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Ironic Myths and Broken Images:

Reflections of the 1798 Rebellion in Twentieth-Century Irish

Fiction and Drama

Ironické mýty a rozbité obrazy: Reflexe povstání roku

1798 v irském románu a dramatu dvacátého století

DISERTAČNÍ PRÁCE

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INTRODUCTION

The Method and Structure of the Inquiry

The 1798 Rebellion together with the political turmoil of the immediately preceding decade is rightly regarded as a crucial period in Ireland's modern history. This is not so much due to the immediate political consequences of the event, but mainly because of its continuing status as a source of inspiration for subsequent political movements and its important role in the forming of Irish national identity. It was the first period when all the socioeconomic, religious and language groups who had lived in relative isolation from one another during the eighteenth century came into intensive contact (and conflict).

The results were admirable and disastrous at the same time. On the one hand, the political project of the United Irishmen, the principal instigators of the rising, famously expressed in Wolfe Tone's words "to substitute the common name of Irishman, in the place of the denominations of Protestant, Catholic, and Dissenter,"¹ retains its inspiration to this day. On the other hand, the numerous bloody acts of sectarian violence committed not only by the government side, which exploited sectarianism to break up the fragile alliance of the rebels, but in many cases also by the insurgents themselves, show that the legacy of the rebellion is far from being unambiguous. Also, the relevance of 1798 for the recent conflict in Northern Ireland cannot be disputed – as the 1790s saw the origins of both Irish Republicanism and the Orange order, it is hardly surprising that they have served as an ongoing source of inspiration for both sides of the political and religious divide.

Given both the importance and the inherent ambiguity of the event, it is hardly surprising that it has inspired numerous, and often conflicting, interpretations not only in historiography, but also in politics, popular ballads and poetry, and, significantly, historical fiction and drama. This is also caused by the fact that the variegated events of the rebellion as if offer themselves for fictional treatment: the discussions and plans of the United Irishmen, the activities of government agents, and the battles and campaigns in

¹ Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone, Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) 126.

the three principal areas where various episodes of the rebellion took place, County Wexford, and parts of Ulster and Connacht. The last of the areas mentioned provides an additional interest due to the involvement of a small French invasion force, which arrived to help the rebels.²

For these reasons, the 1798 rebellion offers excellent material for the exploration of the most important questions to be raised in this thesis: if we agree that history is a matter of construction and negotiation rather than an objective narrative which can be woven from the given facts (and the theoretical basis will be provided for this underlying argument), where exactly is the place of historical fiction and drama in this process? Are they mere poetic embellishments of the ‘hard facts’ of history, or can they bring innovative interpretations, explore interesting connections, reveal surprising aspects of the same facts? And how exactly is it possible to describe the relationship between these genres and historiography?

While looking for some answers to these questions, the material used in this thesis will be limited to literary treatments of 1798 (novels, plays, a set of tales and a short story) written in the twentieth century, especially after the year 1916. There are two reasons for this time delimitation. Firstly, it is dictated by the state of research that currently obtains. While 1798 novels written in the nineteenth century are extensively covered in the doctoral thesis *An ‘Unburied Corpse’: The 1798 Rebellion in Fiction 1799-1898* by Jim Shanahan,³ and the remaining period until the Easter Rising was given at least partial treatment by Eileen Reilly in her doctoral thesis and article,⁴ nothing substantial, apart from essays devoted to individual works, has been written about the topic of 1798 in novels and plays written from 1916 onwards. The present study therefore aims at addressing this gap in the relevant criticism.

The other reason is more directly related to the questions raised above – due to factors to be discussed in Chapters Three and Four, these later literary reflections of the rebellion are more stylistically variegated and offer a wider range of innovative approaches than

² The most exhausting summary of the events of the rebellion can be found in Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty: The Story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969).

³ Jim Shanahan, *An ‘Unburied Corpse’: The 1798 Rebellion in Fiction 1799-1898*, Diss. TCD 2006.

⁴ Eileen Reilly, *Fictional histories: an examination of Irish historical and political novels, 1880-1914*, Diss. Oxford 1997, and Eileen Reilly, “Who Fears to Speak of ’98? The Rebellion in Historical Novels, 1880-1914,” *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22.3 (November 1998): 118-127.

the earlier works, which are more conventional in terms of form, and often (although not always) more straightforwardly directed at addressing political issues of their author's present. The year of the Easter Rising was chosen for obvious symbolic purposes – the process of Irish independence, inaugurated by the event, was seen by many as a certain solution to the unresolved questions raised by 1798. While the conflict in Northern Ireland has soon proved this solution to be incomplete, 1916 has to a large degree replaced the earlier rebellion in its status of an iconic, and at the same time, controversial event. The result was a relative diminishing of the relevance of 1798 as a topic of historical plays and novels, as well as a certain loss of political immediacy in a number of these works, mentioned above.

While the works selected for analysis will include novels and plays written predominantly in the English language, substantial space will be devoted to the Irish language material as well. The reasons for this choice are again twofold. The first reason is that the Irish language and the response of Irish speakers to the historical event of the rebellion feature as prominent topics in the English language reflections of 1798, both in literature and historiography, and therefore it seems only just to give voice to the material written in the language itself. In addition, as one of the most interesting 1798 novels ever published, *L'Attaque* by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (1962),⁵ happened to be written in Irish, it was natural to include it in the analysis and compare it to the relevant works in English.

The only significant omission in the thesis, as regards the material covered, is the poetry written about 1798 in the course of the twentieth century. This is partly due to the limitations of scope, but also due to the fact that the method of the thesis concentrates on the interpretation of history in narrative, which is at odds with the rather lyrical character of many of these poems. Throughout the nineteenth century, the principal poetic genre dealing with the rebellion were ballads, some of which gained immense popularity and nearly canonical status. While the number of new 1798 ballads composed in the twentieth century is relatively small, the old ones retained their popularity. It is therefore not surprising that they often became an important reference point for newly written poems. This is definitely true of the arguably most famous twentieth-century poem about the

⁵ Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, *L'Attaque* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1998).

rebellion, Seamus Heaney's "Requiem for the Croppies," as well as Ciaran Carson's collection *The Twelfth of Never*, which contains many imaginative reworkings of the better-known ballads.⁶ However, for the reasons outlined above, this undoubtedly interesting topic deserves a separate study and cannot be dealt with here.

The critical analysis of the chosen material requires—a substantial preliminary discussion. The first chapter attempts to thoroughly discuss the theoretical fundamentals of the present enquiry. The main emphasis is laid on the work of Hayden White, whose focus on structural similarities between historiography and fiction has prepared a theoretical basis which can be skilfully used for the analysis of literature dealing with history, as has been shown, for example, by the pioneering research of Mark Berninger in the field of contemporary British and Irish historical drama.⁷ However, the discussion of White's theory does not exhaust itself with a simple statement of epistemological relativism as regards possible renditions of history, but gives voice also to White's critics, who were often worried about the lack of ethical and pragmatic dimension in his theory. Accordingly, Hayden White's valuable findings are juxtaposed with relevant notions in the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, who, similarly to White, explored issues of history and narrative. However, by his highlighting of ethical aspects of the historian's work and the role of history for the forming of identities he provides certain pragmatic correctives for White's epistemological relativism. While Ricoeur's underlying concept of collective identity and ethics is essentially conservative and its theoretical grounding can be put in doubt (for example by reference to Jacques Derrida's disquieting analysis of the concept of responsibility in *The Gift of Death*), the ethical dimension of any interpretation of history still remains a most significant issue.

