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A New ‘Rhetoric of Darkness’: Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, John Connolly and the Irish Gothic

Resumen

La relación entre Irlanda y el gótico se remonta a los primeros días del género, cuando lo Sublime, según lo identificó el filósofo irlandés Edmund Burke, se hizo fundamental para los conceptos estéticos que abundarían en la articulación del gótico como forma literaria. La “grandeza oscura, desolada y tormentosa” de la percepción de Irlanda que el público lector inglés tenía a fines del siglo XVIII era fácilmente adaptable a la utilización de la isla como una especie de tierra salvaje pre-Ilustración que, al combinarse con su “otredad” lingüística, religiosa y cultural, produjo un territorio fértil para el crecimiento de una literatura que favorecía lo sobrenatural, lo extraño y las demás características que forman el género. Ya en 1771, *The History of Lady Barton*, de Elizabeth Griffin, contiene elementos del gótico, y la gran popularidad de *The Children of the Abbey*, de Regina Maria Roche, nacida en Waterford, le dio un impulso definitivo al género en lo que respecta a los escritores irlandeses. El éxito de *The Wild Irish Girl*, de Sydney Owenson, y el de Charles Robert Maturin con *The Milesian Chief* y *Melmoth the Wanderer* ayudaron a fomentar una tradición que continuaría durante todo el siglo XIX con escritores como Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, L.T. Meade y Bram Stoker. Es Le Fanu quien, posiblemente, fue el primer escritor en fusionar el gótico con la ficción detectivesca. Para Begnall, sus obras “oscillate between the poles of supernatural horror and suspenseful detection” y, en la narrativa breve, como “The Murdered Cousin” y “The Evil Guest” y en novelas como *Uncle Silas* y *Wylder’s Hand*, Le Fanu fusiona conscientemente el incipiente formato de la novela de misterio con los lúgubres laberintos del gótico. La influencia de Le Fanu fue, por supuesto, internacional, pero los caminos que recorrió fueron seguidos por numerosos escritores irlandeses. Uno de los más conocidos es John Connolly quien, desde la introducción de Charlie Parker con la publicación de *Every Dead Thing* en 1999, en las dieciocho novelas que han aparecido hasta la fecha, revisó con éxito los conceptos y tropos que componen el gótico irlandés. En este artículo, estos trabajos serán analizados con referencia a su deuda con la tradición gótica irlandesa y, más específicamente, con la escritura de Le Fanu.

Palabras clave:

gótico; literatura irlandesa; novela negra; Sheridan Le Fanu; John Connolly

Abstract

The relationship between Ireland and the Gothic goes back to the early days of the genre, when the Sublime, as identified by the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke, became central to the aesthetic concepts which would abound in the articulation of the Gothic as a literary form. The “dark, desolate and stormy grandeur” of the perception of Ireland which was held by the English reading public in the late eighteenth century was readily adaptable for the use of the island as a kind of pre-Enlightenment wilderness which, when combined with its linguistic, religious and cultural “otherness”, provided a fertile territory for the growth of a literature which favoured the supernatural, the uncanny and the numerous features which unite to make up the genre. As early as 1771, Elizabeth Griffin’s *The History of Lady Barton* contains elements of the Gothic, and the huge popularity of Waterford-born Regina Maria Roche’s *The Children of the Abbey* gave a definitive boost to the genre with regard to Irish writers. The success of Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*, and that of Charles Robert Maturin with *The Milesian Chief* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* helped foster a tradition which would be continued throughout the nineteenth century by writers such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, L.T. Meade and Bram Stoker. It is Le Fanu who, arguably, was the first writer to merge the Gothic with crime fiction. For Begnall, his works “oscillate between the poles of supernatural horror and suspenseful detection”, and, in short fiction such as “The Murdered Cousin” and “The Evil Guest” and novels including *Uncle Silas* and *Wylder’s Hand* Le Fanu consciously merges the emerging format of the murder mystery with the lugubrious labyrinths of the Gothic. Le Fanu’s influence was, of course, international, but the paths he trod were also followed by numerous Irish writers. One of the most successful of these is John Connolly who, since the introduction of Charlie Parker with the publication of *Every Dead Thing* in 1999 has, in the eighteen novels which have appeared to date, successfully revised the concepts and tropes which make up the Irish Gothic. In this paper these works will be analysed with reference to their debt to the Irish Gothic tradition and, most specifically, to the writing of Le Fanu.

