capacity to engage with the war on a level beyond the circumstances of material poverty that surround him. Ó Cadhain uses textual ruin here to produce a 'critical interanimation of languages',[46] not only through the fragmented disparity between individual voices, but also within the Nazi supporter's own language. His words in this section reuse and politicise innocent, quotidian images of Irish pastoral life in order to elaborate a prophecy regarding the violent history taking place beyond it. The visibility of this to an English-language reader is dependent upon which of the two currently available translations she consults, for Alan Titley's rendering of this passage is significantly different to Liam Mac Con Iomaire and Tim Robinson's. Their divergent approaches reveal tensions between the need to convey Ó Cadhain's literal meaning and the 'energy' of the 'vivid and untempered idiom' that characterises the author's use of Conamara Irish.[47] Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson, whose stated 'first commandment' is 'be faithful to Ó Cadhain',[48] provide the text quoted above:

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[46] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 296.

[47] Titley, 'Ó Cadhain's squabbling corpses revived in English', *Irish Times*, 30 March 2015, p. 13.

[48] Tim Robinson, 'On Translating *Cré na Cille*', in Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *Graveyard Clay*, pp. xxxv–xxxviii (p. xxxv).

> —... Hitler is my darling! When he comes over the England! ... I think he'll shovel that same England down to hell altogether: he'll sweep away that scuttering bloated pig of an England like the donkey that was carried away by the wind: he'll place million-ton mines under her navel ... (p. 171)

Titley's self-declaredly 'free-wheeling and creative' approach,[49] meanwhile, has the corpse declare:

> — Hitler is my darling! I can't wait for him to get to England! ... I'm sure he'll damn them all to hell and the devils will be dancing on the dunes of England: that he'll give the bum's rush to their snotty snoots: that he'll plant a million tons of mines in their belly buttons ...[50]

Mark Harman remarks that 'the strength of Titley's version lies in his ability to capture the Rabelaisian gusto, broad humor, verbal inventiveness, uninhibited vulgarity, and sheer energy' of the original.[51] That linguistic 'energy' contributes to this passage's capacity to disrupt the passive commentaries on employment which follow it, and Titley's rendition especially emphasises the text's carnivalesque aspects: eccentrically creative word-play ('snotty snoots') is supplemented by alliteration, and comic slang ('bum's rush') to produce a sense of scatological vitality.

A careful reading of Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson's translation,

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[49] Titley, 'Ó Cadhain's Squabbling Corpses Revived in English', p. 13.

[50] Máirtín Ó Cadhain, *The Dirty Dust*, trans. by Alan Titley (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), p. 164.

[51] Mark Harman, '"Wake Up, I Tell You": The Vibrant Afterlife of Irish Writer Máirtín Ó Cadhain', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 27 May 2016 <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/wake-tell-vibrant-afterlife-irish-writer-martin-o-cadhain> [accessed 22 September 2018] (para. 19 of 31).

however, suggests that the subversiveness of Ó Cadhain's prose – and the intervention in historical perspectives facilitated through it – is not just a question of 'Rabelaisian gusto' in audible wordplay. In particular, their translation conveys the terrifying momentum of Hitler's prophesied triumph using language which closes the distance between bucolic Gaeltacht experience and the progress of Nazism. Whereas in Titley, Hitler is hoped to 'damn them all to hell', in Mac Con Iomaire and Robinson, the dictator is awarded the verbs 'shovel' and 'sweep away': this introduces an image of prosaic manual labour which then takes on an apocalyptic tilt by making England's destination 'down to hell'. The disquieting expression of military brutality with imagery that suggests more innocent pastoral activities is supplemented by the characterisation of England through animal metaphors: England is a 'scuttering bloated pig' that will be destroyed 'like the donkey that was carried away by the wind'. The speaker's engagement with the war here is more subtle than an explosion of untempered verbal energy. Ó Cadhain demonstrates through this speaker's example that not only is rural Irish consciousness capable of engaging with the war on a level beyond the constraints of its own surroundings, but that these surroundings are fertile materials with which to produce a highly politicised commentary on global conflict. Disturbing as his attitude may be, the stylistic impositions of this voice demonstrates how the 'peaceful and moribund equilibrium' of a consciousness without heteroglossia has in part been shifted into an environment of 'actively choosing' an orientation between different languages,[52] allowing 'unresolvable dialogues' to exist within the presence of a

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[52] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 296.

single character's voice. Radical decay, therefore, is active not only as a fracturing individual conversations, their themes and styles, but also in the active manipulation and repurposing of the imagery of a supposedly protected space in order to engage actively with history.

3. 'Writer's dots': Ruin as Lacunae

In *Cré na Cille*, then, ruin functions in part as textual fragmentation, allowing rival inflections to proliferate with little formal narrative intervention in a polyvocal environment that one corpse rather optimistically terms a 'democracy' (p. 48). This scenario actively disrupts the quotidian distractions and linguistic passivity characters use to remain detached from history — and, to an extent, Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia provides a useful tool in conceptualising the kinds of juxtaposition, dialogue and 'critical interanimation of languages'[53] that emerges as a consequence of the ungovernable voices within Ó Cadhain's prose. However, the concept of the heteroglot is also curtailed tellingly in relation to *Cré na Cille*. This is due to the particular extent to which ruin proliferates within the text, bringing disjuncture, lack, and the threat of meaninglessness even as it facilitates communication. Bakhtin's description of a diversity of styles in which languages 'live a real life'[54] within the novel draws upon the spirit of carnival, 'a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part.'[55] Heteroglossia and the carnivalesque are closely linked; as Kystyna Pomorska comments, 'since the novel represents the very essence

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[53] Ibid., p. 296.
[54] Ibid, p. 292.
[55] Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, p. 7.

of life, it includes the carnivalesque in its properly transformed shape.'[56] This spirit has a noted presence within *Cré na Cille*: as Harman argues – and the frightening, amoral energy of the Hitler supporter's rant above demonstrates – the text has 'Rabelaisian gusto', and Ó Cadhain himself read Rabelais during internment in Curragh.[57]

And yet, it is the Rabelaisian, carnivalesque 'essence of life' within Bakhtin's theory that underpins its primary divergence from *Cré na Cille*. Ó Cadhain's graveyard is not a place without playfulness and festivity, but neither can it be a place of life. Multiple corpses are able to speak, and give voice to banished history, but this heterogeneous linguistic environment rests in tension with a morbid tendency towards absence and loss. In this Ó Cadhain acknowledges that the neither the dead nor their histories are fully present here. While Bakhtin's concept of the heteroglot is produced by a Rabelaisian excess embodied in language, radical decay emerges from the fundamental tension between presence and absence that ruins exemplify: the uneasy balance identified in Bell's definition of a ruin as 'a form that owes as much to decay as to the original design.'[58] The ruinous descent into verbal fragmentation liberates dialogic interrelations within *Cré na Cille* – to an extent far superseding that employed by Farrell – but it also leaves ambiguous absences which compromise the integrity of the historical understanding and commentary that emerges. As a consequence, Ó Cadhain's use of textual ruin problematises rural Ireland's ability to engage fully with World War II in speech, even while facilitating a consciousness of it.

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[56] Kystyna Pomorska, 'Foreword', in Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, pp. vii–xii (p. x).

[57] Harman, para. 19 of 31.

[58] Bell, p. 261.

As a textual record of the graveyard's auditory space, *Cré na Cille* marks its own ruin in the ellipses which accompany almost every act of speech through the novel. Their location complicates the boundary between speech and silence, creating the tense balance between presence and absence which characterises all ruins. Ellipses can have several different functions within a text. As Anne Toner comments, their use serves to signify 'hesitations, interruptions and omissions' that occur in 'writers' persistent need for routine symbols that express communicative dependence on the non-verbal.'[59] Ó Cadhain playfully mocks his own use of this 'dependence on the non-verbal' in the figure of the graveyard's resident writer, who reminds his illiterate and entirely disinterested neighbour that in all Irish-language writing 'after the last word the final line must be generously sprinkled with dots, writer's dots as I call them …' (p. 20). However, Ó Cadhain's own use of these 'writer's dots' creates a more extensive and politicised disruption than would a simple Gaelic Revival affectation. The presentation of the French pilot, 'your man who was killed out of the aeroplane' (p. 37), offers a particularly useful example of how Ó Cadhain uses a 'communicative dependence on the non-verbal' to represent a struggle to give history a presence within language. The endangered state in which the pilot's speech is left within the text's volatile discursive environment offers a resource with which to reflect on the vulnerability of historical knowledge within neutral Ireland – and how this vulnerability is in part self-imposed by those to whom he attempts to speak.

A foreigner buried with a 'fine funeral' (p. 37), the Frenchman is the

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[59] Anne Toner, *Ellipsis in English Literature: Signs of Omission* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 1.

cemetery's most informed source of knowledge about the war, and tries to allow his neighbours to engage with the conflict on a level beyond self-interest and personal rivalry:

> —... *Mon ami*, the United Nations, England, *les États Unis, la Russe, et les Français Libres* are defending human rights against ... *quel est le mot?* ... Against the barbarism *des Boches nazifiés.* I've already told you about the concentration camps. Belsen ...[60]
> — Nell Pháidín is on Churchill's side. Fowlers and anglers from England, of course ...
> — She was always treacherous, the little bitch! *Up Hitler! Up Hitler! Up Hitler!* Do you think if he comes over he'll raze her new house to the ground? (p. 247)

This passage and its surroundings deserves evaluating at length, for it is one of the few moments in which wider ideological understandings of the war's moral necessity receive open attention. The veteran attempts to cross the boundary between Irish consciousness and the suffering taking place elsewhere by raising his voice within the ungoverned chorus of the graveyard clay – but he has limited success in bringing about the 'critical interanimation' described by Bakhtin. His pronouncements, including an attempt to discuss the Holocaust, emerge only as inarticulate remnants. Siobhán Kilfeather argues that the airman's place in the text is as 'a reminder that Ireland had made itself marginal to the fight against continental

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[60] 'My friends, the United Nations, England, the United States, Russia, and the Free French Forces are defending human rights against ... what is the word? ... Against the barbarism of the Nazi krauts. I've told you already about the concentration camps. Belsen ...'. (Trans. by Dr Charlotte Bentley).

European fascism',[61] and Ó Cadhain's formal presentation of his struggle give 'the barbarism *des Boches nazifiés*' sustained presence within the cemetery suggests that Ireland's choice to remain 'marginal' is carried out through a refusal to engage with knowledge of history, as well as in the diplomatic practicalities of neutrality.

The failure to create the Bakhtin's vision of dynamic 'critical interanimation' between heteroglot languages is represented by the punctuation in this excerpt, used to record the transition between voices. It reveals here that the Frenchman's neighbours, even while responding to his words, work to prevent the empathic engagement he is attempting to produce. Ó Cadhain sets out how to navigate this method in a somewhat cryptic schema at the novel's start:

Guide to Dialogue Conventions

— Speech beginning
—... Speech in progress
... Speech omitted (p. xxxix)

While the Frenchman's opening words are revealed to be speech already 'in progress', the second two speakers in this excerpt have their contributions introduced with a dash, indicating 'speech beginning' – which in fact means that a speaker is *responding* to the previous corpse, joining a thread of conversation that already exists on the page. This could be ambiguous without Ó Cadhain's use of a dash, because the observation that '— Nell Pháidín is on Churchill's side', while relating to World War II, does not

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[61] Siobhán Kilfeather, 'The Gothic Novel', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. by John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 78–96 (p. 93).

engage with any of the terms in which the Frenchman was describing the conflict; they respond to descriptions of 'concentration camps' and the moral purpose of 'the United Nations, England, *les États Unis, la Russe, et les Français Libres*' with a comment about the value of role of 'fowlers and anglers' within local Irish society. The tension between dialogue and disengagement that emerges from this response is made more complex still, for even though the use a dash signals a firm connection between speakers, the Frenchman's preceding phrase is followed by an ellipsis: 'I've already told you about the concentration camps. Belsen …', imposing a distance between both acts of speech. According to Ó Cadhain's guide, this ellipsis signifies 'speech omitted'. It does not indicate that the airman's voice is trailing off into nothing, unable to find more language, but rather a continuation of speech that has been removed. The pilot's words continue, but are no longer represented; instead, the text moves on to the next line and the voice discussing Nell Pháidín's perspective on Churchill 'begins'.

Ó Cadhain uses punctuation here – dashes and ellipses – to illustrate that communication in *Cré na Cille* is palimpsestic, with speech itself forcibly creating absences. In this case, the French airman's ongoing speech regarding 'Belsen …' is lost through the intercessions of his neighbours: 'omitted' in order to make space for the information that Nell supports Churchill because of the personal economic benefits ('fowlers and anglers from England, of course …'). This speaker, soon joined by a third (Caitríona, driven into the arms of Hitler here upon learning that her hated sister Nell supports the Allies) intentionally speaks over and works to erase the rest of the Frenchman's message regarding the Holocaust and the Allies'

ideological fight against it. The obliterating interruptions interpose ruin on the airman's dogged attempt to articulate 'terrible history' happening elsewhere, bringing interpretation of the war to the level of their own financial interests and personal rivalries.