⁶ Seamus Heaney, "Requiem for the Croppies," *New Selected Poems 1966-1987* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990) 12, and Ciaran Carson, *The Twelfth of Never* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1998). Other volumes of poetry published on the topic in the twentieth century include Liam Ó Muirthile, *Dialann bóthair* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1992), which is a meditation on Wolfe Tone's diaries, and Medbh McGuckian, *Shelmalier* (Loughcrew: The Gallery Press, 1998), which refers to the rebellion only in very loose metaphoric terms.

⁷ Mark Berninger, *Neue Formen des Geschichtsdramas in Grossbritannien und Irland seit 1970* (Trier: WVT Trier, 2006).

Chapter Two traces the development of volatile historiographical and political opinion concerning the rebellion from the beginning of the nineteenth century until very recently. Despite the fact that this subject has been already addressed in several recent studies, it was essential to include it as it amply illustrates the theoretical points made in Chapter One and moreover forms a necessary background to the analysis of literary interpretations of 1798. Special attention will be devoted to the heated debates which accompanied the bicentenary of the event, as they, in many respects, exemplify the tension between Hayden White's endorsement of the right to construct historical narratives for political purposes and Paul Ricoeur's emphasis on the ethical commitment of the historian not to omit or marginalise important historical facts, especially those connected to the so-called "history of victims."

The remaining five chapters of the thesis are subsequently devoted to the subject proper, i.e. the critical analysis of 1798 novels and plays written in the twentieth century. Chapters Three and Four are divided chronologically, the former focusing on the period before 1916 and the latter on the remaining part of the twentieth century. However, there is a substantial difference in method. Chapter Three, as it covers ground which has been partially treated by previous critics, has no pretensions at completeness. Rather, it starts with a brief analysis of nineteenth-century literary treatments of 1798 and continues with a discussion of a limited sample of novels (and a play) written in the period between 1900 and 1916. The aim is partially to draw attention to interesting, although neglected, texts, but mainly to give recognition to trends locatable across the chosen time boundary of 1916, i.e., to discuss structural and thematic features which have their counterparts in novels and plays written later in the century. Among the most important lines of continuity we can count the political immediacy of literary works treating the Ulster dimension of the rebellion. Understandably, these novels and plays tended to interpret the rebellion against the background of the unresolved situation in Northern Ireland exacerbated in 1910-1914 by the Home Rule crisis. Moreover, already at this stage elements can be found of the focus on Presbyterian radicalism of the 1790s – an emphasis which became even more prominent in later works by Northern Irish Protestant authors of broadly socialist persuasion, especially in the 1970s and 80s. Another line of continuity can be found in the recourse to specific genres and motifs, for example the various

treatments of the trope of Ireland represented by a woman, epitomised in Yeats's and Lady Gregory's play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*.

In contrast, Chapter Four attempts to provide a comprehensive survey of the majority of the relevant novels and plays (and a short story) published in the chosen period between 1916 and 2000, apart from three outstanding works which have been selected for a more thorough analysis in separate chapters towards the end of the thesis. The discussion follows roughly the same lines as in the preceding chapter – the interpretation of the rebellion in the relevant novel or play is analysed against the background of the various historiographical and political opinions outlined in Chapter Two, but a great deal of attention is devoted also to the way the topic was treated in purely literary terms. The result is a relatively detailed map of literary reflections of 1798 written in the period in question, which includes also several less known and non-canonical works. Out of this map, two important thematic groups emerge. Given the escalation of the Northern Irish conflict from the 1970s onwards, it is not surprising that one of them is devoted to the Northern Irish aspect of the topic – a high proportion of the novels and, in fact, all the plays written in the period 1916-2000 are set in Ulster, and the connection to the later conflict is very prominent. The other important group of literary works deals in various ways with the theme of the Irish language, being either written in the language itself and/or focusing on the role of Irish speakers and their traditional culture during the rebellion.

The last three chapters are devoted to the analysis of three literary works that can be for various reasons considered the most interesting and inspiring both from the point of view of the interpretation of 1798 contained in them, but also as regards the literary techniques employed. These include the novels *L'Attaque* by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (1962) and *The Year of the French* by Thomas Flanagan (1979), along with the play *Northern Star* by Stewart Parker (1984).⁸ All three of them contain a great deal of innovation in the context of their respective genres and illustrate splendidly the broad possibilities of literature in dealing with history, which is, of course, in keeping with the principal line of enquiry of this thesis.

⁸ Thomas Flanagan, *The Year of the French* (London: Arrow Books Ltd., 1979) and Stewart Parker, "Northern Star," *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen, 2000) 2-82.

The first of the works mentioned is, in contrast to the other two, relatively little-known, but deserves a great deal of attention especially because of its unique dual structure, which combines the framework of the traditional European historical novel with references to mediaeval Irish texts that have enjoyed the status of myth in Irish culture ever since the Literary Revival, such as *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*. However, the relationship between the two levels of the text, realistic and mythological, is essentially ironic, as Ó Tuairisc criticises the glorification of conflict contained in the mythological stories and transforms them to set up a much more compassionate ‘heroic code.’ A similar treatment is reserved for the eighteenth-century *aisling* poetry, another important frame of reference for the novel, which is nevertheless regarded as ambiguous and, in keeping with the available evidence concerning the contemporaneous response of Irish speakers to the rebellion, in many ways found inadequate for the expression of the new situation which arose with the landing of the French in Killala and the subsequent rising in Mayo.

Thomas Flanagan’s *The Year of the French*, already written in the shadow of the ‘Troubles,’ is much more topical in its explicit rejection of the mythologisation of 1798 and its use in the subsequent nationalist narrative of Irish history. In many ways it can be regarded as a novelistic expression of the ‘revisionist’ view of Irish history discussed in Chapter Two, which, informed by historical positivism, aimed to deconstruct the nationalist narrative. The most interesting feature of the book, however, is that it at the same time transcends this particular historiographical interpretation and, in a powerful undercurrent of metahistorical commentary, gradually extends its scepticism to virtually all narrative renderings of history, thus coming close to the views of the philosopher Michel Foucault as they are outlined in *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Consequently, the analysis will to a large degree concentrate on these metahistorical features.

The last of the texts to be discussed, the play *Northern Star* by Stewart Parker, is distinguished by its highly balanced account of 1798, its use of the historical setting to indirectly comment on the situation in Northern Ireland and, similarly to *The Year of the French*, its thorough discussion of the nature of history itself. It shares with Ó Tuairisc’s *L’Attaque* a highly complex structure, this time dependent on an elaborated system of metadramatic allusions pointing to dramatic traditions, individual dramatists, as well as

the nature of theatre as a medium in which the interpretation of history is conveyed. Out of this structure, the central metaphor of the play emerges, which is the image of life and history as drama, and the crucial question of the free will of the actors is explored.

In the concluding section, literary interpretations of 1798 will be compared on the immediate political level, with a special attention to the relationship between historiographical and literary reflections of the rebellion. This analysis will be, in turn, followed by a recapitulation of common motifs and structural features of the novels and plays in question. These include principally the central motif of Ireland represented by a woman, the motif of ghosts, metahistorical features and the use of allusion as a structuring device. On the basis of these findings, a tentative answer concerning the value of the interpretation of history in literature will be attempted.