Keywords:

gothic; Irish literature; crime fiction; Sheridan Le Fanu; John Connolly

According to Jarlath Killeen, “Ireland as a whole is readily identifiable as a Gothic space in popular culture” (2014, 9). There is, he argues, a “cultural tradition which figures Ireland as a zone of weirdness, the supernatural and the pathological” (2). Ireland “as a Gothic space” has traditionally been judged through the relationship with England and as “English identity was configured as normative, those areas which surrounded it – the “Celtic fringes” – were simply constructed as abnormal” (9). It is for this reason that, according to Killeen, “Gothic tropes, motifs and themes appear everywhere and anywhere in modern Irish literature” (12). The relationship between Ireland and the Gothic goes back to the early days of the genre, when the Sublime, as identified by the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke, became central to the aesthetic concepts which would abound in the articulation of the Gothic as a literary form. The “dark, desolate and stormy grandeur” of the perception of Ireland which was held by the English reading public in the late eighteenth century was readily adaptable for the use of the island as a kind of pre-Enlightenment wilderness which, when combined with its linguistic, religious and cultural “otherness”, provided a fertile territory for the growth of a literature which favoured the supernatural, the uncanny and the numerous features which unite to make up the genre or mode.

Critics have identified two Irish works, the anonymous *The Adventures of Miss Sophia Berkley* (1760) and the historian Thomas Leland’s only work of fiction *Longsword: The Earl of Salisbury* (1762) which contain notable Gothic features and both of which pre-date Herbert Walpole’s *Otranto*, considered by many to be the founding text of the Gothic. Published in 1771, Elizabeth Griffin’s *The History of Lady Barton* (a novel which critics have cited as a possible source for parts of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*) contains elements of the Gothic, and the huge popularity of Waterford-born Regina Maria Roche’s *The Children of the Abbey* gave a definitive boost to the genre with regard to Irish writers. The success of Sydney Owenson’s *The Wild Irish Girl*, and that of Charles Robert Maturin with *The Milesian Chief* and *Melmoth the Wanderer* helped foster a tradition which would be continued throughout the nineteenth century by writers such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, L.T. Meade and Bram Stoker. The Irish Gothic was largely a Protestant phenomenon, although recent critics have mitigated the perceived anti-Catholic bias in early Irish Gothic fiction by relating some of the first writers within the mode to liberal elements within the Anglican Irish who attempted to look for ways and means to tend possible bridges towards the Catholic middle-class in an attempt to counter-balance the alleged mistreatment of the Anglo-Irish by the central London authorities, in particular with reference to economic matters and which came to a head with the division of Anglican Ireland produced by the attempted introduction of the Money Bill between 1753 and 1756, when the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Ireland Henry Boyle refused to concede Irish tax surplus monies to London.

It is Le Fanu (1872) who, arguably, was the first writer to merge the Gothic with crime fiction. For Begnall, his works “oscillate between the poles of supernatural horror and suspenseful detection” (1971, 28), and, in short fiction such as “The Murdered Cousin” and “The Evil Guest” and novels including *Uncle Silas* and *Wylder’s Hand* Le Fanu consciously merges the emerging format of the murder mystery with the lugubrious labyrinths of the Gothic. Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu (1814–1873) is commonly classified as being a writer of Gothic fiction, as being a leading author in the fashionable field of 1860s sensation fiction and as

being the creator of an output of supernatural and occult fiction, but it is also worthy of mention that he is one of the very few Irish writers – and often the only one – to be regularly mentioned in mainstream histories of crime fiction. Kate Flint sees his early short story “The Murdered Cousin” as a work which “helped to inaugurate the sub-genre of the locked room mystery” (2012, 239), while Julian Symons wrote that Le Fanu “produced a dozen novels mostly concerned with crime, of which four are worth remembering and one is a brilliant mystery puzzle” (1985, 58). Peter Penzoldt sees the influence of the occult detective “editor” of the stories contained in *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), Dr Martin Hesselius, on other later detective figures, including Sherlock Holmes (1952, 111), while V.S. Pritchett called the Dublin-born writer “the Simenon of the peculiar” (1964, 128). The early stories which appeared in *The Dublin Magazine* between 1838 and 1840 and which were posthumously collected in *The Purcell Papers* (1880) show a heavy leaning towards the Gothic, and tales like “The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh” (1838) and “Schalken the Painter (1839) echo the Gothic of Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820) with decaying big houses and Faustian bargains and nightmare visions of hellish demons or, in the case of the latter, the devil himself, who come to drag Sir Robert in “The Fortunes” and Rose in “Schalken” down to Hell. Demons also claim the drunkard in “The Drunkard’s Dream” (1838), a madwoman is resurrected in “A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family” (1839) while, anticipating Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890), a picture comes to life in the humorous Gothic tale “The Ghost and the Bone Setter” (1838). One of the most interesting of these early tales is “Passage in the Secret Life of an Irish Countess” (1838), which would later become “The Murdered Cousin” in the collection *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1851) before being developed into the novel *Uncle Silas* (1864).