Heteroglot renewal, in which languages 'live a real life' and are able to 'struggle and evolve',[62] is here compromised by enervation and aporia. Instead, an ambiguous lacuna reveals the damaged condition of attempts to articulate alternative historical understanding within the graveyard clay. Any opportunity to engage with what the Frenchman has managed to make heard is overridden, precluding the possibility of glossing the word 'barbarism' in order to recognise those who suffer in Belsen, or to formulate reflection on how the political engagement voiced elsewhere within the graveyard – such as the cry of 'Hitler is my darling' – might reveal complicity with this atrocity. Kiberd declares somewhat brazenly that '*Cré na Cille* is punctuated not by genuine conversation but by collections of rival monologues, without interaction of any significant kind, as each speaker seeks to appease his or her monomania and reduces all interlocutors to silence',[63] but this is too abstract a generalisation. The responses to the Frenchman reveal how characters contest and damage the contributions of others, but not simply out of personal 'monomania'. Here Ó Cadhain's punctuation works not to illustrate a transcendental 'death of language'[64] as a communicative device, but rather characters' specific use of it to stifle already fragile explications of uncomfortable history.

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[62] Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', p. 292.

[63] Kiberd, *Irish Classics* (Granta Books: London, 2000), p. 582.

[64] Ibid.

The impossibility of creating any artistic site of cultural memory capable of expressing the Nazi atrocities has been well-articulated. Christopher Ricks, discussing Geoffrey Hill's poem 'September Song', an ambivalent elegy for a Holocaust victim, writes that Hill seeks to acknowledge 'the truth that what happened was unspeakable, unsayable. A man may write of it, and that is not nothing, but he cannot speak of it'.[65] Because the proliferation of omissions and unrecorded speech throughout *Cré na Cille* become particularly troubling when they appear to stymie scant references to this event, it could be argued that Ó Cadhain works to represent how the Holocaust exists under what Theodor Adorno calls an 'image ban'[66] – that they are a means of acknowledging the unspeakable. However, the way in which the attempt to give voice to 'the barbarism *des Boches nazifiés*' is inhibited here suggests that Ó Cadhain's commentary on prohibition in historical speech is local and strategic rather than existential or inevitable. The representation of corpses *deliberately* talking over information regarding the Emergency and Ireland's potential moral responsibilities in relation to it suggests that the graveyard's residents are employing speech to maintain the same 'wilful blindness' that Bartlett finds in the policies of de Valera.[67] When pursuing her analysis that the Frenchman represents 'a reminder that Ireland had made itself marginal to the fight against continental European fascism', Kilfeather argues that a central concern in *Cré na Cille* is that 'truth resides in a site of conflicting testimonies' – an idea with 'particular resonance in post-war Ireland' in part because of 'the "telling" images of the Jewish dead in the

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[65] Christopher Ricks, *The Force of Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1984), p. 300.

[66] Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), p. 280.

[67] Bartlett, p. 463.

liberated concentration camps'.[68] By using ellipses to reveal the indifference of the speakers who follow the Frenchman, Ó Cadhain questions the willingness of his Irish characters to foster this 'site of conflicting testimonies'. In revealing how the interventions of the pilot's neighbours force the enormity of the Holocaust to find signification only as non-verbal scar, the text engenders a scathing commentary on the amoral complicity created by post-independence Ireland's voluntary isolationism. Ruin is not just a symptom caused by the innate challenges faced in speaking about an event such as the Holocaust; it is an epistemological condition perpetrated by the Irish themselves.

4. Ruin as Preservation

The process of overwriting history is both revealed and resisted at the level of form, and it is worth staying with the Frenchman's interaction regarding 'the barbarism *des Boches nazifiés*' for a little longer to explore the impact of textual ruin at this moment of critical historical revelation. Using interruption and ellipsis, Ó Cadhain suggests that the Frenchman's capacity to make the war and its material atrocities present within the graveyard is damaged, perhaps fatally. But these symbols also offer a means of preserving it. The intervention of the second voice does not permit the Frenchman's descriptions of 'Belsen ...' to be completed, severely limiting the presence afforded victims of both the war and the Holocaust within the language of *Cré na Cille*. Yet it does not render them *absent* either, creating instead a consciously marked-out space through which that absence can be registered.

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[68] Kilfeather, p. 93.

This acts as a form of radical decay. Ó Cadhain does not claim to represent the history of the 'United Nations' alliance or the victims at Belsen fully within the text. But by recording a gap where this historical reflection might be, he reveals how the neighbouring voices' take part in overwriting the attempt to give that history a fuller voice. Ruin at the level of form, particularly the lacuna of 'writers' dots', provides a resource to register that there is more to say about war, even though the interventions of Caitríona and her neighbour render it inaudible.

Ó Cadhain thus draws attention to the destructive overwriting of history in Irish consciousness by representing what is being placed beyond recovery within the textual transcription of speech. Ruin is a highly germane term here. Byrne, recognising the 'fragmented and splintered' quality of *Cré na Cille*, describes that text as 'a tapestry of narrative threads, with each strand representing another character or plot line'. In this metaphor, each 'strand' is integrated into an overarching structure, with narrative advancement taking place 'as these threads interact with one another, each time providing more context, and consequently more perspective, for the reader to situate these characters and their stories.'[69] Although this is an image which offers a means of the energetic interactions that take place between the less-than-distinct acts of speech in *Cré na Cille*, it fails to account for the pervasive, uncharted fissures and gaps in communication that trouble these connections between fragments. Elliptical absences bring ruin to the text, compromising its structural integrity, and indicate its insecurity as a vessel of historical representation.

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[69] Byrne, p. 340.

However, at the same time as marking representative failure, these 'writers' dots' offer the outline of a space in which lost history can be drawn out. The ellipses scattered with such profligacy throughout *Cré na Cille* form a commentary on unrepaired fractures in historical knowledge, but the ambiguous traces of verbal presence they suggest may also create a reflective interaction between the text and its reader. As Toner comments, 'the ellipsis is a written acknowledgement of the interactive dynamic of communicative acts', revealing a space in which 'the interpretative act is explicitly handed over to another'.[70] The 'interactive dynamic' in textual interpretation presented by establishing a conscious space allows Ó Cadhain's use of the ellipsis to contribute to the wider project of radical decay identified through this thesis. Ruins possess what Woodward terms a 'perverse fertility',[71] creating 'a dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator'.[72] An incomplete structure (whether literary or physical) allows the individual beholding it to participate in an active encounter with history. This encounter remains different from the Bakhtinian process of carnivalesque 'revival and renewal', for as a creative process of engagement it continues to be provisional, and incapable of repairing what has been lost. The imaginative 'fertility' of ruined space is nevertheless capable of unsettling the oppressiveness of historiographic narratives produced when the past is set in well-preserved stone. An elliptical invitation to participate in what Toner calls 'the interpretive act' raises the possibility of resisting the surrounding corpses' ability to disregard and overwrite the Frenchman's reference to the

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[70] Toner, p. 20.
[71] Woodward, p. 239.
[72] Ibid., p. 139.

Holocaust by returning talk to the self-centred quotidian.

In the fragment of the airman's speech that we receive, Ó Cadhain provides some resources to assist in this inventive dialogue with omission. Although no reference is made to the human beings suffering at the hands of the Nazis – only to the spaces in which this cruelty took place – the soldier speaks of Allied efforts to defend 'human rights'. This points to how the 'barbarism' of the Nazis is forcing individuals to endure life without the basic rights and freedoms that all people should be granted. The ellipsis allows a reader to pause before the voice describing Nell Pháidín's perspective assumes the authority of 'speech beginning' and moves the conversation abruptly onwards. It is a moment of wordless suspension which both denies the reader further knowledge of 'the concentration camps. Belsen …' and creates an invitation to link these spaces with the Nazi's 'barbarism' and the negation of 'human rights' referenced by the Frenchman. The airman's attempt to articulate his historical understanding in order to provoke the engagement of detached, 'protected' Ireland suffers interruption. Yet his failure to give the dead of World War II and the Holocaust a place within this protected cemetery is recorded by a symbol that both designates omission and still exists as a mark on the page, informed by the utterances which precede it, and offering the reader an opportunity to engage reflectively in the vacancy left behind. In this way, Ó Cadhain uses ellipsis and the ruinous voids that they produce in *Cré na Cille* not only to indicate the defeat of communication, but to take advantage of a destabilisation in meaning, and so undermine the other corpses' restrictive interpretations of the war's importance.

In ruins, engagement and loss are never far apart, and although

placing an ellipsis after 'Belsen ...' opens the possibility for the 'interactive dynamic of communicative acts' to which Toner refers, it is remains an ambivalent, insufficient resource. Textual ruin is more advanced within *Cré na Cille* than in texts discussed elsewhere within this project, and although Ó Cadhain is not alone in using ruin to emphasise the failure to create a complete, adequately representative work of cultural memory, his provision of this fragmented remainder only at the level of text places the attempt to preserve overwritten histories at greater risk. In Sebastian Barry's *The Secret Scripture*, when fire breaks out in the asylum, Roseanne takes shelter in different ward and encounters the 'old, old faces' of women who 'had lain there not too far away from me and I did not know'.[73] This moment of insight into the silenced histories of Ireland's institutional abuse bears resemblance to Ó Cadhain's use of ruin to mark lost history, for it creates an acknowledgement of the text's struggle to represent subaltern identities for which it cannot speak. However, Barry's representation of the forgotten victims of Ireland's institutional abuse offers these women palpable material presence. Although the visit is brief and they remain mute, the figures are seen, encountered in the flesh, and Roseanne identifies them unequivocally as 'your own people'.[74] By contrast, Ó Cadhain's use of an ellipsis following a brief, factual description of 'the concentration camps' gives the victims of Nazi genocide a fragmentary presence that is little more than emptiness. The relationship between Gaeltacht consciousness and the dead souls of Belsen is unstable and corroded, with ruin overcoming speech to such an advanced extent within *Cré na Cille* that the creative engagement of radical decay is

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[73] Barry, *The Secret Scripture*, pp. 32–33.

[74] Ibid., p. 33.

haunted by doubt, even while it is produced.

'There was a picture of peace': Ruin, War and Anglo-Irish Heritage in *Bowen's Court*

1. World War II and the 'impulse towards engagement'

War and its ruins provided an intense landscape for Elizabeth Bowen's writing. Her prolific and diverse creative output during the Second World War takes up frequent residence in spaces threatened, scarred, or destroyed by air raids. Such bombing campaigns dominated Europe during this conflict, claiming 600,000 civilian lives and, as Richard Overy writes, leaving much of the continent 'temporarily transformed into a vision of ruin as complete as the dismal relics of the once triumphant Roman Empire.'[1] Bowen knew this vision intimately: she spent much of the war in London, documenting popular experience and working as an Air Raid Precautions warden.[2] Her novel *The Heat of the Day* (1948), as well as two collections of short stories (*Look at All Those Roses*, 1941, and *The Demon Lover and Other Stories*, 1945), depict the Blitz and its aftermath, when 'the first generation of ruins [...] took their places as a norm of the scene'.[3] Bowen portrays the 'fuming glissades of rubble'[4] which bring the war into violent material proximity to civilians, creating strange psychological liberations and pressures.

Bowen was also sensitive to the psychological impact of bombs where they did not fall. Travelling frequently between Britain and Ireland, she

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[1] Richard Overy, *The Bombing War: Europe, 1939–1945* (London: Penguin, 2014), p. xxiii.

[2] Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer* (New York: Avon Books, 1977), p. 145.

[3] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Heat of the Day* ([New York]: Knopf, 1948; repr. London: Vintage, 1998), p. 90.

[4] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Britain in Autumn', in *People, Places, Things: Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. by Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 48–55 (p. 50).

volunteered to carry out espionage in the latter nation, sending 'Notes on Eire' back to the British government. These reports summarise her impression of public feeling towards the Emergency; she describes 'bomb-nervousness' and 'a nebulous fear that war is infectious', as well as anxious responses to shortages and restrictions.' [5] Bowen's reports are not unequivocally critical of Ireland's decision to remain outside the war and its dangers. Her early dispatches acknowledge that the refusal to join Britain was a matter of 'self-respect' for the independent nation, stating that neutrality 'is Eire's first *free* self-assertion: as such alone it would mean a great deal to her. Eire (and I think rightly) sees her neutrality as positive, not merely negative.'[6] Nevertheless, in deciding to work with the British Ministry of Information, and to focus so intently on London and its ruins in her fiction and journalism, Bowen chose to set herself apart from Ireland and its stance regarding the war. In light of this, Clair Wills argues that, despite Bowen's identification as 'Irish', 'the war called forth her obligation towards England'.[7] According to Wills, Bowen can be counted among a group of Irish and Anglo-Irish authors whose wartime writing 'has to be understood as a challenge to neutrality'. Writers including Bowen, Louis MacNeice and Kate O'Brien, 'cosmopolitan in outlook, European-minded',[8] followed an 'impulse towards engagement' with the global struggle Ireland had divorced itself from.[9]

      This assessment of how neutrality accentuated Bowen's already

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[5] Elizabeth Bowen, *'Notes on Eire': Espionage Reports to Winston Churchill, 1940–2*, ed. by Jack Lane and Brendan Clifford (Cork: Aubane Historical Society, 2009), p. 20.

[6] Ibid., p. 12. Emphasis in original.

[7] Wills, p. 80.

[8] Ibid., p. 12.