CHAPTER ONE

Theoretical Preliminaries: History, Fiction and Ethics¹

The principal purpose of the following lines is to introduce the groundbreaking theory of Hayden White and assess its implications both for historiography and fictional genres dealing with history. As outlined in the introduction, the main reason in the context of this thesis is to find a common denominator which would facilitate the comparison of historiographical and fictional interpretations of the 1798 rebellion in a meaningful way. However, White's emphasis on the inevitable fictional element in any rendition of history does not necessarily imply boundless freedom for historians and authors of historical fiction or drama to arrange historical facts in an absolutely arbitrary manner. In fact, most of the best authors (and historians) to be treated in this thesis were painfully aware of the importance of the interpretation of the rebellion for the Irish national identity and even for contemporary politics, often in connection to the conflict in Northern Ireland in the second half of the twentieth century. Therefore, Hayden White's findings will be contrasted with the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, whose work is concerned with a similar relationship between history and narrative, but contains a significant ethical element. After the limitations of both theoreticians have been adequately addressed, a possibility of synthesis will be outlined that could serve as an appropriate framework for the analysis of the novels and plays treated in this thesis.

Hayden White's View of History and its Implications for Literature

According to Hayden White's theory, epitomised in the monograph *Metahistory* and collection of essays *Tropics of Discourse*,² history does not show the past "as it was" (in the famous phrase of Leopold von Ranke, the father of modern history), but is always an interpretation of the historical record. For this reason there is no clear-cut distinction between 'history proper,' limited to pure reconstruction of the individual events, and

¹ An earlier version of this chapter appeared as "History, Fiction and Identity in the Works of Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur," *Litteraria Pragensia* 20.39 (Jul. 2010): 16-29.

² Hayden White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975).
Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990).

philosophy of history, which attempts to interpret the historical process as a whole. This strict separation was established very clearly in Karl Popper's *The Poverty of Historicism* and *Open Society and its Enemies* in the effort to prevent manipulative interpretations of history, often used to vindicate the ideological background of totalitarian movements.³ Popper argued that history could be saved from this pitfall by avoiding "historicism," by which he meant any attempt to give history a generalised meaning, typically characterised by a movement towards some higher goal, or utopia. White's theory shows that this is simply not possible: due to the nature of language, the narrative form itself necessarily interprets the material, and every historian, however he or she may despise 'speculative theorists' like Hegel or Marx, is always guided by a certain philosophy of history, in Popper's case characterised by the opinion that generalised interpretations of it are unacceptable.⁴

In White's view, the historical field before the historian's operation should be seen as a chronicle of disparate facts along a timeline and the historian necessarily chooses some of them and omits others, as well as locates the beginning and the end of the narrative.⁵ Apart from that, interpretation enters into historiography in three ways: aesthetically (emplotment), epistemologically (explanation), and ethically (ideological implication).⁶ On each of these levels, White distinguishes four modes, which correlate in a distinctive way. None of these levels is assigned priority, they are seen instead as a projection of a deeper level yet, which can be described in tropological terms.

Tropes, according to White, are not ornaments of speech, but a necessary feature of language which "prefigures the perceptual field"⁷ in order to make it comprehensible. The specific modes are therefore determined by the 'four master tropes' (a term coined by Kenneth Burke) – metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony. The use of Hayden White's fourfold system of correlations indicates that Popper's refusal of historical generalisations and utopias is, rather than a stance outside philosophy of history, merely a feature of his liberalism, which favours contextualist explanation (putting facts in their

³ Karl R. Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1957).

Karl R. Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1945).

⁴ White, *Tropics of Discourse* 52.

⁵ White, *Metahistory* 5-7.

⁶ White, *Tropics of Discourse* 70.

⁷ White, *Metahistory* 30.

immediate context, but without further generalisations) and is tropologically grounded in irony.⁸

It is possible to conclude that White sees history essentially as fiction – which is made even clearer when White’s concepts are juxtaposed with Wolfgang Iser’s theory of fiction, as outlined in the monograph *The Fictive and the Imaginary*. According to Iser, fiction is constituted by three “fictionalising acts” – the act of selection, the act of combination and the act of self-disclosure.⁹ The first act has direct correspondence in Hayden White’s theory (as we have seen, the historian always chooses facts which seem relevant for his/her purpose), the second largely corresponds to White’s “emplotment.” The last of the acts, the act of self-disclosure, distinguishes between literary fiction, which reflects its own fictional status, and other fictions which do not disclose themselves. History, as conceived by Hayden White, would in most cases fall into the second category. Seen in this light, it must no longer be equalled with the past, but rather regarded as a largely fictional narrative constructed from the relics of the past.

This profound reconsidering of the status of history has had far-reaching consequences for historiography of course, creating a major debate among Anglophone historians (about which later). Significantly in the present context, it has had an impact on literary theory as well, especially on the treatment of historical fiction and drama. Traditionally, these genres were seen as dependent on the established meaning of history, sanctioned by current historiography, and judged by the criteria of authenticity and historical accuracy. In addition, an undue stress was laid on traditional models, such as Walter Scott’s novels or history plays by Shakespeare. An epitome of this tendency can be seen in Georg Lukács’s influential monograph *Der historische Roman* (The Historical Novel, 1937), which, despite giving many useful insights about the structure of (above all) Scott’s novels, is theoretically grounded in a rigid (Marxist) historical model and focuses exclusively on realistic traits of the works discussed.¹⁰

⁸ A table of these correlations can be found in White, “Interpretation in history,” *Tropics of Discourse* 70.

⁹ Wolfgang Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993) 12.

¹⁰ Georg Lukács, *Der historische Roman* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 1955).

The contribution of White to the theory of these genres lies in the fact that he has explicitly pointed out the structural similarities between literature and historiography, and thus undermined the privileged status of the latter in presenting verbal images of history. Consider, for instance, this passage from the essay “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” published in *Tropics of Discourse*:

Viewed simply as verbal artefacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in. But the aim of the writer of a novel must be the same as that of a writer of a history. Both wish to provide a verbal image of ‘reality.’¹¹

Parallel developments of thought or indeed direct influence of White has therefore recently led to new views of the genres in question. The establishment of “historiographic metafiction” as one of the most distinctive postmodern novelistic types by Linda Hutcheon has exposed the overreliance of literary criticism on the paradigm of the realistic historical novel as established by Walter Scott and drew awareness to the peculiarly self-reflexive way history was presented in numerous historical novels of the second half of the twentieth century.¹² These recent trends were subsequently explored in great detail by the German literary critic Ansgar Nünning, who, in his monograph *Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metafiktion* [From historical fiction to historiographic metafiction] proposed a typology for the modern British historical novel.¹³ Although largely critical of certain aspects of White’s theory, he was nevertheless able to brilliantly trace the new developments in the historical novel, which to a great degree reflect White’s findings. Another feature of Nünning’s monograph, relevant for the present thesis, is his recognition of the tension between various time levels (the present and one or several levels in the past) as constitutive for the genre as such. This enabled him to classify novels according to the relative degree of focus on the respective time levels, between the two poles of “present-oriented” and “past-oriented.”

¹¹ White, “The Fictions of Factual Representation,” *Tropics of Discourse* 122.

¹² See Linda Hutcheon, *Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge 1988).

¹³ Ansgar Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metafiktion, Band I* (Trier: WVT Trier, 1995). Nünning’s typology will be discussed in greater detail in connection to Thomas Flanagan’s novel *The Year of the French* in Chapter Six. See especially Nünning 49-58.