Le Fanu’s first novels are broadly works of historical fiction which show the influence of Scott as well as that of Gothic predecessors like Radcliffe, Roche or Maturin. After a number of historical novels with an Irish setting and predominantly Gothic tone, *Wylder’s Hand* (1864) was set in contemporary times and eschewed an Irish setting for an English one, apparently on the insistence of the writer’s English publisher Richard Bentley. Bentley believed Le Fanu would sell more if he were to cater for the ostensible wishes of the English reading public, influenced by the rise of the “sensation” novel of the 1860s (McCormack 1980, 140). The necessity of complying to Bentley’s wishes revealed, according to McCormack, “the absence of a native publishing industry in Ireland” which “placed the writer at the mercy of the British market” (238). The novel also features a number of Gothic touches in atmosphere and the imagination of the characters. Brandon Hall is apparently haunted by the ghost of old Uncle Lorne, while from his arrival in the house De Cressens is constantly regaled with tales of old family murders, crimes and hatreds. The supernatural is easily explained away by the natural – the ghost of Uncle Lorne is in fact the family’s mad relative, Uncle Julius. The mystery is soon resolved – the handwriting on the missives purportedly sent by Mark is found to have been falsified – and the discovery of the physical hand of the doomed groom is discovered preserved in the earth in which he has been buried by his killer, Stanley Lake.

The English setting of *Wylder’s Hand* is repeated in Le Fanu’s next novel, *Uncle Silas: A Tale of Bartram-Haugh* (1864), a re-writing of the story he had already placed in an Irish setting “A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess” (1839) and which itself was later reprinted as “The Murdered Cousin” (1851) and which, finally as the novel, was first published in serial form in

the *Dublin University Magazine* as *Maud Ruthyn and Uncle Silas*. Set in Derbyshire, Maud, the young narrator tells of her lonely childhood with her reclusive father Austin, a widower and disciple of the theories of Swedenborg. *Uncle Silas* is a novel which skilfully combines the density of atmosphere of the Gothic with the major concerns of the new sensation fiction of the 1860s. While the character of Maude is largely passive, more in keeping with the heroine of the Gothic than with the new female protagonist of the sensation novel (Kontou 2013, 145), the narrative also introduces features which would help provide the link between sensation fiction and the detective fiction of the 1890s. The work contains a central mystery, that of the murder of Charke in the locked room, and although this is not solved by a detective per se, the eventual resolution of the enigma by the mild-mannered lawyer Bryerly provides, along with the works of Poe, one of the first blueprints for modern crime fiction.

Amidst these novels of the 1860s and 70s, Victorian romances which can be classified within the mode of sensation fiction, the publication of *In a Glass Darkly* in 1872 was perhaps something of a surprise. Looking back towards his earlier fictions with historical settings and the influence of the supernatural, but at the same time forward to the rational detection of Sherlock Holmes and his counterparts, *In a Glass Darkly* is widely considered to be Le Fanu's masterwork. Although consisting of a collection of five stories (two of which are of the length of novellas), the book is held together by an intricate narrative structure in which an unnamed narrator acts as curator and editor of the papers left by the mysterious Dr Martin Hesselius. Hesselius is a doctor whose "case studies" provide a model for later detective figures such as Holmes (Crawford, Rockhill and Showers 2011, 111) who Nelson Browne sees as "a projection of the author himself" (1951, 78). The fact that the "detective" is a medical practitioner and not a member of the police or detective force is seen by Martin Kayman as being symptomatic of the status of Ireland at the time (2003, 45), but the mixture of psychiatry, physiology, mysticism and pure detection creates what Srđan Smajic calls "the first occult detective in history" (2010, 150) whose task, like that of Poe's Dupin and Conan Doyle's Holmes "is to make inferences and conjectures, link effects to causes" (155). Smajic goes on to state that, while the methodology employed by Hesselius is similar to that used by the traditional detective he starts from a different premise, namely the belief in spirits, ghosts and the existence of the supernatural (155).