[9] Ibid., p. 13.

divided Anglo-Irish identity is an established interpretation of her wartime writing and its politics. It is certainly supported by the texts themselves. For instance, in the short story 'Summer Night', Bowen queries the separation that de Valera sought to maintain between the world of neutral Ireland and the destruction taking place elsewhere. The story is set in a provincial town, and emphasis is placed on the vivid, serene natural landscape that surrounds its events: hills 'where no foot ever seemed to have trodden', against which 'the burning red rambler roses in cottage gardens along the roadside looked earthy'.[10] But against this background of apparent pastoral innocence, ruin elsewhere creates mental pressure. As Stefania Porcelli comments, 'no violent act is portrayed, yet the war haunts every scene'.[11] A newspaper brings news of 'an awful battle. Destroying each other',[12] and a central character, Justin, finds himself attempting to use placid conversation as a distraction from European violence:

> Above all, he was glad, for these hours or two of chatter, not to have to face the screen of his own mind, on which the distortion of every one of his images, the war-broken towers of Europe, constantly stood. […] In the heart of the neutral Irishman indirect suffering pulled like a crooked knife.[13]

This story examines what Porcelli describes as 'the discursive dimension of

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[10] Elizabeth Bowen, 'Summer Night', in *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 653–82 (p. 653).

[11] Stefania Porcelli, 'Elizabeth Bowen's Wavering Attitude toward World War II Propaganda', in *Propaganda and Rhetoric in Democracy: History, Theory, Analysis* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2016), pp. 96–117 (p. 110).

[12] Bowen, 'Summer Night', p. 656.

[13] Ibid., p. 659.

the conflict' in Ireland;[14] the war is present in words only. Justin's character, however, 'confirms the uselessness of uncommitted discourse'.[15] Images of 'the war-broken towers of Europe' stand metonymically for the 'indirect suffering' that the casualties of World War II undergo. Wills suggests that Justin bears likeness to the figure of Bowen's lover Seán Ó Faoláin, whose 'tortured allegiance'[16] to neutral Ireland expressed to her 'the public mood in Ireland'.[17] There is in fact an intriguing resemblance in this story to Ó Faoláin's 'Midsummer Night Madness' (1932), which begins with the 'May-month sweetness' of a 'summer night […] falling gently as dust' and ends in the narrator bearing witness to violent, ideologically troubling ruin at the hands of the IRA.[18] Within Bowen's 'Summer Night', however, the ruins of World War II remain an indirect experience to the characters, a matter of words. As a consequence, the suffering they represent is felt by Justin as a 'crooked knife', a physical but imagined pain that suggests distress at remaining distant.

Despite her description of neutrality as a positive act of self-definition, Bowen uses this image of guilty detachment from ruin – and the contrast that it forms when placed alongside her portrayal of Blitz-era London – to perform the 'challenge to neutrality' that Wills depicts. In war, the author was able to exploit her hyphenated identity to adopt a role of moral evaluation, viewing Emergency-era Ireland in a critical light following her own direct experience of violence in the bombing campaign and the city left

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[14] Porcelli, p. 108.

[15] Ibid., p. 111.

[16] Wills, p. 80.

[17] Ibid., p. 81.

[18] Ó Faoláin, 'Midsummer Night Madness', p. 9.

'acrid with ruins' in its wake.[19] Permitted unusual mobility between the two nations, Bowen imbues her fiction with a diversity of perspective not available to all Irish cultural figures during the war. As I have shown through an examination of *Cré na Cille*, Ó Cadhain, interned in Curragh Camp for IRA membership, claims to offer no such privileged access to the direct encounter with war. Doubts and uneasy connection to its suffering can emerge in his novel only as a deliberate fracturing of literary form, rather than open description. Bowen, by contrast, brings Irish neutrality into confrontation with the ruins that she knew.

Yet reading Bowen as the intellectual critic of neutral Ireland, driven by an 'impulse towards engagement'[20] with Europe and its 'war-broken towers', is an incomplete characterisation. This becomes evident in examination of another work completed during the war: *Bowen's Court*. This memoir was published in 1942, but at first glance has little relevance to World War II or the anxious concerns it precipitated in Ireland. Instead, it constitutes an extensive portrait of her own ancestral heritage and the family's Big House built on colonised land. Exploration of contemporary wartime settings and themes is restrained, and the work appears firmly entrenched in the landscape of an Anglo-Irish past. The text's diversion from war ruins in favour of the secluded decay of west Cork may call for reassessment of the judgement that Bowen represents an unflinching resistance to Irish isolationism. *Bowen's Court* sees the author contending with a more personal impulse to take shelter from the destructive

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[19] Elizabeth Bowen, 'In the Square', in *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), pp. 682–90 (p. 682).

[20] Wills, p. 13.

contemporary world within a stable and distant history.

The book is an attempt to form a magisterial, totalised chronicle of her family line, its eponymous house, and their relationship (or lack thereof) with the country in which they settled. This account, which spans from the time of fifteenth century 'Glamorganshire family of ap Owens' (p. 33) to Elizabeth Bowen's own inheritance of her ancestral home, is folded into a narrative of Ireland's synchronous national history. Although determinedly chronological, the text is vast and sprawling: passive narration of historical events jostles for space alongside legal documents, family anecdotes, detailed architectural descriptions, moral interrogations of colonialism, and commentary that often constitutes rife speculation on Bowen's part. This curious assortment is pervaded by instances of ruin and decay. Ireland is described as a 'country of ruins. Lordly or humble, military or domestic, standing up with furious gauntness, like Kilcolman, or shelving weakly into the soil.'[21] Bowen portrays Ireland as a palimpsest of scars and conflict. Yet ruin also makes intrusions into her own demesne. As I will argue, these instances are crucial to our understanding of the work and its tense engagement with the Second World War.

For the conflict is by no means irrelevant. While it is to some extent impractical to attempt to formulate a complete reading of this dense and miscellaneous text, Bowen herself provides a point of entry by expressing the significance of the Emergency to her process of construction. In an Afterword, written in 1941 and revised when the text was reprinted in 1963 (by

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[21] Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 15. Further references to *Bowen's Court* within this chapter will be to this edition, and will be given in the text.

which time Bowen's Court itself had been sold and demolished, having 'never lived to be a ruin', p. 459), she explains that only the first two chapters were completed before the war:

> When, for instance, I wrote about ruins in County Cork there were as yet few ruins in England other than those preserved in fences and lawns. I do not know how much, after that September of 1939, the colour of my narration may have altered. […] The war-time urgency of the present, its relentless daily challenge, seemed to communicate itself to one's view of the past, until, to the most private act or decision, there attached one's sense of its part in some campaign. (pp. 453-54)

Bowen indicates that the outbreak of combat – and the alteration and devastating expansion of ruins within England's landscape that eventually resulted – had repercussions for the literary construction of *Bowen's Court*. Her somewhat imprecise reference to 'the colour of my narration' and the present-day 'war-time urgency' that may have caused it to change offers readers a means of approach to the text. *Bowen's Court* is a work of cultural memory, seeking to preserve both a house and the Anglo-Irish history that it represents. Yet this act of private conservation, and the 'view of the past' which drives it, are both informed by the global experience of an unstable present. Bowen's family memoir has a more than coincidental relationship to the international conditions under which it was written.

While appraisal of Bowen's wartime writing focuses most frequently on its more easily discernible images in her fiction, *Bowen's Court* has been placed against this historical background by some critics. R. F. Foster argues that this 'composite portrait of Anglo-Irish culture (or lack of

it)'[22] is an attempt on Bowen's part to understand her ambivalent loyalties to both Ireland and Britain: 'in its evocation of place, family and Irishness *Bowen's Court* is […] a book about allegiance.'[23] Crucially, this evocation is *precipitated* by war, which acted as a 'catharsis' for Bowen, forcing her to examine her own Irish identity.[24] Meanwhile, Jack Lane and Brendan Clifford, jointly responsible for producing the *North Cork Anthology* which sought to 'ruin' Bowen by presenting her name as '~~Elizabeth Dorothea Cole Bowen, C. B. E~~',[25] take a more hostile view of her intentions. *Bowen's Court*, 'hastily assembled from materials she found to hand',[26] is not a probing inquiry into her own Irishness but rather an attempt to buttress the pretence of its existence. 'It was the war clouds which caused Elizabeth Bowen to polish up her Irish credentials, as a means of furthering her cover for espionage', writes Lane,[27] concluding that 'the perspective the book is written from was calculated to ingratiate her with Irish intellectuals. It is not one that sits easily with her Churchillian imperialist arrogance.'[28] Lane's nationalistic accusations and Foster's far more measured identification of ambivalence both implicate the war as a time in which Bowen's relationship to Ireland, whether for practical or philosophical reasons, was placed in question. Turning to autobiography, Bowen sought to secure that identity by reconstructing her own heritage.

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[22] Foster, *Paddy and Mr Punch*, p. 104.

[23] Ibid., p. 117.

[24] Ibid., p. 109.

[25] Lane and Clifford, *A North Cork Anthology*, p. 9.

[26] Jack Lane, 'Introduction', in Elizabeth Bowen, *'Notes on Eire': Espionage Reports to Winston Churchill, 1940-2*, ed. by Jack Lane and Brendan Clifford (Cork: Aubane Historical Society, 2009) pp. 5–9 (p. 8).

[27] Ibid., p. 7.

[28] Ibid., p. 8.

There is general insight in this reading, but detailed consideration of the *spaces* used to perform this task in *Bowen's Court* facilitates a subtler understanding of the tensions in identity brought to light by 'the war-time urgency of the present'. In particular, Bowen's portrayal of the Big House around which the text centres suggests a desire to situate and preserve her identity in a site of isolation and material stability; an attempt which can be read productively against the ruins of physically destructive conflict that impinge upon her writing. Bowen describes the Anglo-Irish as existing in 'house-islands', each of which has 'a frame of its own', embodying an 'innate' social segregation at the level of space (p. 20). The desire to preserve this centred, islandic environment and its attendant ideological 'frame' becomes apparent in our first encounter with the demesne. Following the opening tour of the property's environs, readers are offered an extensive description of her ancestral seat. 'This is Bowen's Court as the past has left it', she summarises:

> an isolated, unfinished house, grandly conceived and plainly and strongly built. [...] Larger in manner than in actual size, it stands up in Roman urbane strongness in a land on which the Romans never set foot. It is the negation of mystical Ireland: its bald walls rebut the surrounding, disturbing light. Imposed on seized land, built in the rulers' ruling tradition, the house is, all the same, of the local rock, and it sheds the same grey gleam you see over the countryside. So far, it has withstood burnings and wars. (p. 31)

Bowen may have described Ireland as 'a country of ruins' (p. 15), but here she establishes her own family's space within this country as an environment striving toward stability. The building 'stands up in Roman urbane

strongness', an unsentimental contribution to the philosophical ideals of the Ascendancy and 'the rulers' ruling tradition' which is upheld in turn by the physical permanence of the house's 'plainly and strongly built' form.

According to this passage, the threat of ruin has not diminished the structure or the ideals it embodies – at least, not yet, for 'so far it has withstood burnings and wars'. Heather Bryant Jordan argues that, throughout *Bowen's Court*, the author protects herself from her own historical present by 'sustaining fantasies of her Anglo-Irish heritage' against the context of World War II.[29] This sustenance takes place primarily through her portrayal of the house, which comes to be the text's 'organizing principle'.[30] Its constancy as an object with which to conserve cultural memory allows it to stand as Bowen's refuge from 'the nightmare of war'[31] and 'the sense of fragility in everyday life' that the conflict instilled.[32] This interpretation suggests that the 'impulse towards engagement'[33] Wills attributes to Bowen requires a further gloss. Bowen's work *did* engage with the Second World War, but this commitment was accompanied by a rival, instinctive search for safety in the 'urbane strongness' of an idealised past.

The connection Jordan has drawn between wartime fragility and the landscapes of *Bowen's Court* informs the analysis that follows. However, Jordan risks presenting an overly simplified understanding of the 'sustaining fantasies' of the Ascendancy's halcyon days, as well as overstating the

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[29] Heather Bryant Jordan, *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 17.

[30] Ibid., p. 115.

[31] Ibid., p. 108.

[32] Ibid., p. 97.

[33] Wills, p. 13.

effectiveness with which they are illustrated. Bowen does present the house as an organising principle in the narrative, and links its literary construction to a desire for escape from the contemporary pressures of global conflict. But the reliability of this preservative performance is cast in continual doubt by the appearance of ruin, which disrupts any retreat into nostalgia and reveals the presence of contemporary threats within apparently distant history.

In the investigation which follows, several moments in which ruin makes intrusions into the narrative are scrutinised. When choosing these instances, a considerable degree of selectiveness is necessary, for *Bowen's Court* is not lacking in damaged sites of cultural memory. The memoir portrays Ireland as a country in which 'campaigns and "troubles," taking their tolls, subsiding, each leave a new generation of ruins to be reabsorbed slowly into the natural scene' (p. 16). The author speculates whether this ruinscape is so capacious that those living within it cease to engage: 'in Ireland we take these as part of life' (p. 17). As Shelley Saguaro comments, Bowen indicates an 'over-determination of "ruin" in Ireland' here, suggesting that their proliferations frustrates historical understanding. [34] This study, however, focuses on sites in which such loss of meaning is counteracted. In doing so, I identify a limited sample of locations, each of which exists takes place within an identifiable moment of historical crisis. Rather than revealing a slow move into absence and absorption by 'the natural scene', these sites illustrate the capacity of ruin to produce new and diverse historiographies. Isolationism is challenged by resistant connectivity.