The classification is useful for distinguishing between novels and plays which are more concerned with the influence of the past on the present and the significance of history in present politics, and literary works focusing rather on the understanding of the historical events themselves.¹⁴

Another good example of an innovative approach to literary genres dealing with history is the monograph *Neue Formen des Geschichtsdramas in Grossbritannien und Irland seit 1970* [New forms of historical drama in Great Britain and Ireland since 1970] by Mark Berninger.¹⁵ While explicitly drawing on White, Berninger maintains that there is no clear border between history and literature, which enables him to lay aside the traditional definitions based on authenticity and accuracy, and shift the stress from *mimesis* to *poiesis*. A proof of that is his broad definition of historical drama: “Geschichtsdrama ist Drama, das Geschichte gestaltet und sich so in einer der vielfältigen möglichen Weisen mit Geschichte auseinandersetzt.” [Historical drama is a drama which constructs history and deals with it in various possible ways.]¹⁶ The word “gestaltet” implies that historical plays, rather than merely giving poetic ornaments to the findings of historical science (as was essentially the view of Lukács), participate in the construction of history, which is not identified with the past events themselves, but seen, in accordance with White, as a verbal image of the past constructed (or ‘invented’) in the present.¹⁷

The broadness of the definition enables Berninger to include all innovative types of historical drama which had emerged during the twentieth century. Against this theoretical background he, similarly to Nünning in the realm of the historical novel, outlines the development of the British and Irish historical drama in this period, which moves from realistic plays (the realism of which is revealed as resting on a mere convention) through revisionist dramas which strive to replace existing views of history, towards so called

¹⁴ See Nünning 106-110. In the context of this thesis a definite tendency can be noted among works connected to Northern Ireland to fall into the “present-oriented” category.

¹⁵ Mark Berninger, *Neue Formen des Geschichtsdramas in Grossbritannien und Irland seit 1970* (Trier: WVT Trier, 2006).

¹⁶ Berninger 47 (this and all other subsequent quotes from this work are in my translation).

¹⁷ “Obwohl Geschichte auf die Vergangenheit bezogen ist, ist sie nicht deckungsgleich mit Vergangenheit. Sie ist ein in der Gegenwart geschaffenes Konstrukt [...] aus den Relikten der Vergangenheit.” [Although history is related to the past, it is not identical with it. It is a construct from the relics of the past, made in the present.] Berninger 19.

metahistorical plays, which cast reflection on the way in which history is constructed and remembered.

Nevertheless, the possibilities of this approach have not yet been fully made use of in the Irish context, especially in the field of the historical novel, which may be illustrated by the fact that the only monograph on the Irish historical novel as yet, James Cahalan's *Great Hatred, Little Room*, is very much grounded in the traditional perspective.¹⁸ The present thesis therefore aims to make a modest contribution towards the remedy of this shortcoming.

Despite the invaluable impetus that it has provided for both historiography and literary research, there are certain aspects of White's theory which might be seen as problematic unless further explanation is given. If we regard history as fiction in Iser's sense of the word, a question arises whether there are any criteria how to evaluate different versions of it, and thus save the discipline from ideological manipulations, which was, after all, the goal of Karl Popper and others who drew a strict line between philosophy of history and 'history proper.' Does the fact that interpretation is inevitable, regardless of what historical method is chosen, mean that the historian is 'free' to select whatever historical facts that suit his or her preferable mode of emplotment in the same way as an author of a historical novel or drama writes his or her story? This disquieting question did not escape the attention of White's critics and became one of the main lines along which his work was attacked. For example, in a 1978 review of *Metahistory*, Stanley Pierson expresses his concern that White's work might become an apology for fashionable "engaged" historical writing, and in such way undermine the historians' effort to establish more objective historical pictures.¹⁹ Maurice Mandelbaum, in his scathing critique of the same work, complained that White "viewed every historical work as a linguistic entity whose structure wholly depended on the original poetic act which prefigured it" and that it "involved treating the statements that historians make as if they had no referents outside their own work."²⁰ This critique culminated in the discussion of the Holocaust: it has been (quite plausibly) suggested that in the framework of White's

¹⁸ James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983).

¹⁹ Stanley Pierson, review of *Metahistory*, *Comparative Literature* 30.2 (Spring 1978): 180.

²⁰ Maurice Mandelbaum, "The Presuppositions of *Metahistory*," *History and Theory*, 19.4 (1980): 53.

theory, there are no constraints which would prevent historians from interpreting similar terrible events in morally unacceptable ways, starting from suppressing the fact on the level of selection to an ‘unethical’ emplotment of the narrative (e.g., as a comedy).²¹

Some critics, however, were able to perceive that such sharp critiques do not do justice to White’s work as they fail to distinguish between epistemological and moral relativism.²² While epistemological relativism remains at the core of White’s theory (there is no real way in which to distinguish between competing interpretations of history purely on cognitive grounds), evidence can be found that he was very much aware of the moral significance of choosing one historical interpretation over another. For example, in his own preface to *Metahistory* he states: “[...] the best grounds for choosing one perspective of history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological.”²³ However, the ethical questions related to historical interpretations are not generally discussed in his work and neither are their pragmatic functions. Yet, they are of crucial importance – after all, in the framework of Iser’s theory mentioned earlier, fictions are determined by their pragmatic use and this seems to be valid also for history.²⁴

The neglect of pragmatic issues lies probably behind another recurrent theme in critical treatments of White – disagreement with his thesis that the recorded past exists, before the historian’s operation, in an unprocessed, chaotic form, devoid of any meaning or moral significance. While this statement has much validity on a purely analytical level (historical events do not have meaning independent of their interpretation), it is not

²¹ These issues were subsequently addressed in White’s later essay “The Politics of Historical Interpretation” in which he argued that historical lies such as Holocaust denial can be simply determined on the level of fact, independent of any interpretation. This argument, however, does not take into account that facts do not simply ‘lie there’ to be picked, but must be first established in discourse. There is therefore ample space for shaping the facts in manipulative ways without explicitly contradicting the documented reality. See Hayden White, “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” *The Content of the Form* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1990) 58-82. Moreover, Wulf Kansteiner has pointed out that White’s reaction to this critique eventually ran into unsurmountable inconsistencies with the rest of his theory, for example when he, in one of his later essays, attempted to impose constraints on the types of plot structures for the representation of certain events, as certain emplotments would distort the truth. See Wulf Kansteiner, “Hayden White’s Critique of the Writing of History,” *History and Theory*, 32.3 (October 1993): 282.

²² For instance Kansteiner, “Hayden White’s Critique” 274.

²³ White, *Metahistory* xii.

²⁴ Drawing from the theory of Hans Vaihinger, Iser argues that, for example: “[...] the pragmatic significance of fiction for action becomes unmistakable. Such a significance is no longer the object of cognition but is gauged in proportion to the success achieved...” Iser 168.

possible, as critics like David Carr have pointed out, to strictly separate the interpretative work of the historian from the historical events.²⁵ It can be argued that the process of narrative interpretation starts with the historical actors themselves (we all tend to perceive our own lives as stories of a certain kind) and continues in the ‘collective memory’ of their communities. In such a way (collective) identities are created and a historian, however ‘detached’ he or she may be, is always a part of this process – a crucial connection which is not given much prominence in White’s analysis.

Paul Ricoeur’s Ethics of History

In the work of the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur, especially in his seminal book *Temps et récit* (Time and Narrative),²⁶ it is possible to find a carefully drawn theory which, to a certain degree, may be used in order to give a new dimension to Hayden White’s observations while retaining their innovative and inspirational value.²⁷ *Temps et récit* analyses history as part of an attempt to solve a larger philosophical problem: the paradoxical relation of the time of the universe and time as we perceive it, characterised by a permanent tension between the past, the present, and the future. Ricoeur suggests that to conceive of these problems through pure phenomenology of time always leads to further paradoxes, and argues that an intermediary is always needed – which is, in his view, narrative. History, as one of the two principal kinds of narrative along with fiction, has a crucial position in the book, and substantial passages are devoted to it both in the first and the third volume.