The first three stories presented in the collection, "Green Tea", "The Familiar" and "Mr Justice Harbottle" all deal with cases of haunting, but a haunting which appears to be rooted in the mind of the afflicted. In "Green Tea" an English vicar, the Reverend Jennings, tells Hesselius that he is being haunted by a weird monkey which is visible to him alone, and which encourages the clergyman to commit crimes and to cause harm to himself. The doctor approaches the case with an open mind, willing to accept the supernatural supposition of an actual haunting or the natural explanation of hallucinatory obsession, and finally comes to the conclusion that the tea the reverend is consuming is responsible for the visions. Far from providing a natural solution, however, Hesselius insists that the green tea is opening the vicar's "inner eye", giving rise to the vision of the monkey. The doctor's speculations are ineffectual in any case, as Jennings is eventually driven to suicide by the persistence of the monkey's presence. "The Familiar" is a re-writing of an earlier story, "The Watcher" (1851), in which Barton, a sea captain, returns to Dublin to discover he

is being followed by a shadowy figure who takes the form of a strange dwarf. These visions are accompanied by accusatory voices which seem to refer to some secrets hidden in the captain's past related to the mistreatment of a seaman whose subsequent death may have sparked off the feelings of guilt which accompany the hapless Barton to his death. Hesselius distances himself, however, from a simply materialistic explanation and the story ends by the narrator opining that "whatever the truth may be as to the origins and motives of this mysterious persecution, there can be no doubt that, with respect to the agencies by which it was accomplished, absolute and impenetrable mystery is likely to prevail until the day of doom (1872; 1995, 68).

Guilt and its effect on the human conscience is again the subject matter of "Mr Justice Harbottle", again a revision of an earlier story, "An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street" (1853). The judge of the title, living in the mid eighteenth century, is haunted by the spirits of those he has condemned to death in his assizes. In a dream-vision, the judge is himself tried by his own mirror image and, at the end of the story, is found hanging by the neck in what appears to be a case of guilt-related suicide. "The Room in the Dragon Volant" is a historical mystery detailing the adventures of the young English narrator in post-Napoleonic France. Set in 1815, Richard falls in love with a mysterious French countess who tells the young Englishman her story of oppression at the hands of a brutal husband and convinces him to help her to rid herself of her spouse. Despite the use of Gothic conventions like a haunted inn and a case of burying alive, the novella is primarily a "superb story of crime" (Browne 1951, 82) which pits an innocent Englishman abroad against the wiles of a devious French fraudster whose motives are strictly of an economic sort.

"Carmilla" is undoubtedly the best-known story in *In a Glass Darkly* and probably the author's most famous work. Regarded as a major influence on Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), "Carmilla" is narrated by Laura who is living with her father, a wealthy English diplomat and widower, in a lonely castle in the forests of Styria in south-eastern Austria. Laura relates how as a child she had dreamt that she had been visited by a strange girl who had bitten her on the chest and now, aged eighteen, she and her father await the arrival of Bertha Rheinfeldt, the niece of an acquaintance of the father's, General Spielsdorf. Informed of the girl's death before her arrival, Laura and her father take in another girl who has suffered a strange carriage accident close to their castle. Laura recognises the girl from her childhood dream, and this recognition seems to be replicated by the girl, Carmilla, who has been forbidden from revealing any information about her background or family. Despite the friendship which grows between the two girls, Laura is baffled by Carmilla's secrecy, by her periods of near catatonic sleep and by her constant mood swings. Laura sees in a portrait of a Countess Mircalla Karnstein the exact likeness of her friend but, when her health deteriorates after a series of nightmares, her father takes Laura to the village of Karnstein where they meet Bertha's uncle who tells them that his niece prior to her death had met and befriended a mysterious young girl called Millarca before falling ill with symptoms similar to those of Laura. The fact that Bertha had died from these symptoms worries both Laura and her father who begin to suspect that Mircalla, Carmilla and Millarca, all anagrams, are all versions of the same vampire, Countess Karnstein, whose body is eventually exhumed and destroyed.

Le Fanu's influence was, of course, international, but the paths he trod were also followed by numerous Irish writers. One

of the most successful of these is John Connolly who, since the introduction of Charlie Parker with the publication of *Every Dead Thing* in 1999 has, in the eighteen novels which have appeared to date, carefully revised the concepts and tropes which make up the Irish Gothic. John Connolly was born in Dublin in 1968 to Roman Catholic parents. After studying at Trinity College, and various jobs, including a long stint as a freelance contributor to the Irish Times newspaper, he published his first novel *Every Dead Thing* in 1999. This introduced Charlie Parker, at first a detective in the homicide division of the NYPD who becomes a private investigator on leaving the force after the horrendous death of his wife and daughter at the hands of the Traveling Man, the first of a long line of larger-than-life villains who share an increasingly prominent supernatural element.