In order to assess Bowen's treatment of the past, it is helpful to

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[34] Shelley Saguaro, *Garden Plots: The Politics and Poetics of Gardens* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 40.

seek the assistance of a theoretical model, and an adaptive interpretation of Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory' affords results. As noted earlier, Rothberg argues that the past is a source of 'dialogic interactions',[35] 'subject to ongoing negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing'.[36] This is not a theory which can be applied wholesale. Rothberg's analysis is focussed primarily on the Holocaust, and although he states that a 'commitment to uncovering historical relatedness'[37] can be of benefit to the study of memory within 'other historical and cultural traditions',[38] *Bowen's Court* involves very different terrain. A central concern in the use of multidirectional memory is the need to question the assumption that remembrance is competitive and culturally singular, 'a struggle for recognition in which there can only be winners and losers'.[39] The 'zero-sum game' at issue in regard to Holocaust commemoration is less relevant to my own argument. However, the process of negotiation and cultural interchange that Rothberg describes can still be used constructively here, offering a means to see how ruins complexify the one-dimensional retreat into the 'sustaining fantasies' of Anglo-Irish heritage described by Jordan.[40] Cultural memory is disrupted in *Bowen's Court* by subtle, unruly linkages between histories, which challenge its stability.

In pursuing this argument, I shall begin with Bowen's Afterword. This crucial final chapter addresses World War II directly, revealing the author's desire to create a refuge away from its destruction. Yet that image of

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[35] Rothberg, p. 5.

[36] Ibid., pp. 2-3.

[37] Ibid., p. 29.

[38] Ibid., p. 28.

[39] Ibid., p. 3.

[40] Jordan, p. 17.

safety is shown to be unsettled by ruin's use as a connective substance, reinscribing historical threat within the text – a process facilitated by the presence of a wireless at Bowen's Court, which creates a disruptive source of historical communication. Following this, I consider how the portrayal of Ireland's revolutionary period styles ruin as an unruly, resistant force. During the Civil War, Bowen's Court is overtaken by Republican soldiers; and while it is spared complete eradication, I argue that lasting damages left by the intrusion disrupt the memoir's chronological structure, revealing persistent vulnerabilities in Anglo-Irish history. Finally, I examine Bowen's portrayal of the vista of destruction created during the War of Independence. This reveals a shift in historical perspective towards the multidirectional which can be traced to World War II – and potentially compromises the cultural isolation upon which the house's role as an 'organising principle' depends. *Bowen's Court* is a text animated by an unresolved tension between an apparently incorruptible ideal – shored up in the face of global warfare – and palpable, connective signatures of conflict. As the following analysis will show, this guiding tension is a further source of radical decay.

2. 'The very image of continuity': Peaceful Scenes and the Perception of War

Ruin is a subversive force within *Bowen's Court*. It does indeed constitute a contribution to the framework of radical decay elaborated across this project, proffering resources with which to renegotiate ingrained historical perspectives – in this case, the restrictive enclosures of Anglo-Irish isolationism. Nevertheless, the use of ruin to mount ideological resistance is particularly sensitive within this text. Whereas authors such as Sebastian

Barry and, to an extent, J. G. Farrell are able to attain a level of distance from the culture which they critique, Bowen's own identity is bound up with the ethnocentric traditions at issue in her autobiography. Motions towards resistance are compromised by rival attraction towards 'sustaining fantasies'. Isolationist heritage is also a source of protection from the circumstances in which Bowen wrote: both the changed political landscape in post-independence Ireland, and the violent dislocations of a ruinous world war.

In her Afterword, Bowen reflects on the preceding memoir and explores the latter pressure in candid detail, revealing a deliberate attempt to escape from representing any encounters with the historically charged ruin upon which radical decay is founded. She writes that the psychological climate of World War II triggered a reactionary response:

> Yes, there was a picture of peace – in the house, in the country round. Like all pictures, it did not quite correspond with any reality. Or, you might have called the country a magic mirror, reflecting something that could not really exist. That illusion – peace at its most ecstatic – I held to, to sustain me throughout the war. I suppose that everyone, fighting or just enduring, carried within him one private image, one peaceful scene. Mine was Bowen's Court. War made me that image out of a house built of anxious history. (p. 457)

Bowen concedes a distorted quality in the preceding portrait of her home and its surroundings, acknowledging in a hedging phrase that the result 'did not quite correspond with any reality'. She uses the Second World War as a justification for resorting to this fantasy. Asserting that 'war made me that image' concedes agency as a writer, implying that the conflict itself assumed

authorship while she took on a more passive role. Escapism of this kind was certainly common between 1939 and 1945. As Paul Fussell comments, conditions in Britain led to an acute need for 'simulacra of prewar freedom, delight, warmth, abundance, and elegance'.[41] Yet there is an additional dimension to Bowen's vision, for in her case, sustaining an idealised 'simulacra' within an Anglo-Irish property requires a specific manipulation of the past. The preservation of a 'peaceful scene' demands eliding the history of colonial relations in Ireland. Even while acknowledging the illusory nature of her vision, Bowen continues to support the elision which sustains it: an equivocal reference is made to an 'anxious history' involved in the house's construction, but this is euphemistic and brief. In a conscious retreat from landscapes of threat, there is little material to contend such strategic forgetfulness.

Yet this reactionism is also resisted, for despite the emphasis on pastoral 'peace' above, ruin is given presence within the Afterword – and with it the stimulus to an active relationship with the past:

> The war-time urgency of the present, its relentless daily challenge, seemed to communicate itself to one's view of the past, until, to the most private act or decision, there attached one's sense of its part in some campaign. Those days, either everything mattered or nothing mattered. The past – private just as much as historic – seemed to me, therefore, to matter more than ever: it acquired meaning; it lost its false mystery. In the savage and austere light of a burning world, details leaped out with significance. (p. 453–54)

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[41] Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 209.

A few pages before declaring her 'picture of peace' in the same chapter, Bowen not only gives war and the vistas of destruction it produced a presence – the 'burning world', a 'campaign' – but styles it as a clarifying force. 'In the savage and austere light of a burning world' history is given 'meaning' and renewed significance. Maud Ellmann comments that Bowen wrote her memoir 'in an effort to preserve the past', but the experience of 'London under siege' also confirmed 'the incalculable nature of reality, its resistance to interpretation and negotiation'.[42] This confrontation with the incalculable and resistant 'nature of reality' through war suggests an opportunity to challenge the erasure required by escapism. It is not the only time ruin is linked with enlightenment in Bowen's war writing. In 'Summer Night', Justin describes the violence taking place outside Ireland as 'an awful illumination: it's destroyed our dark; we have to see what we are'.[43] But in *Bowen's Court*, this 'illumination' is not only an abstract metaphor. By recording 'a burning world', the literal, fiery matter of the ruins overtaking the rest of Europe is identified as an intellectual resource, stimulating analytic revaluation of the author's 'view of the past' and its relation to the present. The historical revisionism required to create an idealised 'picture of peace' is frustrated by the landscape of war.

The contradictory experience of both enlightenment and the desire to escape it is present through the memoir. Beyond her writerly commentaries, Bowen's portrayal of life at her ancestral home during the war

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[42] Maud Ellmann, 'Shadowing Elizabeth Bowen', *New England Review*, 24.1 (2003), 144–69 (p. 166).

[43] Bowen, 'Sumer Night', p. 661.

years reflects this fraught relationship with the ruins of World War II: the attempt to dramatise a 'peaceful scene' is threatened by multidirectional access to narratives of traumatic history. At first glance, Bowen represents neutral Ireland as a safe, detached environment, secluded from both violence and its memory:

> Bowen's Court, in that December of 1941 in which this book was finished, still stood in its particular island of quietness, in the south of an island country not at war. Only the wireless in the library conducted the world's urgency to the place. Wave after wave of war news broke upon the quiet air of the room and, in the daytime, when the windows were open, passed out on to the sunny or overcast lawns. Here was a negative calm – or at least, the absence of any immediate physical threat. Yet, at the body of this house, threats did strike – and in a sense they were never gone from the air. The air here has absorbed, in its very stillness, apprehensions general to mankind. It was always with some qualification – most often with that of an almost undue joy – that one beheld, at Bowen's Court, the picture of peace. (pp. 456–67)

To maintain her 'picture of peace' on the page, Bowen offers repeated evidence of her distance from the conflict. She is protected by the inherent geographical security of an 'island country', as well as that country's isolating neutrality ('not at war'), and her own estate's location 'in the south', far from the border with Allied combatant Northern Ireland. This twofold political and spatial insulation from historical anxiety is supported by a sensory characterisation of the home's atmosphere, stressing its 'quiet air' and 'stillness'. Apparently drawing on this paragraph, Victoria Glendinning

provides a biographical description of Bowen at work on her final chapter, confirming its claim to peace, 'in the quiet of the countryside, with only the wireless in the library to remind her that Europe was at war. It seemed very far away. The house and demesne were the very image of continuity.'[44] Both Glendinning and Bowen – the latter at least in this paragraph's first statements – represent an environment of durability and cohesion; a monument protected from the instability of radical decay. However, while the landscape of Bowen's Court is granted a material insulation from the Emergency with the confirmed 'absence of any immediate physical threat', its ability to evade the perspectival challenge posed by 'a burning world' is not necessarily secure.

Within this section, a particular source of challenge is revealed. The association between sensory peace and the preservation of 'continuity' requires minimising the significance of the one device which does disturb her room's 'quiet air': the wireless. Glendinning brushes over the presence of this tool ('only the wireless') yet it is an important presence, with connective power that Bowen acknowledged elsewhere. She writes in her 1940 'The Big House' that even in the Ascendancy's exclusive world-within-a-world, it interrupted 'the isolation, or loneliness, of my own house':

> I have grown up accustomed to seeing out of my windows nothing but grass, sky, tree, to be enclosed in a ring of almost complete silence and to making journeys for anything that I want. Actually [...] the motor car demolishes distances, and the telephone and wireless keep the house knit up, perhaps too much,

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[44] Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer*, p. 184.

with the world.'[45]

The significance of this technology to 'knit up' isolated spaces with the events of elsewhere became greater during World War II. Wills emphasises the relationship between the radio set's ability to interrupt 'loneliness' and the war being given presence; this was felt across Ireland. As a technology it was thought to pose a considerable threat to neutrality and the 'safety in solitude' that Ireland's neutral status – and Bowen's own advantaged position in owning a comfortably resourced Anglo-Irish property – sustained. 'Efforts to modernise' within post-independence Ireland made the country 'part of the latest networks of communication spanning the globe', and the result was a device 'which could bring home the reality of the war even to the remotest areas of the countryside'.[46] Bowen reveals the vulnerability to isolationist security that this connection to 'the reality of war' presented. Because her narrative has associated ahistorical 'continuity' with *silence*, wireless broadcasts have an implicitly disruptive capacity. On a personal rather than national scale, the threats to wartime solitude and political stability that Wills describes begin to become manifest at Bowen's Court.

Efforts to exile the 'burning world' by taking refuge in Anglo-Irish 'loneliness' and physical quietude are threatened by an increasingly technologised and interconnected environment, in which narratives of suffering can be transmitted easily across distances. The impact of this upon her ideal 'picture of peace' can be understood with reference to multidirectional memory. Rothberg's discussion of the role technology can

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[45] Bowen, p. 25.
[46] Wills, p. 43.

play in mediating the relationship between ruins and memory is of assistance, even though it comes in a consideration of far later technological advances. Discussing the twenty-first century 'ruinous histories' pursued by Caryl Phillips, he notes the profound influence of an increasingly complex communicative network on the work of memory. Facing 'a contemporary moment in which the means of communication and transport have been globalized' means that 'new forms of cultural and economic exchange multiply the possibilities for identification with the histories of others'. There is an unsettling volatility in this, for a 'multiplicity' of 'means of communication' makes 'paths of identification difficult to stabilize'.[47] Of course, it is inadvisable to remove these remarks too far from their original context, and in citing them I do not seek a simple equivalence between Bowen's confrontation with a wireless network during World War II and the profoundly unstable 'paths of identification' produced under the conditions of contemporary globalisation. *Bowen's Court* is written in an analogue, not digital age, and the 'possibilities for identification' are consequently far reduced.

Notwithstanding, an earlier and more restricted form of the same instability in historical relations becomes a source of radical decay in *Bowen's Court*. The technological closing of spatial and psychological distance endangers the house's capacity to fulfil its role as an 'organising principle' – the role which, according to Jordan, gave Bowen an escape from the trauma of war.[48] Reference to the wireless set as the 'only' source by which 'the world's urgency' can be articulated appears to minimise its repercussions; but

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[47] Rothberg, p. 171.
[48] Jordan, p. 115.

Bowen's subsequent description thwarts this dismissiveness. Broadcasts are represented as 'wave after wave of war news' which 'broke upon the quiet air of the room and, in the daytime, when the windows were open, passed out on to the sunny or overcast lawns'. This sentence creates a play on the word airwaves (a term established in Bowen's time)[49] so that insubstantial electromagnetic broadcasts are expanded metaphorically into an assault of physical waves assailing the house and grounds. The descriptive figuration presents the expression of a multidirectional 'identification with the histories of others' that Rothberg attributes to communicative technology.[50] The aural message regarding 'war news' that 'broke upon the quiet air' is given an impactful relationship with the *space* of Bowen's Court.