Ricoeur’s treatment of the problem of reference, although it superficially seems to be formulated in opposition to epistemological relativism, does not fundamentally differ from White’s approach. The main premise is that language has always reference in the

²⁵ See David Carr, “Narrative and the Real World: An Argument for Continuity,” *History and Theory*, 25.2 (May 1986):117-31.

²⁶ Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit. L'intrigue et le récit historique* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1983).

Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit. La configuration dans le récit de fiction* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1984).

Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit. Le temps raconté* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1985).

²⁷ It is of interest that White himself greeted the publication of this work with enthusiasm – see Hayden White, “The Metaphysics of Narrativity: Time and Symbol in Ricoeur’s Philosophy of History,” *The Content of the Form* 169-83.

outside world, that it always communicates some experience.²⁸ This is true even of literary works, which due to their fictional nature acquire subversive potential vis-à-vis the ruling moral and social order, possible exactly because the horizons of the world of the text and the world of the reader intersect. Even the most figurative language, seemingly self-referential, communicates something about the outside world: by virtue of its poetic qualities it can refer to aspects of being ungraspable by descriptive discourse.²⁹

However, there is an important difference between the reference of fictional narrative and that of historiography, despite their undeniable structural similarities. Unlike fiction, history is always connected with the traces of the past, which require continuous correction of the historical picture.³⁰

This would indicate an opposing view to that of Hayden White, but it is necessary to bear in mind that Paul Ricoeur does not present the dichotomy in simplified, dualistic terms and is well aware of the unavoidable element of construction in every rendition of history. To solve this paradox, he introduces the notion of “crossed reference” of history and fiction.³¹ In his view, one cannot virtually exist without the other: while historical narrative cannot do without certain configurations, or emplotments, borrowed from fiction, fiction inevitably borrows from history the illusion that the narrated events actually happened in the past (this is indicated linguistically by the use of the past tense in fiction).

It should be also noted here that Ricoeur’s concept of narrative emplotment differs significantly from that of Hayden White. While White’s notion is essentially static, largely taken over from the archetypal theory of Northrop Frye, Ricoeur applies the term tradition, conceived in a dynamic sense. Such a tradition is not rigid, but evolves, depending of the interplay of innovation and sedimentation.³² From this point of view, White’s narrative paradigms, taken from Frye, are a feature of sedimentation, but can always become subject to innovation.

²⁸ “L’événement complet, c’est non seulement que quelqu’un prenne la parole et s’adresse à un interlocuteur, c’est aussi qu’il ambitionne de porter au langage et de partager avec autrui une *expérience* nouvelle.” Ricoeur, *L'intrigue* 147.

²⁹ Ricoeur, *L'intrigue* 151.

³⁰ Ricoeur, *Le temps raconté* 280.

³¹ “Référence croisée,” Ricoeur, *L'intrigue* 154 (this and all other subsequent quotes from Ricoeur are in my translations).

³² Ricoeur, *L'intrigue* 133-135.

The implication of the concept of “crossed reference” for history is that historical “discourse has to accept two commitments: on the one hand to the constraints attached to the chosen *type* of emplotment and on the other to the past itself on the basis of documentary information available at a given time.”³³ This connection, in Ricoeur’s view, establishes the basis for the search for objectivity in history, a time-honoured maxim of historians largely absent in White,³⁴ but taken as it is, it is also one of the weaker links in Ricoeur’s argument, if we give credit to the reevaluation of the status of the document in Foucault’s *Archeology of Knowledge*. According to the latter, documents are to be treated as “monuments,” i.e., not something which gives us immediate access to the past, but as essentially opaque entities which require discursive interpretation to acquire any meaning at all.³⁵

In any case, it can be argued that the line between history and fiction in Ricoeur seems to be rather a matter of degree than a fundamental difference. Rather than being defined in epistemological terms, other passages in *Temps et Récit* indicate that any such border is crucially dependent on the ethics and pragmatics of history.

Ethical considerations first appear when Ricoeur introduces the idea of potential, unnarrated stories, as an argument against the thesis of the circularity of mimesis.³⁶ He illustrates this concept on the example of psychoanalysis – the analyst helps the patient to construct a more credible and consistent story from the fragments of conflicting life episodes and dreams. This implies, in Ricoeur’s view, that the story of one’s life has its origins in suppressed and untold stories and leads towards real, narrated, stories which can serve as a credible base of personal identity. The fact that narrative lies also at the core of collective identity of specific groups, such as nations or minorities, brings us directly to the question of history and to the potential of historical narratives to heal collective traumas. The concept of potential stories serves Ricoeur as a means of criticising the constructivist concept of history (such as Hayden White’s), or of narrative

³³ “Ce discours paraît, en effet, revendiquer une double allégeance: d’une part aux contraintes attachées au *type* d’intrigue privilégié, d’autre part au passé lui-même à travers l’information documentaire accessible à un moment donné.” Ricoeur, *Le temps raconté* 274.

³⁴ Ricoeur maintains that although the ideal of full objectivity (in the sense of universal history in which all the various aspects would correspond to one another like facets of a diamond) cannot be achieved, the effort to achieve it “n’est ni vain ni insensé” [is not in vain or without meaning] *Le temps raconté*, 313.

³⁵ Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2001) 6.

³⁶ Ricoeur, *L’intrigue* 141-42.

in general: “we tell stories,” not as an expression of our artistic freedom, but “because human lives require and deserve to be told. This statement, however, gains its entire force only once we evoke the necessity of keeping the stories of the vanquished and lost.”³⁷

Because of the above-mentioned connection of history with (collective) identity, prominent in Ricoeur’s book, the historian has also special responsibility when writing about events which are considered “epoch-making” by his/her community.³⁸ Ricoeur does not define these events empirically, but by their ability to evoke certain powerful emotions, which can be either positive (reverence, admiration), or negative (indignation, grief). Although critical detachment from these emotions has been traditionally considered a virtue of a historian, Ricoeur sees it as problematic with recent events, especially those which still evoke a strong sense of trauma, such as the Holocaust. If the practice of detachment puts into question feelings of reverence, it can have positive value because of the closeness of these feelings to “the history of the winners,” although the complete elimination of reverent memory Ricoeur finds hardly possible or desirable.³⁹ The feelings of horror, however, are defining features of “the history of victims,” in the face of which detachment loses its meaning completely. The pragmatic meaning of this particular history, according to Ricoeur, lies close to the biblical commandment of *zakhor* [remember]: the suffering of victims should never be forgotten.⁴⁰

The ethical commitment of the historian is described by the metaphor of the “unpaid debt,” which characterises the historian’s relationship to the past.⁴¹ Ricoeur introduces this concept in the third volume of *Temps et récit* when he examines the nature of “the reality of historical past.”⁴² The passage is crucial because it makes clear that referential criteria, by which we can judge different versions of history, are groundless unless firmly linked with ethics. In a similar way as in the argument related to the concept of “crossed reference,” also here Ricoeur works with the premise that despite the selective nature of

³⁷ “Nous racontons des histoires parce que finalement les vies humaines ont besoin et méritent d’être racontées. Cette remarque prend toute sa force quand nous évoquons la nécessité de sauver l’histoire des vaincus et des perdants.” Ricoeur, *L’intrigue* 143.

³⁸ Ricoeur, *L’intrigue* 339.

³⁹ “L’histoire des vainqueurs,” Ricoeur, *L’intrigue* 340.

⁴⁰ Ricoeur, *L’intrigue* 339.

⁴¹ “Il a une dette à l’égard du passé, une dette de reconnaissance à l’égard des morts, qui fait de lui un débiteur insolvable.” Ricoeur, *Le temps raconté* 253.