The Charlie Parker novels are set far from Connolly's native Ireland, in the USA, most especially in and around Portland, Maine, where the author spends part of every year. This American setting is important for the author, as a premeditated and conscious "way of escaping the expectations that come with being an Irish writer" and as "a means of escaping a very parochial literary viewpoint" (Material Witness 2014). Despite this, however, something about Connolly's writing remains intensely Irish. Many of the themes and issues found in the collection are highly topical and relevant when placed within an Irish context, and the recurring references to subjects such as religious intolerance, the institutionalization of familial roles in such institutions as mental hospitals, orphanages, and old people's and maternity homes, the legal status of abortion and homosexuality, adoption and fostering of children, problems of domestic violence and the abuse of alcohol, etc. Connolly's novels rely heavily on the Irish Gothic tradition with Parker himself, the troubled male protagonist, haunted by the ghosts of his wife and daughter, fighting against criminals who, as the writer himself says, "are darker than the average murderer or burglar" (Material Witness 2014). The victims in the Parker series are usually women, or more particularly young girls, and the settings, from the vast wilderness of the northern forests of Maine to the Gothic mansions and crumble-down shacks from New England to Louisiana, are more often than not the scene of dysfunctional families where incest and abuse form part of the process of coming of age.

A number of critics, including those from such varied ideological backgrounds as Roy Foster and Terry Eagleton, while recognising the initial Protestant origins of the Gothic, have commented on the existence of a number of Catholic writers who have made use of this mode. Seamus Deane even went so far as to proclaim the existence of a "Catholic Nationalist Gothic" which reproduces the anti-Catholic paranoia of the Protestant Gothic (Killeen 2014, 56). Certainly, as Killeen points out, after the power passed over to the Catholics on Irish independence in 1922, the "Other" of Gothic fiction, a new use for the Gothic has been found by writers of a Catholic Nationalist background who use the mode to "characterise the post-independence decades until the 1980s, and its industrial schools and Magdalene Laundries have all been imbued with an aura more common to the horror film than to the history book" (205). John Connolly recognizes the importance of his Catholic background in his works:

As a Catholic the word redemption comes with a certain spiritual and supernatural baggage and has

resonance, he says. It seemed appropriate I could explore the implications of redemption through novels and that's why the supernatural elements become more pronounced. It's about the possibility and the cost of redemption as redemption costs sacrifice and sacrifice is painful. (2014, n. pag.)

The first Charlie Parker novel, *Every Dead Thing*, begins with the murder of Susan Parker and her young daughter Jennifer, in which the victims are skinned and flayed and their faces removed. Blaming himself, his obsession with his work and his problem with alcohol, Parker leaves the NYPD and, after a time of aimless wandering, decides to accept private investigation assignments. The first of these cases involves the search for Catherine Demeter, the fiancée of the stepson of Isobel Barton, a wealthy New England heiress. The investigation takes Parker to New Orleans where, through a blind creole seer, *Tante Marie*, the ex-policeman establishes what he believes to be contact with his dead child and daughter. Accompanied by Louis and Angel, two diametrically opposed criminals who form a gay sentimental partnership, and the criminal psychologist Rachel Wolfe, with whom Parker is to develop a more than professional relationship, he sees in the disappearance of Catherine and its link to a series of crimes committed in the Louisiana bayou in the past a relationship with the double murder of Susan and Jennifer. Tracking down their killer, The Traveling Man, Parker understands why the murder had seemed to possess such personal motivation.

The Gothic atmosphere of *Every Dead Thing* is heightened by the scenes set in Louisiana, where the ruins of the Dane house remind local people of past events, and whose gardens are overgrown with "the limbs of the evergreens fanning the darkness and the empty jangling of a chain in the wreckage of the yard" (Connolly 1999, 212). References to Ireland exist, but these are largely coded – as Connolly says, "Everything has to be interpreted, everything is codified. To live with signs is to understand the necessity of understanding meanings in seemingly irrelevant pieces of information" (122).