Represented as an environmental force, the hostile energy in this imagery of 'wave after wave' brings with it the idea, if not of full ruin, then at least a level of spatial endangerment. The metaphorical disturbance is exacerbated by a reverberation with Bowen's anterior description of her home as both a 'house-island' (p. 20) and within 'an island country' – images which embody detachment, but also a certain susceptibility to incursions by 'wave after wave'. Emily. C. Bloom, noting the transnational role of the wireless in World War II as a whole, also perceives the significance of this moment in *Bowen's Court*. She describes it as 'an assault on isolation: an assault rendered ambivalently as both a rescue from a paralytic state and as a destruction of the calm of the rural estate'.[51] Employing further imagery of violence, Bloom

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[49] The OED gives its first use of 'airwaves' as a reference to radio transmission in 1924. <www.oed.com.wam.leeds.ac.uk/view/Entry/270268> [accessed 1 April 2018].

[50] Rothberg, p. 171.

[51] Emily C. Bloom, *The Wireless Past: Anglo-Irish Writers and the BBC, 1931–1968* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 109.

concludes that the potentially imprisoning 'calm' of the house is vulnerable to the belligerent presence of 'war news'. Her analysis can be taken forward to suggest that while the radio broadcasts at Bowen's Court constitute an example of the 'paths of communication' Rothberg describes, the path is a particularly unsafe one for the listener. Peace and continuity at Bowen's Court are not disrupted by falling bombs, but instead by knowledge of those suffering elsewhere.

The capacity of radio communication to jeopardise the 'image of continuity' described by Glendinning indicates that Bowen's reference to the wireless here is no casual remark. Indeed, its status as a significant preoccupation can be seen in its emergence not only in *Bowen's Court* but also in *The Heat of the Day*. In the latter's fictional portrayal of Anglo-Irish wartime experience, the same anxiety regarding wireless broadcasts and their connective possibilities resurfaces. Midway through the novel, the protagonist Stella leaves London in order to organise affairs at Mount Morris, an Irish Big House owned by her late cousin. On arrival she discovers that the wireless is broken, allowing her to experience a changed relationship to history, very different from her intimacy with ruins in bomb-damaged London:

> After supper she twiddled perfunctorily the knobs of the wireless beside Cousin Francis's chair – it had pleased him to have the war at his elbow; she was pleased to have only one more and more significant degree of silence added to the library: evidently the battery was dead. There never had been a telephone at Mount Morris – assurance of being utterly out of reach

added annullingness to her deep sleep that night.[52]

Stella – who is, as Phyllis Lassner states is fundamentally 'uncertain in her commitments', with an 'elusive' identity[53] – interprets Anglo-Irish existence as an opportunity to escape the danger war has posed to her allegiances and material safety. Mount Morris becomes an encapsulation of refuge and stability, very like the 'continuity' described by Glendinning at Bowen's Court. Indeed, the comment is echoed tellingly in R. F. Foster's appraisal of *The Heat of the Day*. Noting that Mount Morris 'recalls Bowen's own home', Foster argues that the house 'symbolises continuance and integrity' – ideals given greater value in response to the destructive conditions of London at war: 'as the brittle stucco houses of London shudder, crack or simply disappear, the apparently undisturbed world outside the beleaguered capital takes on a new symbolic importance.'[54] Mount Morris does provide an evident contrast to conditions in London, where both allegiances and space are rendered unstable. But it is significant that Stella's ability to identify the house with undisturbed continuance is to an extent provisional: dependent in part upon the non-functioning of communicative resources. Without access to the broadcast media's representations of war, she is able to find deep rest in the additional 'degree of silence' added to Ireland's neutral seclusion, 'utterly

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[52] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 168.
[53] Phyllis Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990), p. 124, 125.
[54] Roy Foster, 'Introduction', in Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, pp. 1-6 (p. 3).

out of reach'.[55] The sense of safety provided by a dead battery underscores the connection between listening to stories from conflict, and the threat of ruin. Stella is able take temporary refuge in an Ascendancy role she perceives as 'outside time'; a position sustained by the inaccessibility of her own connections to the Emergency. Without the waves of news that assault Bowen's Court, the Big House is granted 'immortality'.[56] Only divorce ('annullingness') from multidirectional routes of communication can secure permanence and preservation from ruin – and this is not present at Bowen's Court.

3. 'Still testifying': Anachronistic Ruin from the Civil War

The troubling connection to distant history enabled by wireless communication is given limits within the memoir. The account of receiving 'war news' both reveals and censors the author's relationship with the ruin taking place elsewhere, for the news itself is given no verbal reproduction within the text; and although its 'waves' of sound take on a striking metaphorical enactment across the property, there is no substantial record of the narratives these waves convey. Readers' possibilities for engagement are restricted. Earlier in the memoir, however, there are instances of material ruin

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[55] As Stella learns in her trip to Ireland's subsequent days, the lack of a wireless does not actually ensure 'silence', for she finds herself hailed by the house's servant who announces Bernard Montgomery's victory in Egypt with enthusiasm. Bowen thus portrays local Irish people as highly engaged with the war, although the source of their knowledge is not clear: the news is simply 'all through the country'. (*The Heat of the Day*, p. 178). This characterisation of popular Irish engagement further suggests the artificiality of expecting the neutral country to sustain a 'peaceful scene'. It also reveals connection to the war among the Irish population around the Big House, and identifies their role as sources of challenge to the use of Anglo-Irish space as a source of apolitical isolationism.

[56] Bowen, *The Heat of the Day*, p. 166.

which facilitate more extensive, multidirectional disruptions of idealistic continuity. This is particularly evident in Bowen's representation of the Irish Civil War and the ruinous imprints that it left upon her home. These traces of conflict are able to provoke an anachronistic connective engagement, not only with the time in which they were made, but also with the global conflict through which Bowen wrote.

Bowen's Court survived Ireland's revolutionary period, but in both the War of Independence and the Civil War its fate was doubtful. Emerging from the first conflict 'untouched' (p. 440), the risk of destruction resumed again when, during the second conflict, Big House burnings became even more frequent.[57] In the summer of 1922, Bowen's Court was occupied by Republican soldiers. They had already 'established themselves' at Mitchelstown Castle before burning that property down as they left (p. 441). Seventy 'young men' arrived, sleeping, conducting reconnaissance, and reading Kipling before leaving after three or four days (pp. 441–2). Bowen minimises the episode as comparatively innocuous ('even prejudice allows it that they behaved like lambs', p. 441), yet the soldiers create physical effects on the house through their more hostile intentions:

> The Republicans came in to meet cautious faces, emptied cabinets, bare walls. They lost no time in mining the lower avenue – the mines are said to be still there, but, as my father said, no doubt damp got into them soon. They also made preparations to blow the house up, in case of surprise attack. Vital wires connecting with these mines came through a corner of

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[57] Michael Hopkinson, *Green Against Green: The Irish Civil War* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), p. 195.

the library wall, the corner where the wireless now
stands. (p. 441)

Several forms of ruin are displayed here, and it is necessary to identify each before examining their subversive impact. Firstly, the soldiers' 'preparations' have left unrepaired, if relatively minor, physical scars on the building: 'a corner of the library wall' has been broken in order to orchestrate the arrangement of 'vital wires'. A few pages later this description is expanded: Bowen recounts her father writing his life work on land law 'at the table in the library window, beside the wall still torn by the Republicans' wires' (pp. 443-44). Secondly, the men have left behind a source of threat and decay in the mines placed in 'the lower avenue', now apparently damp and corroding.

A final, more fundamental ruin is also attendant: the house's absolute destruction, which did not take place but is still registered. Bowen describes 'preparations to blow the house up', leaving the methods involved ambiguous, but the phrase's position in the text means that the hypothetical act of total ruin is recorded; the prospect is also represented by the torn wall and mines, signatures of violent action and intent. It can be seen therefore that Bowen's account of the Civil War has created a concrete record of the nebulous atmospheric 'threats' described in the Afterword as striking 'at the body of this house' (p. 454). History has left marks on Bowen's Court, in themselves records which speak to an incident incompatible with Bowen's much-desired 'picture of peace'. Scrutiny of these marks can be pressed further, for their presentation reveals dialogic connections which begin a more radical undermining of historiographic stability within the text.

The two forms of material ruin at the property – a wall torn by

'vital wires' and mines in the avenue 'said to still be there' – are relics of a highly dangerous occupation, bearing witness to a specific historical moment. Yet they persist in space, still visible when Bowen writes, and are thus given a relationship to the 'now' of the memoir's composition. Rothberg's inquiry regarding ruins and multidirectional memory offers specific terms in which this complexification of memory can be analysed. Bowen presents a moment in which spatial proximity is privileged over chronological order, and in this it can be seen as an instance of 'anachronism'.

This is a concept examined by Rothberg as a source of the multidirectional, specifically within the 'ruinous geography'[58] developed by the novelist André Schwarz-Bart. An anachronism is an instance of temporal inconsistency, in which places or things from different times are found in incongruous conjunction between 'that which is supposed to be kept apart'.[59] The productive 'dialogical exchange'[60] which constitutes multidirectional memory can emerge as a result. In Schwarz-Bart's *A Woman Named Solitude*, a 1972 novel which traces the story of the renowned Guadeloupean slave through the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Rothberg identifies ruin as the source of 'multiple forms of anachronism and *anatopism* (or, spatial misplacement)'.[61] These include a temporal connection between Solitude's story and contemporary times, and a spatial link between a site of trauma in Caribbean slavery and the ruins of 'the humiliated ruins of the Warsaw

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[58] Rothberg, p. 112.

[59] Ibid., p. 136.

[60] Ibid., p. 21.

[61] Ibid., p. 146. Emphasis in original.

ghetto'.[62] In Rothberg's reading, anachronism and anatopism work in Schwarz-Bart's narrative to draw connective attention to spaces rendered 'uneventful', left 'outside the dominant narrative of world history'[63] – and in doing so proffer a 'demystifying means of exposing the ideological assumptions of historicist categorization'.[64] Schwarz-Bart and in turn Rothberg are again both involved in a context very different to that examined by Bowen. But equipped with this definition of anachronism, it is possible to analyse how the traces of ruin 'where the wireless now stands' provide connective resources capable of challenging the 'ideological assumptions' and instincts towards forgetfulness in *Bowen's Court*, which in this case emerge from the Anglo-Irish writer's own reservations regarding historical engagement.

The moment of anachronism permits a form of contact between the Civil War and the history which, according to Bowen, drives her need for a 'peaceful scene': that of World War II. The wall, 'still torn by the Republicans wires', is given a spatial connection to the radio set, with its waves of 'war news' (p. 457) that articulate the 'burning world' (p. 454) from which Bowen sought escape. The proximity is detailed in a brief subclause, appended to a paragraph without commentary, and it thus appears coincidental and even irrelevant. Yet the disclosure is anomalous, and alters the implications of the wires' imprint upon the wall significantly. In a lateral movement assisted by the verbal affinity between 'wires' and 'wireless', two focal points for different instances of historical threat – one presented by

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[62] André Schwarz-Bart, *A Woman Named Solitude*, trans. by Ralph Manheim ([Paris]: Editions du Seuil, 1972; repr. London: Vintage, 2002), p. 179.

[63] Rothberg, p. 147.

[64] Ibid., p. 137.

Ireland's troubled path to independence; the other by the global war supposedly kept at a remove by Éire's neutral condition as a Free State – are placed in a multidirectional relationship.

The only instance in which the wireless is given mention within the main text, this anachronism allows for the articulation of repeated threats to Bowen's identity which are otherwise confined to the Afterword. For Bowen, whose hybrid movement between England and Ireland resulted in vulnerability during both the Civil and Second World War, the two conflicts present analogous anxieties – specifically with regard to property, and its loss through destructive invasion. Both World War II and the Republican occupation reveal that, while it may ameliorate the impacts of conflicts' destruction (and impacts which are comparable in extent to those upon less politically enfranchised individuals), power is nevertheless no guarantee of safety from ruin. This shared danger is recognised by critic Robin Truth Goodman, who pursues it in an intertextual relationship between *Bowen's Court* and *The Heat of the Day*. Dispossession through ruin in 'the violence of the London war zone' can, she argues, be understood in relation to the threat posed by 'the frontline of the Irish Civil War'.[65] Concerns regarding 'the rise of an Irish decolonizing movement' and its subsequent threat of occupation are 'reflected' in her wartime novel.[66] The reflected unease Goodman describes between these two texts exists in *Bowen's Court* alone – through the use of ruin as a connective substance. Apparently incidental references to the house's present-day layout create associations between separate historical

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[65] Robin Truth Goodman, *Gender for the Warfare State: Literature of Women in Combat* (New York: Routledge, 2017), p. 131.
[66] Ibid., p. 133.

moments, troubling the narrative of Bowen's Court with the author's contemporary unease.