⁴² “la réalité du passé historique,” Ricoeur, *Le temps raconté* 253.

the historian's work, and despite its unavoidable ideological background, it is the reference to documents which creates the border between history and fiction: the constructions of the historian, as opposed to the novelist, aim to be *reconstructions* of the past. This commitment on the part of the historian, however, is not given by the historical reality itself (this is a crucial argument which shows that epistemological relativism is shared by *both* Ricoeur and Hayden White), but by the "mysterious" feeling of responsibility, of debt towards the people who once lived in the past and now are dead. And it is precisely this feeling which forces the historian to continuously correct his picture of the past (which can, of course, never be absolutely accurate) on the basis of available traces. According to Ricoeur, the historian is therefore never the sovereign maker of the plot, but "a servant of the memory of people of the past."⁴³

Such a concept of the historian's responsibility, however, poses its own questions and problems. From the preceding paragraphs it is clear that Ricoeur's ethics of history is largely based on the undeniable connection of history to collective memory and identity – something that has been pointed out also by the above-mentioned critics of Hayden White. Collective identity, however, can be conceived in various ways, and therefore also Ricoeur's concept of it deserves thorough discussion. It can be easily argued that the use of the expressions "debt" and "servant of the memory of people of the past" implies a rather conservative approach. Ricoeur's notion of the debt, if taken in a broader sense than just regarding historiography, can be seen as constituting a conservative version of the social contract, famously introduced already by Edmund Burke. In criticising the classical liberal concept, Burke emphasised that the "state ought not to be considered as nothing better than a partnership agreement in pepper and coffee, calico and tobacco" in which the contract can be dissolved at pleasure, and that "as the ends of the partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, *but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are to be born.*"⁴⁴ In other words, the dead enter the partnership with the living and have their say in the present social contract. The conservative nature of Ricoeur's concept of the debt is corroborated by the treatment of the same in his later book *Memoire, l'histoire*,

⁴³ "[...] un serviteur de la mémoire des hommes du passé." *Le temps raconté*, 283.

⁴⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (London: Penguin Books, 1986) 194 (emphasis added).

l'oublie [Memory, History, Forgetting], where, in a passage concerning the duties of memory, the notion of the debt is linked to that of heritage:

The idea of the debt is inseparable from the notion of heritage. We are indebted to those who have gone before us for part of what we are. The duty of memory is not restricted to preserving the material trace, whether scriptural or other, of past events, but maintains the feeling of being obligated with respect to these others, of whom we shall later say, not that they are no more, but that they were. Pay the debt, I shall say, but also inventory the heritage.⁴⁵

When applied to history, this conservative view of identity might under certain conditions strengthen the ethical responsibility of the historian; however, it also runs a certain risk of underpinning a rather rigid and authoritative social structure. This can be shown by relating Ricoeur's concept of the debt to the anthropological constant of the gift, as it was described in Marcel Mauss's book *The Gift*.⁴⁶ In his description of the function of the gift in 'archaic' societies, Mauss emphasises that the gift establishes a binding social relationship due to its paradoxical nature: according to the rules of the society, it must be repaid, but can be never repaid fully. Following this dissymmetric logic, unconditionally acknowledging our "debt to the people of the past" implies that we let the past rule over the present and determine its meaning. This hierarchy, in relation to collective identities, is characteristic of the paradigm of primordialism, which, by establishing the nation as a perennial, not invented, structure, gives it unconditional authority over the individual.⁴⁷

Of course, it would be unjust to attribute naive primordialist views to Ricoeur, especially in the light of his emphasis on the history of victims or "the forgotten and lost," since such a history has always the potential of subverting established national narratives, inevitably based as much on what is (deliberately) forgotten as on what is

⁴⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. K. Blamey, D. Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004) 89.

⁴⁶ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift*, trans. W.D. Halls (London: Routledge 1990).

⁴⁷ For the discussion of various versions of the primordialist paradigm see Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism and Modernism: A Critical Survey of Recent Theories of Nations and Nationalism* (London: Routledge 1998).

remembered.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the notion of the debt to the dead lends itself to problematic conclusions and that the problem of a historian's responsibility is much more complex than to be simply defined by a concept of this kind. In the light of the history of reversals and repressions connected to the notion of responsibility in European culture, which Jacques Derrida outlines in *The Gift of Death*, it is clear that responsibility cannot be based merely on some notion of universal duty derived from our belonging to a collective entity, but must be defined also by our relationship to singularities, regardless of whether they are conceived as our fellow humans or "the absolute other." These obligations are often in conflict and cannot be reconciled, as Derrida's reading of the Old Testament story of Abraham's sacrifice indicates.⁴⁹ Therefore, if we want to talk of responsibility on a deeper level, also these (possibly irreconcilable) paradoxes must be taken into account.

Conclusions

Despite these reservations, it might be concluded that the juxtaposition of Hayden White's theory and Paul Ricoeur's philosophy may prove to be of definite value for both historiography and various treatments of history in literature. In contrast to other critics of White, Ricoeur does not insist upon the possibility that objective history can be defined in epistemological terms: it remains true that full objectivity in history cannot be achieved and that history contains a strong element of construction on the part of those who write it. In addition, the forms and configurations available to the historian are very much culturally determined and dependent on certain paradigms, which are represented in White's system by the four master tropes and in Ricoeur's philosophy by the dynamic concept of tradition. The border between history and fiction remains hard to define even in Ricoeur's framework, mainly because the concept of "crossed reference" implies that neither can exist without the other. Therefore there is no proper historical method which would save history from ideological manipulations, as it was imagined by Popper, and the only safeguard remains in ethics. As Ricoeur has argued, it is mainly ethical

⁴⁸ The connection between national identity and forgetfulness was brilliantly pointed out already by Ernst Renan in "What is a nation?" trans. Martin Thom, *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 2003) 11.

⁴⁹ Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995).

considerations which urge the historian to strive for objectivity. Although it has been shown that many of Ricoeur's ethical notions regarding the historian's work are based on an essentially conservative paradigm and pose important unsolved questions, the insistence on the connection of history to collective identity together with the concept of the history of victims comes across as very plausible indeed. Arguably, it can provide even some 'light in the dark,' in the case of (sadly too numerous) conflicts based on different interpretations of history: as it has been suggested by Joep Leerssen, conflicting historical narratives can be possibly reconciled if the communities in question recognize each other's victims and traumas coming from their common past.⁵⁰

Due to the permeable border between history and fiction, which is a feature of both White's and Ricoeur's work, the ethical dimension is open not only to historiography, but also to fictional works dealing with history, such as historical novels or plays. In the following chapters of the thesis, various pragmatic and ethical aspects will be given due attention in the analysis of both historiographical and fictional reflections of the 1798 rebellion. However, it will be seen that Ricoeur's historical ethics, expressed as it is largely in categories related to the past, can be only partially applied in this case. As will be demonstrated already in the following chapter, the rebellion was a highly complex and controversial historical event which presents obstacles to interpretation already due to the conflicting nature of historical evidence or a simple lack of it. Moreover, given its importance for Irish national identity, its various interpretations have always had political significance and were often shaped in relation to more recent historical events. In the twentieth century, such events had usually connection to the conflict in Northern Ireland – we may name the Home Rule crisis shortly before the First World War, and even more prominently, the so-called 'Troubles' in the last third of the century. It is therefore clear that the ethical responsibilities of the authors of historiographical and fictional treatments of 1798 cannot be defined only in relation to the past and the available historical evidence, but also as regards the possible influence of a given interpretation on the present and the future.