The Traveling Man quotes from Joyce when, in one of his phone calls to Parker he describes the "mouth to mouth's kiss", a description of the "pale vampire" in *Ulysses*. There is also a relationship with Seamus Heaney when one of the Louisiana bayou victims is compared to one of the peat bog corpses:

The girl in Louisiana was part of a bloody succession, a modern-day Windeby Girl, a descendant of that anonymous woman found in the fifties in a shallow grave in a peat bog in Denmark where she had been led nearly two thousand years before, naked and blindfolded, to be drowned in twenty inches of water. A path could be traced through history leading from her death to the death of another girl at the hands of a man who believed he could appease the demons within himself by taking her life but who, once blood had been spilled and flesh torn, wanted more and took my wife and child. (151)

Every Dead Thing also constitutes Connolly's first attempt to examine the concept of evil and, quoting from Edmund Burke, he believes that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing". The Traveling Man is the first of his criminals to show the pure evil he is convinced exists:

We do not believe in evil any more, only evil acts, which can be explained away by the science of the mind. There is no evil and to believe in it is to fall prey to superstition, like checking beneath the bed at night or being afraid of the dark. But there are those for whom we have no easy answers, who do evil things because that is their nature, because they are evil. (151)

Indeed the debate on the existence of "pure evil" is central to an understanding of Connolly's works:

I didn't know what a demon was, if an individual's inhumanity could cause him to 'cross over' in some way, to become something less than human; or if there were some things that seemed to defy any conventional notion of what it meant to be human, of what it meant to exist in the world. (137)

This attempt to define the nature of evil, the idea that characters can be evil just because that is their nature echoes, of course, earlier Gothic models, and The Traveling Man, like future villains in the Charlie Parker novels, owes more than a little to the evil monk figure so typical of the Gothic. His intellectual and social arrogance, for example, *Every Dead Thing* also introduces a number of features which would appear throughout the series. The Traveling Man is interested in medieval paintings, engravings and anatomical diagrams, and in true Gothic style his referents include Spanish and Italian models from the Middle Ages. He is also obsessed with the apocryphal text *The Book of Enoch*, setting the tone for the scores of esoteric, apocryphal and quasi-religious texts which will abound in subsequent novels within the series.

In *The Killing Kind* (2001) Connolly also starts to develop his theory of the "honeycomb world" which would prove to be a constant point of reference and which relates to a belief in the "interconnectedness of all things". This "honeycomb world", however, "holds a hollow heart", but, despite its apparently empty core, it creates patterns of empathy which are central to the series and, indeed, to Parker's very existence. Along with the evil he encounters in his search for reparation and comprehension of events, Parker encounters a number of empathetic characters, ranging from Rachel through a number of secondary but important figures who help to keep the detective on track, as it were.

As in all Gothic fables, the past is of constant and recurring importance in the series. Parker is who he is because of the events of his past, and this past, like that of all the major characters in the books, is constantly present:

The present is imperfectly layered on the past; it does not conform flawlessly at every point. Things fall and die and their decay creates new layers, thickening the surface crust and adding another thin membrane to cover what lies beneath, new worlds resting on the remains of the old. Day upon day, year upon year, century upon century, layers are added and the imperfections multiply. The past never truly dies. It is there waiting, just below the surface of the now. We stumble into it occasionally, all of us, through remembrance and recall. (2001, 3-4)

One of the most interesting features to be found in the Charlie Parker series is the development of the supernatural elements found in the novels. In the early works, and especially in *Every Dead Thing*, the author makes use of the principle of hesitation – leaving the reader to wonder on the existence or not of supernatural elements in the works. Is Charlie Parker literally haunted by the ghosts of his wife and daughter or are the psychological scars caused by their death distorting his perception? How could *Tante Marie* communicate with the dead?

Connolly himself admits that there is an increasing importance given to the supernatural as the series progresses, and on the publication of the third novel, *The Killing Kind*, he stated:

It's gradually becoming more and more explicit as the novels progress. I think *The White Road*, the fourth book, will take it one stage further. In the end, I don't write realist crime fiction. (In fact, I don't think crime fiction in general can be termed "realist". Too much manipulation of the realities of police work, private investigation, and detection, too much telescoping and compression of events and time, is required for it to really claim that it reflects reality. Instead, it acts like a kind of prism, simultaneously distorting reality and also making the constituent elements of a story or plot clearer to the reader.) I'm interested in using the structures of crime fiction as a springboard to explore other themes: empathy, morality, compassion, maybe even life after death. And I'm also interested in mixing genres, creating hybrids. Not everybody is going to like that, but it's still legitimate to try to do it. (Material Witness 2014)