The presence of connections between 'that which is supposed to be kept apart'[67] at Bowen's Court creates a further challenge to idealised presentations of Anglo-Irish heritage. Disordered traces of the past within Bowen's present create a disruption in temporality which compromises the stability of the text's chronological structure. *Bowen's Court*'s narrative is sustained by a progressive movement forward in time which is used to nourish an image of enduring ancestral property, passed between generations with teleological purpose. It forms the bedrock to the 'image of continuity' Glendinning describes as a refuge from the uncertainties of war. Anachronism, which produces 'nonsynchronicity', [68] poses a serious disruption. This can be seen in the way it is resisted in Bowen's narrative, even while being produced. In describing the Republicans' actions, Bowen acknowledges that their mines 'are said to be still there'. As soon as she has created this ongoing, physical overlapping between her own time and the Civil War, she moves to diminish its significance, leaning on the workings of decay to render the weapons inoperative: 'the mines are said to be still there, but, as my father said, no doubt damp got into them soon'. Her dismissal is delivered carelessly, with a disinterest that implies emotional as well as physical detachment. It relies upon secondhand knowledge without identifying a source, reducing the weapons to an anecdotal, and hence trivial, matter. Bowen's narrative treatment of these relics moves to rectify the broken chronology they have produced, downplaying the possibility that the

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[67] Rothberg, p. 136.
[68] Ibid., p. 140.

past has ongoing practical or emotional implications at her home. The explosives may have once represented the threat of destruction brought by Civil War, but there is now 'no doubt' that active conflict is no longer represented – and so the multidirectional impulse can be overlooked.

However, this attempt at dismissal is subverted by the material properties of ruin. Depending on decay to render history irrelevant is never advisable. Instead of being kept in their chronological place, the remains of these mines are given a lingering continuation which extends into Bowen's own time. The reassuring comment that 'no doubt the damp got into them soon', while apparently carefree, is not entirely resolute enough to deaden the explosives' presence. According to Bowen, no attempt has been made to check or remove the weapons, or to repair the wall that is 'still torn'. As a result, the tension between 'decay' and 'original design' by which Dorothy Bell defines ruin[69] has not been halted by any attempts towards restoration. The ambiguous, resistant substance of radical decay that emerges from this state, caught in transition between presence and absence, is suggested by Rothberg's illustration of the multidirectional. He examines the epilogue in *A Woman Named Solitude*, in which a modern-day tourist visits the site of a plantation mansion 'blown sky-high'[70] in Solitude's time, walking among the 'bone splinters' and scattered building stones.[71] Rothberg comments that the fragments left behind from the destroyed mansion produce anachronism: 'Like the fragments of bone, time is literally splintered. […] As ruin, the site of the plantation is itself disjoined from the present, half-buried by nearly two

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[69] Bell, p. 261.

[70] Schwarz-Bart, p. 162.

[71] Ibid., p. 178.

centuries of "innocent" activities but still testifying to a traumatic past.'[72] This argument provides incipient articulation of the essential, material ambiguity exhibited by ruins as signifiers: fragmentary, corroded, or unstable, they are not part of the present but are yet capable of 'still testifying' within it. Exhibiting progressive environmental damage which prevents their stories from achieving integration from the contemporary, ruins also offer fragmented resources which can bring forward a long past time. This ambivalence intensifies the historiographic disruption created by anachronism. The physical, stubbornly enduring damage done to Bowen's Court results in signifiers of the Civil War, which resist confinement within the isolated moment they have been allotted in the text's chronology.

Bowen's ability to protect herself from 'the burning world' by creating a history which sustains 'the ruler's ruling tradition' of her house (p. 31) is shaken by this narratological disorder. It is not difficult to overlook the abrupt shift into the 'now' which these traces of ruin spur, but, as sudden dislocations in a temporal structure that is otherwise tightly controlled, their presence points to an underlying tension between stability and threat within the text. Arguing that *Bowen's Court* seeks to create 'a testimony to that which had felt significant and enduring' during 'the fearful years of the Second World War', Elizabeth Grubgeld notes that Bowen attempts to secure 'permanence' through a 'chronological design, in which each chapter bears the name of a succeeding male ancestor'. It is not until her Afterword that Bowen confronts the present day, and recognises that her own identity, female, childless, with a 'crumbling' house, evidences the design's failure to

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[72] Rothberg, p. 147.

endure.[73] Grubgeld's argument can be extended by taking Bowen's Civil War anachronism into account. Lasting damages from the Republican incursion give readers a resource to perform multidirectional connections in defiance of the narrative's chronological progress. Bowen's Court, though protected from war by both the surrounding Irish state's neutrality and the 'urbane strongness' of an inherited Ascendancy property, is unable to sustain a history untouched by ruinous threats. Coercive attempts to maintain its permanence, protecting memory from contemporary experience, are therefore disrupted by the presence of radical decay.

4. Mutual Execution: Dialogic Perspectives and the War of Independence

Forms of ruin within *Bowen's Court* at once illustrate and subvert the author's desire to control history in the face of threats from the past and present. These threats exist not only in relation to Bowen's property, but also her identity: an anxiety demonstrated in her account of the War of Independence. Before turning to the Civil War, the narrative lingers on the previous conflict – 'Ireland's bitter struggle for Ireland' (p. 439) – in which ruin once more presses close. Under its pressure, further multidirectional connections emerge to resist Bowen's own conservative historiography.

When the 'bitter struggle' moved through Bowen's county, it struck the Anglo-Irish community with particular ferocity. At least twenty-six Big

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[73] Elizabeth Grubgeld, 'Life Writing in the Twentieth Century', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, ed. by John Wilson Foster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 223–37 (p. 228).

Houses burned,[74] although the number may have been almost double this.[75] Across Ireland their destruction remained rare, but in Cork it was 'a common occurrence.'[76] Bowen felt personal involvement, albeit at a privileged distance, receiving news from her father which tells her to prepare for the worst: 'I read his letter beside Lake Como, and, looking at the blue water, taught myself to imagine Bowen's Court in flames' (p. 440). This imagined vision of ruin is a dominant presence, but her account of this war here does not produce an image of the Big House burning in isolation. Instead, it is placed in the context of a wider, *socially diverse* history of the conflict, taking in not only 'Anglo-Irish houses in our immediate neighbourhood' but multiple parties involved in a cycle of 'reprisals and counter-reprisals', including local farms belonging to 'our family's friends' (p. 431). Her own home's ability to act as a centralised organising principle is rejected in favour of a diffuse landscape of ruin. Bowen's own advantaged status within this landscape is not in doubt, and is indeed confirmed by her ability to seek refuge outside Ireland during the revolutionary period; she experiences her house's presumed ruin only in her imagination whilst looking into idyllically peaceful 'blue water'. Nevertheless, *Bowen's Court* reveals a significant movement towards the dialogical in Bowen's practice of memory – a change that can be traced to the

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[74] Terence Dooley, *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland: A Study of Irish Landed Families, 1860–1960* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 2001), p. 185.

[75] According to James S. Donnelly, 'close to 50 Big Houses and suburban villas were burned there before the Truce in July 1921'. (James S. Donnelly Jr., 'Big House Burnings in County Cork during the Irish Revolution, 1920–21', *Éire-Ireland*, 47.3 (2012) 141–97 (p. 141)). Cork as a whole experienced particularly extreme violence throughout the war; as Dooley comments, this included 'the highest number of towns and villages affected by British reprisals and by far the highest incidence of IRA violence' (Dooley, *The Decline of the Big House in Ireland*, p. 185).

[76] Donnelly, p. 141.

'light of a burning world' in which the text was produced.

In order to identify the revisionist fluctuation in regard to the Anglo-Irish War, it is imperative to examine Bowen's encounters with the war while in London. Her own accounts suggest that experiences there precipitated a fundamentally changed experience of society. In her direct literary responses to the latter conflict, Bowen describes facing a challenge to her certainties with regards to class and ownership. This was not the result of hostile social currents – as in the Civil War – but instead a more amicable relaxation of social relations. During the Blitz, 'differentiation was suspended':

> I felt one with, and just like, everyone else. Sometimes
> I hardly knew where I stopped and everyone else
> began. The violent destruction of solid things, the
> explosion of the illusion that prestige, power and
> permanence attach to bulk and weight, left all of us,
> equally, heady and disembodied. Walls went down; and
> we felt, if not knew, each other. We all lived in a state
> of lucid abnormality.[77]

In the absence of 'solid things' an emotional intimacy emerges, so that the loss of spatial boundaries and 'permanence' is mirrored in a movement towards unity. The description is a reflection of the atmosphere of London at this time. Angus Calder, whose work *The People's War* challenges simplistic images of wartime unity,[78] nonetheless identifies 'the freedom with which

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[77] Elizabeth Bowen, *Ivy Gripped the Steps and Other Stories* (New York: Knopf, 1948), p. viii.

[78] Bowen reviewed Calder's book and criticised its attempt to 'debunk' myths regarding popular experience of the war. She responds that the 'exuberance' and 'mythical intensity' of wartime London 'was not a fake'. (Bowen, '*The People's War* by Angus Calder', in *The Mulberry Tree*, pp. 181–85 (p. 182)).

people now conversed with total strangers':[79] 'war had already weakened the famous English reserve; the blitz swept it away.'[80] Bowen takes this new form of 'freedom' further by suggesting that the climate of solidarity had political consequences: 'for the first time, we *are* a democracy [...] what we see, from day to day, acts as a leveller. All destructions make the same grey mess'.[81] In their cultural impact the ruins of the Blitz are themselves the material that facilitates a levelling. The loss of possessions and even the self – Bowen is in a 'disembodied' state – results in solidarity and even democratic liberation.

The sentiment of feeling 'one with, and just like, everyone else' carries with it a strong echo of the classless unity described as the Blitz Spirit: a now-familiar staple of Britain's mythologised 'finest hour' which, as Paul Gilroy comments, continues to provide 'desirable forms of togetherness' and 'exceptionally powerful feelings of comfort and compensation' in the face of multiculturalism.[82] Bowen's portrait of 'lucid abnormality' should not be classed as a jingoistic iteration of this propaganda-inspired myth, however. Instead it must be placed in relation to the Ascendancy worldview that the Blitz interrupted. The levelled world of the 'grey mess' is in evidently stark contrast to life within the Big House, which was 'isolated by something very much more lasting than the physical fact of space' (p. 20): an originary divorce between the Anglo-Irish culture and that beyond it. As Moynahan comments, 'the Irish Big House is about as convincing a symbol of community as the

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[79] Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939–1945* (London: Granada, 1971), p. 205.

[80] Ibid., p. 206.

[81] Bowen, 'Britain in Autumn', p. 54.

[82] Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture?* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 95.

House of Usher'.[83] In light of this divorced, bound consciousness, the level of dislocation precipitated when 'walls went down' during the Blitz becomes evident. Concepts of social solidarity and democratic levelling are not necessarily a source of comfort; indeed, they pose a danger to the framework which supported Bowen's pre-war identity.

This danger, representing a change to social consciousness, emerges obliquely within *Bowen's Court*. As discussed above, direct reference to World War II is rare within the memoir – a censorship reflecting her attempt to create a 'peaceful scene' to act as refuge. However, the intrusions made by reference to the conflict associate its influence with a change in social perception which is not necessary welcome. Defending the lack of 'education' in the eighteenth century ancestor styled in the memoir as 'Henry III', who established a 'lasting order' by building her house, Bowen asks:

> And to what did our fine feelings, our regard for the arts, our intimacies, our inspiring conversations, our wish to be clear of the bonds of sex and class and nationality, our wish to try to be fair to every one bring us? To 1939. (p. 125)

Delivered abruptly at the end of a paragraph that begins with a temporally specific reflection on a single individual, the date '1939' stands as a metonym, linking the founding of Bowen's Court to a history against which this chronicle is never quite sealed. In deploying this reference to WWII, Bowen associates the 'democracy' of ruin created in besieged London with a more profound loss of the cultural boundaries – 'sex and class and nationality' –

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[83] Moynahan, p. 241.

present at her home's founding, and registers her ambivalence towards the absence of these 'bonds'. As Glendinning argues, Bowen's fiction before WWII enshrines a policy of 'life with the lid on',[84] a phrase epitomising the civilised order and restrictions she viewed as inherent to Ascendancy existence.

But 1939 did arrive, and in bomb-damaged London, the order changed dramatically. Glendinning continues: 'one of the results of the war for Elizabeth was the breaking down of boundaries and barriers […] "Life with the lid on" was over for good'.[85] Glendinning also concedes that these conditions exerted influence upon *Bowen's Court*, representing a 'shattering change' which 'had its effect on what and how she wrote'.[86] This statement is rather vague, and sits alongside her claim that the war remained 'far away' from the house's 'image of continuity'.[87] I argue, however, that the presentation of ruins enclosed within the Cork landscape of *Bowen's Court* reflects the shattered, newly levelled social world created in the Blitz: a world in which 'I hardly knew where I stopped and everyone else began'. Her documenting of spatial violence reveals a revised, multidirectional contribution to cultural memory – reflecting precisely the transition from 'life with the lid on' that Glendinning sees realised in Bowen's direct

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[84] The phrase is taken from a 1942 essay by Bowen regarding Jane Austen. In a passage that appears to describe her own worldview as much as the subject of her study, she writes that Austen's 'view of life, in fact, if confined to, was not confined by, drawing-rooms and lawns. […] The constraints of polite behaviour serve only to store up her characters' energies; she dispels, except for the very stupid, the fallacy that life with the lid off – in thieves' kitchens, prisons, taverns and brothels – is necessarily more interesting than life with the lid on.' (Elizabeth Bowen, *English Novelists* (London: Collins, 1942), p. 25).

[85] Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer*, p. 162.

[86] Ibid., p. 183.

[87] Ibid., p. 184.

representations of the Blitz.