⁵⁰ Joep Leerssen, "Monument and Trauma: Varieties of Remembrance," *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001) 204-22. The immediate context for Leerssen's argument were the casualties suffered by Irishmen from the Six Counties in the First World War and their joint commemoration by the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland in 1998.

Along with that, a question will be opened concerning the structural ways in which the portrayal of history in novels and plays can differ from historiography, with a special emphasis on the use of various previously established motifs and genres, as well as the method of mythical or literary allusion, which some of the authors in question have chosen for structuring the historical material contained in their work. For the more innovative novels and plays, Ricoeur's dynamic notion of tradition might prove a more useful analytic tool than White's typology of emplotment as the authors often drew from previous traditions in order to rework them in an imaginative way. Attention will be also devoted to the direct thematising of questions related to the theory of history in specific novels and plays, i.e. their metahistorical elements. This may, in turn, help in the general considerations of the complex relationship between history and literature as it has been outlined by White and Ricoeur in their various ways.

CHAPTER TWO

Squaring the Circle: The 1798 Rebellion in Historiography

Given the impossibility to arrive at a definite meaning of historical events, discussed theoretically in the previous chapter, it is hardly surprising that the events of the 1798 rebellion, being momentous and ambiguous at the same time, almost immediately provoked an ongoing debate in historiography and politics, which has continued well until these days. The vividness of the debates and the lack of their final resolution was poignantly expressed by Kevin Whelan, one of the prominent historians to be discussed in this chapter, who stated that “the rising never passed into history, because it never passed out of politics.”¹ Another historian, Roy Foster, commented on the debate in a much more sarcastic way:

What Hubert Butler wrote of Irish history sometimes seems true of Irish historiography as well. It is all like ‘a journey on a scenic railway in a funfair: we pass through towering cardboard mountains and over raging torrents and come to rest in the same well trodden field from which we got on board.’²

The principal aim of the following lines is to analyse the historiographical debates surrounding the rebellion from the theoretical perspective outlined in the previous chapter. After a brief overview of the principal nineteenth-century interpretations, the main focus will be placed on historiographical treatments of the event that were influential during the twentieth century, especially after 1916, thus coinciding with the main focus of the literary part of this thesis. Thereby, ground will be prepared for the comparison of the portrayal of the rebellion in historiography to that in fiction, which is one of the main issues that the present thesis attempts to address.

It is true that the fascinating ‘metahistory’ of 1798, or the evolution of historiographical opinions concerning the event, has been described elsewhere in great detail.³ Nevertheless, most of these elucidating treatments focus prevalently on the

¹ Kevin Whelan, “‘98 after ‘98,” *Tree of Liberty* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1996) 133.

² R.F. Foster, “Remembering 1798,” *The Irish Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 233.

³ The most important and influential analysis is in Kevin Whelan, “‘98 after ‘98,” *Tree of Liberty* 133-175. Interesting details can be found in unpublished theses: Anna Kinsella, *The 19th-Century Interpretation of 1798*, M.Litt. thesis, UCD 1992 and Jim Shanahan, *An ‘Unburied Corpse’: The 1798 Rebellion in Fiction*

debates in the nineteenth century, and if they comment upon the most recent developments, it is usually from a clearly defined political position and without recourse to theoretical concepts.

In his essay quoted above, Kevin Whelan has traced the movement of the prevailing interpretation of the rebellion in the nineteenth century according to the changing political landscape. The first history of the rebellion, the rabidly partisan account by Sir Richard Musgrave entitled *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland*, expressed the extreme loyalist position, which discarded the United Irish ideology as a deception and rather saw the rebellion as a sectarian Catholic conspiracy aimed at the extirpation of Protestants.⁴ The loyalist view was soon challenged by a Catholic interpretation, shared by some liberal Protestants, which equally downplayed the role of the United Irishmen, but differed from Musgrave in that it stressed the loyalty of the Catholics and portrayed the rebellion as spontaneous, provoked by government atrocities. These opinions are best represented by the history of Edward Hay,⁵ or in the eyewitness account of the Protestant Bishop Stock of Killala, remarkable for giving inspiration to numerous historical novels, one of which, *The Year of the French* by Thomas Flanagan (1979), is analysed in this thesis.⁶

It was only in the 1840s when the (ironically enough, anonymous) publication of John Kells Ingram's poem "The Memory of the Dead" (1843), with its memorable opening line, "Who fears to speak of Ninety-Eight?" famously marked the end of the period of reluctance to commemorate the political aspect of the rebellion and the radical legacy of the United Irishmen.⁷ The reinterpretation of 1798 coincided with the rise of the Young

1799-1898, Diss. TCD 2006. For a remarkable dissenting account see Tom Dunne, *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory and 1798* (Dublin: Lilliput Press 2004) 101-114.

⁴ Sir Richard Musgrave, *Memoirs of the Different Rebellions in Ireland, from the Arrival of the English: Also a Particular Detail of that which Broke Out the XXIII of May, MDCCXCVIII; with the History of the Conspiracy which Preceded it, and the Characters of the Principal Actors in it*, 2 vols. (Dublin: R. Marchbank, 1801). Due to its successful exploitation of loyalist fears, this history became an instant bestseller, selling out three editions in close succession. See Whelan, "'98 after '98" 135.

⁵ Edward Hay, *History of the insurrection of the County of Wexford, A. D. 1798; : including an account of transactions preceding that event, with an appendix* (Dublin: J. Stockdale, 1803).

⁶ Joseph Stock, *A narrative of What Passed at Killala, in the County Mayo, and the Parts Adjacent, During the French Invasion in the Summer of 1798* (Limerick: John and Thomas McAuliff, 1800). Another example of a twentieth-century novel heavily indebted to Stock is Emily Lawless and Shan F. Bullock, *The Races of Castlebar* (London: Murray, 1914).

⁷ Terry Moylan, ed., *The Age of Revolution in the Irish Song Tradition, 1776-1815* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000) 102.

Ireland movement, whose particular version of nationalism owed much to the United Irish ideology. The main historiographical event in this remarkable decade was the publication of R.R. Madden's *Lives and Times of the United Irishmen*, a seven volume monumental work which appeared between the years 1842 and 1846.⁸ In this history, influenced by Romanticism, Madden took great pains to dispel the idea that the rebellion was sectarian, and by stressing the virtues of the United Irishmen laid grounds for the subsequent 'canonisation' of their principal leaders. Although, according to Whelan, Madden can be credited for saving the inspirational value of the United Irishmen from the post-rebellion debates,⁹ he nevertheless left an ambiguous legacy in that his account, to a certain degree, legitimised the use of violence on the part of the rebels. This militant note, which is rather implicit in Madden, was reinforced with the Paris publication of the unapologetic *Memoirs of Miles Byrne* in 1863,¹⁰ the last of the recollections of the direct participants of the rising, and heartily embraced by the Fenians and later physical force nationalist movements.

This radical nationalist interpretation was in turn superseded by the highly influential Catholic interpretation of Father Patrick F. Kavanagh, which tried to reclaim the rebellion for the Catholic church by downplaying the role of the largely Protestant (and often dangerously secular) United Irishmen and stressing the role of local Wexford priest leaders who, when faced with government provocation, bravely fought for "faith and fatherland."¹¹

The *Popular History* by Patrick F. Kavanagh

It was the last of these interpretations (or rather a volatile combination of Kavanagh and the established reverence for the predominantly Protestant United Irishmen, especially Wolfe Tone) which became the standard view of the rebellion throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century, having made its way into school textbooks

⁸ Another four volumes were published in the years 1857-60. See Richard R. Madden, *The United Irishmen, Their Lives and Times* (1st ed., 7 vols., London: J.Madden, 1842-1846; 2nd ed., 4 vols., Dublin: J.Duffy, 1857-60).