This increased development of the explicitly supernatural can be evidenced by the succession of evil villains found in the novels, from the arachnophile Elias Tubb, through the hate-filled religious fundamentalism of the Reverend Faulkner up to the pure evil of Quayle in *The Woman in the Woods*, Connolly's latest novel in the Parker series to date. The "dark angels", who as Cliff notes make their first explicit appearance in the third volume of the Parker books, gain increased importance as the series progresses. The sects and religious groups which abound in the earlier novels are joined by obscure international collectives which use their occult powers for financial and political gain. Texts, especially old occult volumes, some even made of human skin and

bones, abound throughout the series, and the settings, from the harsh forests of Northern Maine to the primeval swamps of the bayou, broken down shacks, obscure colonial mansions and Gothic cemeteries all echo the roots of the mode of writing, the Gothic.

The Woman in the Woods (2018) contains all these elements, and more. Parker is in constant contact with his dead daughter Jennifer through the medium skills of his living daughter Samantha, fruit of his relationship with the criminal psychologist Rachel from whom he is now separated. Jennifer also makes contact, through a toy telephone without batteries, with the child Daniel, in danger from the villain Quayle, who “belonged to an older dispensation” and who “was a creature of candles and gaslight, a liminal dweller in fog and shadow” who works alongside another mute female assistant, the assassin Pallida Mors. The evil group in this novel is The Backers, a seemingly religious group whose main theological tenet is apparently a sophisticated and secretive form of occult atheism (they predicate the non-existence of the “Not-Gods”) who, along with Quayle, are in search of a magic volume called *The Lost Atlas* hidden in the pages of *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*.

A Book of Bones (2019) can in all probability be seen as Connolly’s most complete work to date, and is without doubt the most adventurous volume within the series. Taking strands from many of the earlier novels, strands which were either unresolved or left in an enigmatic way, and continuing with the main thematic and narrative threads of *The Woman in the Woods*, *A Book of Bones* is a huge novel, Dickensian in extent and often in content, initially unwieldy but finally a highly satisfying and mature work of fiction. Connolly himself told Declan Burke that the novel “is the end of a six-novel sequence, starting with *The Wolf in Winter*” (Hughes 2019) and, although it does not end the series it certainly brings a touch of closure to a number of situations which had been simmering within the earlier works in the series. The action is spread between the New England settings so typical of Connolly’s work to a Europe which, apart from the odd exception such as *A Song of Shadows* (2015) was alien to the writer’s work. *A Book of Bones*, however, takes us (and the protagonists) to the Amsterdam underworld and to a present-day London which, thanks to the gothic influence of the sinister Quayle is still disturbingly Victorian. The killing grounds are situated near ancient churches in the rural south and north of England, but the most important territory is Connolly’s magnificently portrayed Northumbria. In Northumbria lie the roots of the weirdly malevolent religious sect – the Familists – before their move to colonial New England in the seventeenth century. The Backers, the anti-theological religious sect which was central to the previous novel, are also featured, with details of the extent of their influence in important circles of the establishment which are revealed within the book’s surprise ending.

The depiction of Quayle and his otherworldly assistant Pallida Mors is even more exaggerated in its Gothic extremes than in *The Woman in the Woods*. Mors is first seen in Quayle’s dingy, archaic office, with “the accumulated burden of the past imposing itself on her as though the gloom of these places were less a function of the absence of light than a physical manifestation of darkness itself” which stemmed from “a material accumulation of centuries of light” (2018, 40). She is described as “a woman with unnaturally white skin and prematurely silver hair who trailed the stink of moral and corporeal corruption” (41). Quayle himself is, like his chambers, extemporal:

Quayle understood that no real distinction existed between what is and what once had been. The past was alive in the present, and the seeds of the present were lodged in the past. What was gone before had a habit of manifesting itself over and over again, sometimes without even bothering to find new raiment. And Quayle was the living proof. He was both his own self and all his former selves. Their paths lay parallel to his, and their footsteps echoed in unison. (42)

This ageless character is Connolly’s latest embodiment of pure evil, and his supernatural aura, hinted at in *The Woman in the Woods*, obtains greater relevance in *A Book of Bones* (2019). To cure his melancholy, for example, he takes “swallow water” which, Connolly explains is composed of:

Fifty baby swallows sourced from their nests before they could take their first flight, ground to a pulp and combined in a solution of castor and vinegar, with a little sugar added to ease the consumption of the whole, guaranteed to make the heart take wing and ease one’s sorrows. (68–9)