As with the Civil War, Bowen's attention to the War of Independence is brief, yet also rife with material capable of challenging the text's overarching, conservative agenda. This is particularly evident in the amassment of ruins detailed before Bowen describes picturing her own house 'in flames':

> Meanwhile, in Dublin and in the country, Ireland's bitter struggle for Ireland entered on a new phase. Between the armed Irish and the British troops in the country, reprisals and counter-reprisals – tragic policy – raged. Fire followed shootings, then fires fires. In the same spring night in 1921, three Anglo-Irish houses in our immediate neighbourhood – Rockmills, Ballywalter, Convamore – were burnt by the Irish. The British riposted by burning, still nearer Bowen's Court, the farms of putative Sinn Feiners – some of whom had been our family's friends. What now? (p. 431)

Stylising the conflict as entirely dominated by violent ruin, in which 'fire followed shootings, then fires fires', Bowen places her own house's potential destruction (the unspoken answer to the question 'what now') amidst consonant events taking place beyond it. The Bowens' own susceptible relation is emphasised by the description of violence, which progresses from a more abstract, national condition ('in Dublin and in the country') to localised action, 'in our immediate neighbourhood' and moving 'still nearer Bowen's Court'. In stylising the house as connected to her nation and 'immediate neighbourhood', Bowen's narration initiates an uneasy resistance to the isolationism previously dominant in her work. This is a significant change to

the claim that the Big House is bound by cultural origin to exist in 'a frame of its own' (p. 20). The house remains unscathed, but its destruction is given credence as a material prospect by a narrative which illustrates the destructive actions overtaking the rest of Cork, and situates the house inside, rather than beyond, this history.

Despite its brevity, the movement beyond Bowen's demesne wall at a time of personal crisis in order to put her own vision of destruction into context is a significant step, and facilitates a revision of generalised critical assumptions regarding the text's focus. Vera Kreilkamp argues assuredly that *Bowen's Court*, seeking to create a preservation of Anglo-Irish 'property rights', renders 'unpropertied Catholic Ireland […] strikingly absent from the book' – a feature which illustrates how much the volume is 'bound by those conservative values that prevent its author from questioning the deepest assumptions of her culture that caused its decline'.[88] Conservative values are undoubtedly enshrined within the text, but the ruinscape narrated in this section reveals an important resistance to their totalising presence. 'Catholic Ireland' is indeed portrayed as 'unpropertied', in that ownership of landed estates is an assuredly Anglo-Irish (and hence Protestant) affair throughout. And yet, when describing the War of Independence, it is by a conscious acknowledgement of the local buildings and private spaces of those who live *outside* Ascendancy society that Bowen's own fears are given contextual meaning. This widened perspective may offer a resource with which to challenge the reactionary conservatism also present in the text.

By extending beyond her own house-island, the geography of ruin

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[88] Kreilkamp, *The Anglo-Irish Novel and the Big House*, p. 149.

that Bowen portrays becomes a potentially shared condition, and a source of a 'relatedness' that is not completely obstructed by political and social boundaries. Once more, Rothberg offers terms with which to analyse the productive threat ruins pose to Bowen's own ideology within the narrative. The multidirectional 'commitment to uncovering historical relatedness'[89] that can be found in 'connective tissue between seemingly disparate histories'[90] is present in this return to the War of Independence. While Bowen's account of the Civil War harnesses an anachronistic overlap with the temporally distant Emergency, the historical narratives present above already exist in spatial and temporal proximity, and are rendered 'disparate' politically. The dialogic links identifiable here are therefore both closer and more fraught.

Nevertheless, relatedness does begin to emerge. Both the Irish and British parties participating in the alternation of 'reprisals and counter-reprisals' are implicitly not only perpetrators but also casualties of the same 'tragic policy'. In mentioning that both 'Anglo-Irish houses' and the farms of 'putative Sinn Feiners' suffer arson, social groups that have been declared at odds are shown to have mutual experience. The relation is pressed further, revealing not only physical proximity but also emotional connection: the farmers targeted as members of Sinn Féin are identified as 'our family's friends'. This represents significant dissent from the atmosphere of accusation and hostility that dominated this period in Irish history; as Peter Hart comments, the War of Independence involved 'accelerating cycles of

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[89] Rothberg, p. 29.
[90] Ibid., p. 228.

terror and counter-terror', motivated by 'the politics of revenge'.[91] With their allegiance cast as 'putative', their status as 'friends' becomes the more influential appellation, working against the stereotyped, sectarian designation driving the war. The result is that the 'peaceful scene' of conservative heritage Bowen idealises is resisted by ruin, not only by threatening the building's capacity to withstand war, but also by becoming a source of the 'connective tissue' Rothberg describes: capable of forming a culturally dissonant linkage in narratives of the past, and hence demanding a historiographic framework that is not bounded and kept safe by the demesne wall.

The significance of her approach can be seen through comparison with Bowen's earlier response to the same war. In *The Last September*, the possibility of finding 'connective tissue' in ruin is rejected definitively in the text's conclusion. Instead, the arson of Danielstown becomes a means of preserving the hostile boundary between Anglo-Irish and Irish society. The text's final paragraphs describe the inevitable inferno:

> the death – execution, rather – of the three houses, Danielstown, Castle Trent, Mount Isabel, occurred in the same night. A fearful scarlet ate up the hard spring darkness […] The roads in unnatural dusk ran dark with movement, secretive or terrified; not a tree, brushed pale by wind from the flames, not a cabin pressed in despair to the bosom of night, not a gate too starkly visible but had its place in the design of order and panic.[92]

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[91] Peter Hart, *The I.R.A. and Its Enemies: Violence and Community in Cork, 1916–1923* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 83.

[92] Bowen, *The Last September*, p. 206.

Resemblance between this scene and the fears recorded in *Bowen's Court* is evident. This scene can be read as an enactment of the mental image of her house 'in flames', for which Bowen prepared but never saw: as noted in Chapter 1, she commented in a preface to the novel that its ending was 'more real than anything I have lived through.'[93] The correspondence is deceptive, however, for there are substantial differences in regard to how each text represents the cultural relations of ruin. Whereas *Bowen's Court* places Anglo-Irish ruin within a wider, shared experience of destruction, *The Last September*'s climactic 'design of order and panic' represents ruin as singularly Anglo-Irish: three houses appear vibrant in 'fearful scarlet' while the surrounding country is cast into shadow through an 'unnatural dusk', its anonymous cabins 'pressed in despair' to the night. After this end, the shell left behind is a 'vacancy' possessed only by light and silence'[94] so that both in burning and abandonment the space is used to preserve an isolationist Ascendancy identity within cultural memory. Against this use of ruin to actively *refuse* dialogic connections to the 'unloving country' beyond the monumental demesne of Danielstown,[95] the social diversification in Bowen's second visit to this history is cast into relief.

In *Bowen's Court* ruins have the potential to become a more connective material, used to locate common ground even across politicised divisions. However, this intercultural movement has limits, for the ruins represented as 'fire followed shootings, then fires fires' are not necessarily developed in order to entirely erase social difference. This tension is a key

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[93] Bowen, 'Preface to the Alfred. A Knopf Inc. edition of *The Last September*, New York, 1952', p. 100.
[94] Bowen, *The Last September*, p. 206.
[95] Ibid., p. 166.

facet in the role ruins play as spaces of memory. Continuing his analysis of Schwarz-Bart, Rothberg argues for a discrepancy between the multidirectional linkage of histories that he advocates, and a more extreme, transhistorical abandoning of the 'concrete, situational demands of the particular'.[96] Schwarz-Bart's representation of the Holocaust and its trauma he argues, exhibits rival forces:

> There are then two versions of anachronism in Schwarz-Bart's work. While the first is a force of rehistoricization that cuts through the calcified distinctions of period and identity in order to create new ways of seeing history as a dynamic force field of intersecting stories, the other is a force of de-historicization that removes those intersecting stories from any relationship to power and thus from any possibility of change.[97]

Although the 'intersecting stories' present within *Bowen's Court*'s account of the Anglo-Irish war come from an evidently different historical context, the question of ruined spaces' 'historicization' is relevant here too; indeed, Rothberg argues that the oscillation he identifies in Schwarz-Bart's oeuvre 'carries implications for all attempts to write ruins'.[98] In representing multiple sites of destruction when illustrating the War of Independence, regardless of their owners' identities, Bowen suggests the possibility that 'calcified distinctions' – even those as deeply structural as Ascendancy seclusion – can be resisted. However, this resistant movement against conservative isolationism does not necessarily amount to a claim to have erased boundaries

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[96] Rothberg, p. 22.
[97] Ibid., p. 152.
[98] Ibid., pp. 152–53.

long ingrained by imperial history, and in this Bowen counteracts the tempting opportunities for 'de-historicization' found in ruins.

During the Blitz, Bowen may have 'felt one with, and just like, everyone else', but as the writer of *Bowen's Court* this universalist mythology does not make ruin a substance capable of eliminating the hostilities driving the war's progress. The author remains aware of her own status as, to use Ó Faoláin's phrase in 'Midsummer Night Madness', 'one of the conquering race'[99] – a race designated, as Cannon Scmitt summarises, by a condition of 'extreme isolation [...] surrounded by dispossessed natives'.[100] This form of isolated spatial dominance, marked by sharp inequality, may also involve a restriction on empathy. According to Bowen, 'to enjoy prosperity one had to exclude feeling, or keep it within prescribed bounds' (p. 248). With this determination to recognise such aspects of her culture, Bowen prevents herself from representing the War of Independence as transhistorical experience.

The narrative does not succeed in equalising different cultural experiences ruin, or obscuring Bowen's own position of privilege. The three 'Anglo-Irish houses' which burn in *Bowen's Court* are not given an exclusionary spotlight to the extent seen in *The Last September*'s final scene, but they are still provided with individual, seemingly familiar names ('Rockmills, Ballywalter, Convamore'), and hence each offered a unique place in her reflection upon the past. Meanwhile the buildings of 'putative Sinn

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[99] Ó Faoláin, 'Midsummer Night Madness', p 20. Bowen herself repeats the phrase in her chronicle to describe Anglo-Irish 'privileges'. (*Bowen's Court*, p. 37).

[100] Cannon Schmitt, 'Mother Dracula: Orientalism, Degeneration, and Anglo-Irish National Subjectivity at the Fin de Siècle', in *Irishness and (Post)Modernism*, ed. by John S. Rickard (London: Associated University Press, 1994), pp. 25–43 (p. 35).

Feiners' attacked by the British are identified only as 'farms', without stating how many were involved or giving any dwelling a singular identity. Whilst detailing mutual destruction, the text reinscribes residual prejudice towards the memory of her own class – traces of selective identification which mean that the account itself cannot claim to have stepped back from and risen above historically ingrained ideology.

The attempt to create a dialogical narrative of ruin in the light of imperial history surfaces too as anxiety in Bowen's account of how her home survived. Because 'it did not, after all, happen' (p. 440), she explores the possibility that the house's continued life can be understood as evidence of successful intercultural relations – and in doing so scrutinises the cultural division between her family and their tenantry:

> When the tide turned, Bowen's Court stayed untouched. I have been told, and have reason to credit, that a determining protest against the burning of Henry VI's house [Bowen's Court] was raised by one of those very neighbours of ours whose own farm had been burned by the military. I cannot go into this – many men who had been liked as well as my father lost their houses by fire, in those years. My father had the reputation of being a just, as well as a gentle, man. While he had made no secret of his political principles, he accorded his neighbours an equal right to their own. At any rate, Bowen's Court stood, and the kind inherited tie between us and our country was not broken. (p. 440)

Speculating that her own house was spared by 'a determining protest' from the local community, Bowen adds to the empathic engagement implied in the previous description of farmers as 'our family's friends', suggesting that this

compassionate concern was reciprocated through a 'kind inherited tie'. There is an idealistic assertion of unity in using this 'tie' to provide a structural explanation for why the family demesne was spared – a unity which risks contradicting her judgements regarding Anglo-Irish isolation given elsewhere in the text. Neil Corcoran identifies an uneven attitude towards colonial relations throughout *Bowen's Court*: the book 'imputes blame consistently' for past wrongs,[101] yet at the same time does 'maintain a belief in the "greatness" of Anglo-Irish society; *Bowen's Court* celebrates the fact that the Bowens were in general more benevolent than most landowners and did cement local attachments'.[102] In her portrayal of the house's survival, Bowen certainly emphasises the cemented solidity of these 'local attachments'; she presents any divisions that might exist between her family and their community as abstract 'political principles'. This is supported by a simply stated – and so presumably straightforward – ideal of 'an equal right' to divergence in philosophy, which does not impact intercultural unity.

The 'tie' between the two classes is 'inherited', and in this it associates social accord with the stable succession in Anglo-Irish property (despite that system of inheritance having come to violent end elsewhere in her 'immediate neighbourhood'). By pointing to her home's preservation and describing this connection, the author leverages the surrounding landscape of ruin as a means to support her claims, not only of only empathy between class and political separations, but an unbroken form of unification with the suffering of 'unpropertied Catholic Ireland'. In its attempt to transcend political differences, this interpretation of ruin and survival verges on the 'de-

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[101] Corcoran, p. 24.

[102] Ibid., p. 25.

historicization' that Rothberg criticises, failing to provide the more unsettled, tense connections between histories and cultures which create the multidirectional.

However, despite this claim of a transhistorical bond underwritten by the house's success in emerging from 'Ireland's bitter struggle' in an 'untouched' condition, I argue that an anxiety regarding the tie's security is also represented. Corcoran addresses the anecdote regarding a supposed 'determining protest' against burning Bowen's Court in a footnote, remarking that its rhetorical style is 'extremely reticent'.[103] This is a telling quality, and can be drawn out to suggest a more nuanced relation to ruin, in which the supposedly stable, intergenerational connection becomes inflected with historically specific obstructions. Bowen qualifies her knowledge of the crucial protest using a subclause ('I have been told, *and have reason to credit*') which establishes distance from the events and a consequent lack of certainty – particularly as she does not disclose what this reason actually is. The lack of detail regarding the evidence and its source makes it difficult for the reader to decide how much credence these claims can be given. It also implies that the matter is sensitive, awkward; a facet exposed again with the unexplained phrase 'I cannot go into this'. Bowen asserts her father's 'reputation' as further evidence that the tie is cemented, but has to cast doubt on her own

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[103] Ibid. Corcoran is also able to supplement Bowen's taciturn explanation with his own oral research, having travelled to Cork in 1998 and asked locals about its veracity. He was told that 'while Elizabeth was in London, the local branch of the IRA – some of whose members worked, or had worked, in the house – took a vote *in the house itself* about whether to burn it. The vote was of course, not to do so.' (p. 25. Emphasis in original). This report does echo Bowen's story fairly closely, substantiating her claim that local sympathies saved Bowen's Court; it also illustrates the potentially extreme proximity between life in Big Houses and those participating in the violent 'struggle for Ireland' which threatened their existences.

theory by acknowledging that 'many men who had been liked as well' suffered the ruin that Bowen's Court escaped.

Beneath these assertions lies an anxiety that the 'inherited tie' which signifies common experience, and hence a mutual navigation of the war, is without consequence: that an impression of unity is not sufficient to give cultural memory an underlying structure of cause and effect. The reflection thus presents – perhaps not intentionally, given the struggle visible in its narrative style – an ambiguous portrait of the 'cross-cultural understanding' discussed by Rothberg.[104] Intercultural relations and empathy across 'prescribed bounds' of feeling and space are not absent, and from what we are told may indeed have been critical to the house's preservation, but Bowen's ability to dismiss the ingrained separation produced by Ireland's bitter colonial relations is compromised by hesitation. Her attempt to produce a multidirectional history of the War of Independence, shaped by a 'kind inherited' cultural connectivity, is animated by unresolved historical tensions. Through this ambiguity, the narrative that does emerge from the attempt to revisit and renegotiate an old war is an example of radical decay. Bowen resists the conservative boundaries that, decades earlier, she entrenched in the ruinous monument of Danielstown. But she is unable to overcome them altogether.

With this tension in mind, it is necessary to revise existing conclusions regarding the conservative escapism that Bowen's Court – both house and text – supposedly preserved against the background of world war. Kristine A. Miller, considering whether the sweeping changes to civilian life

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[104] Rothberg, p. 133.

during the Blitz actually challenged underlying social structures, argues that Bowen's access to her country house exposes the unaltered securities of her class privilege: 'while most working-class people in London' endured political intrusions into their private lives, 'Bowen owned a home where she could retreat from the violence of war. From the physical and psychological shelter of her family estate, she could impose a sense of order on wartime experience.'[105] There is truth to this; as the Afterword to Bowen's Court acknowledges freely, Bowen sought and to an extent found a 'peaceful scene' in Ireland. However, as a generalisation regarding the ability to impose 'order on wartime experience', Miller's verdict is too sweeping. Ruin emerges source of 'connective tissue' in this Anglo-Irish chronicle: a common experience capable of forming links between temporalities and boundaries – and hence against the grain of cultural divorce within which the author herself seeks refuge. During wartime, the house provided her with effective material safety; but this is not sufficient to quell the troubling threats which rise in *Bowen's Court* as radical decay.

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[105] Kristine A. Miller, '"Even a shelter's not safe': The Blitz on Homes in Elizabeth Bowen's Wartime Writing', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45.2 (1999), 138–58 (p. 143).

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, I have sought to show that the form of the ruin can be understood within Irish fiction as a resource with which to brush 'against the grain' of established historiography. I have coined the term 'radical decay' in order to conceptualise how the texts studied here perform active interventions in Ireland's heritage, dissenting from prevailing ideologies and challenging problematic reconstructions of historical meaning. Ruin, which I have defined as a structure characterised by tension between damage and original design, is a dynamic, highly variable condition. Furthermore, the authors examined here are diverse in their concerns and backgrounds. It is therefore important to avoid generalising in regard to the significance of ruin as a vessel of cultural memory here. However, with the previous analysis complete, it is now possible to draw together several of the overarching purposes to which radical decay has been directed in the above authors' resistance to hegemonic cultural agendas.

Firstly, I have shown that ruin is a means of identifying and disrupting efforts within Ireland's 'authorised heritage discourse'[1] to elide historical raw materials from the revolutionary period which might prove uncomfortable in the present. J. G. Farrell and William Trevor are particularly intent on this. Each works to suggest that the legacy of colonialism was not resolved when the War of Independence ended. Ruins act as traces of the past, illustrative of how their stories have been abandoned to disappear, and yet not entirely vanished or silent. In Farrell, the Majestic Hotel – both when it stands as site of vast decay and when it lies in charred remnants – is a space in

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[1] Smith, *Uses of Heritage*, p. 11.

which memory can be heard as echoes and touched in fragments. The reader is given materials with which to perceive a past ostensibly 'silent and forgotten […] quiet now for an eternity'.[2] Farrell's novel troubles this silence, offering ruins, fragile but dynamic, in which history is still palpable within contemporary Ireland. This rendition of radical decay also takes place at the level of form, so that *Troubles* not only re-registers the forgotten past, but also offers a tool with which to revise its narrative.

Trevor's representation of ruined Big Houses is similarly designed to alter cultural perceptions of their unfinished presence in post-independence Ireland. In both *Fools of Fortune* and *The Story of Lucy Gault*, ruins are associated with ongoing trauma for multiple parties who lived through the destructive war. Freud's psychoanalytic discussion of 'the uncanny' and 'mourning and melancholia' have assisted me in showing how Trevor draws attention to deep wounds, which persist for characters after the War of Independence concluded. In *Fools of Fortune*, Marianne claims that 'it was good to see the ivy growing over imperial Ireland' and praises use of the Big Houses' 'ivied ruins' as asylums or buildings for training priests in Free State;[3] but this nationalistic endorsement of erasing history is contested by the continued impact of the house at Kilneagh. Its shell continues unrepaired, associated with the 'human ruin' of its survivors. While decay and precariousness characterise the Majestic, in this text the central ruin shows little sign of degeneration towards absence, thus forming an insistent reminder of a culturally repressed past. The use of radical decay to illustrate an unresolved trauma is taken even further in *The Story of Lucy Gault*, for

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[2] Farrell, p. 419.

[3] Trevor, *Fools of Fortune*, p. 170.

while the nation becomes 'Ireland of the ruins'[4] as the century progresses, Lahardane house remains preserved, its tension with the surrounding landscape of decay offering a means to express Lucy's paralysis in suffering. Trevor's return to the Big House novel carries out an extensive renegotiation of the trope of ruin in order to widen his challenge to heritage. Radical decay appears in this text as an empathic challenge to the selective amnesia of Ireland's twentieth-century heritage. My analysis of these texts has revealed how the ruins 'left to die'[5] can, through literary effort, become a source of memory as well as a symbol of its gradual loss.

Trevor's keen focus on marginalised histories leads me to articulate a further, central role of radical decay within the texts studied here: resistance directed towards specific, prevailing ideologies in Irish cultural memory. Sebastian Barry and Seán Ó Faoláin each illustrate ruins which, in my interpretation, are situated as a means to target romantic nationalism and its use in constructing historical narratives. *The Secret Scripture* identifies how valuations of Catholic purity and pastoral landscape were enforced within the Free State and beyond through incarceration of deviant individuals. Barry works to restore perceptions of cultural identities exiled from public consciousness. His use of ruin to do so is intriguingly diverse: written documents, created to exert official power, are poorly preserved; and the heterotopic, bounded functioning of the asylum begins to fail. Both forms offer means by which alternative history can be expressed, and saved.

The short stories of Ó Faoláin analysed above offer a more ambivalent perspective. I have argued that studying ruin within 'Midsummer

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[4] Trevor, *The Story of Lucy Gault*, p. 145.
[5] Bowen, *Bowen's Court & Seven Winters*, p. 16.

Night Madness' results in a more complex understanding of the author's attitude towards romantic nationalism than that allowed by critics such as Denis Donoghue. Although the narrator initially declares his hatred for the Ascendancy, and conceives of a clear division between his own people's existence and that behind the walls of the Big House, the decrepit state of Henn Hall shifts these certainties. Ruin becomes a source of empathy, and even nostalgia for imperialism. Attending to 'A Broken World' demonstrates how the earlier story's fluctuations in perspective and nationalist certainties have become more pronounced. Decay and social stasis are brought together – although only indirectly, through the voice of the priest – to illustrate the atrophy haunting the romantic idealism of the Free State. Availing of Colin Graham's vocabulary regarding Ireland's 'cultural geography'[6] has enabled my analysis to show how Ó Faoláin presents a landscape frozen in ruins in order to produce a fundamental critique of the unchanged relationship between coloniser and colonised, which has been reinforced rather than escaped by post-independence statehood.

Whereas Barry positions ruin as a source of active, and to a great extent successful, resistance against repressive environments, I conclude that 'A Broken World' offers little hope that largely silenced voices could provoke change. Studying Ó Faoláin in this thesis, in regard to both the Big House and to Free State politics, has brought a different and more equivocal relationship to Irish heritage. Ó Faoláin does not share the level of temporal and personal distance which informs the social critique of writers such as Trevor and Barry. His own proximity to the events involved results in a less certain form

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[6] Graham, *Deconstructing Ireland*, p. 1.

of radical decay, which reveals the difficulty of resisting authorised heritage from within its discursive perimeters.

The potential employment of radical decay to bring about a weakening of thresholds, both perspectival and physical, is a further significant discovery made within this thesis. This is a concern of particular significance in Elizabeth Bowen's writing. In *The Last September*, ruin challenges the Ascendancy's ingrained, wilfully blind perspectives: their (purposeful) inability to look 'beyond the demesne'.[7] I have examined how Bowen portrays impending destruction as an environmental and linguistic force, disturbing the selective awareness. The use of decay to disrupt structured perception is also present at the ruined mill, a key scene within the text. Here Lois confronts a slippage of historical meaning in transient, 'irresistible decay' described by Benjamin.[8] The result is a threat to imperialist cultural values. Nevertheless, this subversion of insularity is itself resisted in the final events at Danielstown. Trevor and Farrell make the remains of torched Big Houses available in the texts as shared touchstones with which to remedy neglectful memory, and allow cross-cultural access to historical knowledge. For Bowen, however, the scene of destruction in *The Last September* fortifies the division between Anglo-Ireland and the world beyond. The blaze and its aftermath are a means of ideological preservation, so that Bowen creates an isolationist monument to her class's dominion.

My thesis has also explored how the issue of cultural isolationism is a wider preoccupation in Irish writing. I have focused particularly on World War II in this regard, discussing how ruins in the work of Bowen and Máirtín

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[7] Bowen, *The Last September*, p. 30.

[8] Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, p. 178.

Ó Cadhain are represented as a means by which to resist disengagement and escapism against a backdrop of global destruction. *Bowen's Court* has been read by prior critics – and is described by Bowen herself – as a source of self-protective retreat into a 'picture of peace'. Her memoir does exhibit nostalgic tendencies, and appears to use heritage as a source of security, keeping war at a distance. Yet I have worked to revise this critical perspective, at least to an extent, by drawing attention to easily overlooked, but in fact highly significant, sources of ruin. Creative use of Rothberg's 'multidirectional memory' has assisted in analysing these ruins' role as unruly signifiers within the text, which result in subtle, anachronistic connections between wartime and the ostensibly insular Anglo-Irish past.

Ó Cadhain's background is (to say the least) different from Bowen's, yet his Emergency-era writing is also concerned with the less-than-secure perspectival divide between Ireland and the world's conflict. Unlike in *Bowen's Court*, in which ruinous environments reveal contention with a personal desire for privileged escapism, I argue that in *Cré na Cille* radical decay is used to intervene in isolationist perspectives within Irish society as a whole. Pursuing the possibilities of 'textual ruin' offered within this project, I explored in depth how Ó Cadhain uses form and structure to resist wilful blindness in regard to the war and its atrocities. Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia is a useful critical foundation for this argument, but has required adjustment to acknowledge the aporia and enervation which can accompany fragmentation's imaginative possibilities.

And in this summary, I have outlined the purposes to which ruin is put within the texts studied. This reveals once more the diverse conceptual

potency offered by radical decay. Its underlying role remains that of *resistance*. Across each work, ruin is used to formulate countercultural interventions in hegemonic control over Ireland's heritage, challenging idealised or amnesiac practices. Not every author presents ruin as a means to change perceptions of the past successfully, or to rescue what has been lost. Nevertheless, as raw materials of history, sites of decay and fragmentation are represented to foster ambiguity and dynamic engagement, so that Ireland's past can be re-encountered in new ways. The presence of ruin within Irish literature rewards critical attention, and will continue to do so.

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