Despite its complexity, Connolly blandly informs us, the concoction does not have the desired curative effect. Quayle, as was shown in *The Woman in the Woods*, is, obsessed with an ancient, arcane book, formally entitled *The Atlas of Unknown Realms* but generally referred to as *The Fractured Atlas*. Interestingly, this volume was first mentioned in the short story sequence “The Fractured Atlas – Five Fragments” which had appeared in Connolly’s collection *Night Music: Nocturnes Volume 2* (2016). In these stories Quayle is presented, although not within the context of the Charlie Parker series. Parker, of course, becomes involved in *The Woman in the Woods*, and the battle between the detective and Quayle for possession of the book is central to the plot of both works. Quayle’s unhealthy obsession with the work is, of course, similar to that of many evil characters throughout the history of the Gothic as a literary mode, similar to that of the evil monk in eighteenth and early nineteenth century works. The book, a symbol perhaps for knowledge used for evil purposes, can be seen as a sort of shadow version of the Holy Grail and its seekers the tortured fallen angels of evil. Quayle needs to complete the Atlas because he believes that “when it’s finally unified, it will become the world: whatever is mapped in its pages, whatever version of the universe it represents, will become reality” (2019, 586). He is, however, also aware of the futility of his quest, aware that the volume and the evil it contains is infinitely more powerful than him or his acolytes. The Atlas, he understands, has always influenced events occurring in the world. “It’s a pollutant. In a sense, it’s trying to create the environment most conducive to its own needs, or the needs of whatever created the Atlas to begin with” (586).

A Book of Bones is in many ways typical of Connolly’s later novels, with the Gothic elements abounding and the supernatural pushed to the forefront. Some readers may miss the elements

of doubt found in the earlier books in the series, where the supernatural was hinted at but, as in much earlier Gothic fiction, open to interpretation from a naturalistic and non-fantastic perspective. In 2019, however, there is no doubt that the supernatural exists within the author's fictional world, that his living daughter regularly converses with his dead daughter and that the ritualistic killings carried out on sacred ground are murders which are committed "both here and elsewhere" (175). The author again uses his theory of the "honeycomb" world to explain the way in which the evil deeds of the past reverberate into the present, using pseudo-empirical language which pretends to grant scientific credibility to his supernatural hypotheses:

And just as a dormant seed may be revived by rain, so too older presences, lying in troubled rest among the hollows of the honeycomb world, may be woken from their sleep, whether deliberately, by the actions of the malicious, or accidentally, by the explorations of the careless and the curious. Mostly, all it takes is a little blood. (54)

It is easy to perceive a direct line between Le Fanu and Connolly, both of whom merged the Gothic with the narrative of crime in works which can be considered to be fine examples of both modes. Le Fanu's initial use of "natural" resolutions to apparently supernatural problems, in his later work, most specifically the masterful tales making up *In a Glass Darkly*, the natural is often discarded, to be replaced either by a question of doubt or, in some cases, a purely supernatural outcome. In this respect, both writers can be seen as progressively privileging the supernatural over the natural, with the later works of both Le Fanu and Connolly leaving little doubt in the reader's mind as to the existence of non-natural elements at play in their works. That is not to say, of course, that their works have little or no relevance as part of a realistic critique of their respective societies and circumstances. Le Fanu's lugubrious settings and the themes of greed, sexual jealousy and frustration in marriage or family situations reflect the concerns of mid-nineteenth century Ireland and Britain, anticipating and later participating in the thematic preoccupations of the world of "sensation" fiction. Connolly's commitment to the social situation in contemporary Ireland is also highly visible in his works, despite the ostensible distancing of his New England settings to his Irish home. Although Connolly's works show movement towards a greater presence of the supernatural – and the corresponding diminishing of the effect of "hesitation" – the Parker series, through its Gothic veneer, and in spite of its non-Irish setting, presents a number of important criticisms of contemporary Irish society. In *The Killing Kind* the attacks on pro-abortion groups and individuals can be seen as a reflection of social concerns in twenty-first century Ireland, as can the abundance of abused women and children, cruel state institutions, mental illness, orphanhood, homophobia and incest. John Connolly, like a number of contemporary Irish writers, including Tana French, Liz Nugent, John Boyne or Patrick McCabe, provides a contemporary version of the Gothic, a mode deeply embedded in the Irish literary system, and makes this relevant – and entertaining – for a contemporary reading public.

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Título:

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