⁹ Whelan, "'98 after '98," 167.

¹⁰ Miles Byrne, *Memoirs* (Paris: 1863; repr. Dublin: Irish University Press, 1972).

¹¹ Patrick F. Kavanagh, *Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798* (1870; repr. Dublin: Guy and Co Ltd., 1898). According to Whelan, this influential book rapidly went through nine subsequent editions in 1874, 1884, 1898, 1913, 1916, 1918, 1920, 1923 and 1928. See Whelan, "'98 after '98" 170.

as well as numerous ballads and historical novels. Despite the fact that dissenting voices can be found in loyalist novels and those stemming from the Ulster tradition, as it will be shown in Chapter Three, it can be argued, in a similar manner as Jim Shanahan does in his as yet unpublished PhD thesis, that Kavanagh's history managed to establish the popular understanding of the rebellion for at least 80 years.¹² A proof of the tenacity of this interpretation might be its occasional occurrence in novels as late as the 1990s, despite the intervening reinterpretations in historiography. It therefore deserves a degree of attention in the present thesis, despite its origin in the nineteenth century.

The overall thrust of Kavanagh's argument, epitomised in his *Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798*, is to shift the stress from the United Irishmen, whose celebratory image, pioneered by Madden, had been long established in the public memory, precisely to the priest leaders of the Wexford rebellion, especially F. John Murphy. Kavanagh's method was rather subtle; while he ostensibly celebrated United Irish icons such as Theobald Wolfe Tone or Lord Edward Fitzgerald, by subtle hints he presented the organization, despite its lofty ideals, as doomed to failure due to its secret nature which made it vulnerable to government spies. As Kevin Whelan and Anna Kinsella correctly point out, this should be understood in its contemporary context as an attack on the Fenians, whose character of an oath-bound society was condemned by the Catholic church.¹³ The noble, but overly conspiring United Irishmen were then implicitly put into contrast with the Wexford peasants, whose peaceful nature and obedience to the Catholic clergy made them "always averse to secret societies of every description."¹⁴

The immediate cause of the rising in Kavanagh's view was the increasing repression of the Dublin government aimed at preventing the planned rising (or alternatively precipitating it in order for it to break out prematurely). This is in agreement with the earlier Catholic histories, such as that of Edward Hay, but Kavanagh presented it more extremely as a downright plot of the English government to goad the people into violence in order to use it as a pretext for the introduction of the Act of Union.¹⁵ This view, although not really substantiated, later became a commonplace in the public imagination

¹² Shanahan 53.

¹³ See Whelan, "'98 after '98" 169 and Kinsella 18-19.

¹⁴ Kavanagh 84.

¹⁵ Kavanagh 11.

and was often recycled in historical novels, such as William Buckley's *Croppies Lie Down*, which will be analysed in the following chapter.

The natural leaders of the Wexford people, once driven to rebellion, were not United Irishmen, as in Byrne's account, but Catholic priests, especially F. John Murphy, who is presented almost in superhuman terms. Consider, for example, this passage from the centenary edition of *Popular History*:

Father John continued to be the idol of the brave men whom he led, and who admired in him the perfection of their own courage – always fighting in the foremost ranks, ever ready to cheer and rally those who wavered in the fight, skilful and cool after the battle to improve the victory, kind to console and warm with his own heroic ardour the humblest of his followers when their spirits, less lofty and less firm than his, drooped under the calamities of unequal war.¹⁶

A notable feature of Kavanagh's account is his implicit view of Irish national identity, which is perceivable if we read 'between the lines' of his account of Wexford. Notwithstanding that he takes great effort to exculpate the insurgents from any deeds of sectarian violence and lays stress, for example, on the fact that they have elected the Protestant Bagenal Harvey as their military leader, he leaves no doubt that his often-used word "the people" designates almost exclusively Irishmen of the Catholic denomination. In contradiction to his initial stress on the ethnic diversity of Wexford, he sometimes reverts to a downright sectarian and racist vocabulary, as, for example, in his passionate execration of the loyalist historians of the insurrection:

Alas, Ireland has been sadly prolific of such vipers as those so-called historians – men who, living on property wrestled by iniquitous laws from *the people*, and fattening on Irish soil, habitually utter the vilest calumnies against the truest and least of her sons.

[...] They were honest men who lived by honest labour, not on the wages of dishonour; they were not descendants of Cromwell's bloodstained hypocrites, robbers, and regicides, with, perchance, a title of honour that but made their native meanness more conspicuous by the contrast, but were the sons of honest men with humble but stainless names.¹⁷

¹⁶ Kavanagh 166.

¹⁷ Kavanagh 96. Emphasis added.

The high selectiveness and unreliability of Kavanagh's history was well documented by Whelan, who pointed out its undue focus on Wexford at the expense of other episodes of the rebellion, and exposed the political reasons which lay behind Kavanagh's effort to dismiss the contribution of the United Irishmen to the rebellion. However, little attention has been devoted to the exploration of the reasons why it was precisely this interpretation that took such a firm hold in the public imagination. One obvious answer lies in the simple fact that the 1870s, when Kavanagh's history was published, coincided with the rise of the previously impoverished Catholic majority in Ireland as a significant political force. Other possible reasons can be found, however, if we closely examine the relationship between collective memory and history. In the previous chapter it was argued, in connection to the critique of Hayden White's model of history, that a historian does not construct his or her interpretations as if on a blank sheet of paper, led only by the documentary evidence, but finds himself in an ongoing communication with collective memory, the continuity of which can be traced back to the historical events themselves.¹⁸

In Kavanagh's case, it can be shown that his interpretation of the rebellion gained strength precisely due to its resonance with a particular strand of collective memory. As much as Kevin Whelan takes great pains to prove that Kavanagh, as an individual, succeeded in completely transforming the public perspective concerning the rebellion, including its subsequent treatment in novels and ballads, evidence can also be found for a view which places him in a continuity. When, for example, Whelan writes that the ballads written around the centenary "completely obliterated the actual songs of the 1790s and the immediate 1798 period,"¹⁹ he does not heed the fact that P.J. McCall's *Boollavogue*, which is presented as a typical example of these new songs, was itself a reworking of an earlier ballad called *John Murphy*, written immediately after 1798.²⁰ Moreover, Kavanagh himself was aware of the close connection between his history and orally transmitted collective memory, and uses it to legitimise his version of events. In the advertisement to the second edition of *Popular History*, reprinted in 1898, he states:

¹⁸ See page 20 of this thesis.

¹⁹ Whelan, "'98 after '98" 171.

²⁰ For the history of the ballad, see Moylan 51. The radical view that Kavanagh's interpretation and the celebrations of the centenary amounted to an 'invention of collective memory' is problematised in Guy Beiner, "Modes of Memory: Remembering and Forgetting the Irish Rebellion of 1798," *Memory Ireland, Vol. 1, History and Modernity*, ed. Oona Frawley (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2011) 71.

But the writer of this volume claims to be something more than a mere compiler. [...] Born in the centre of the district where the contest was most fiercely waged, many of those who took part therein were his own near relatives, and from their lips he learnt much of what he now narrates. He was, from the information thus obtained, enabled to discern whatever was erroneous in works previously written on the same subject.²¹

Needless to say, Kavanagh's use of oral sources was entirely without method and highly selective, ignoring compilations of oral evidence which would contradict his view, as Whelan correctly pointed out.²² Nevertheless, it would be a grave omission to see his work purely as an invention, which suited contemporaneous political needs – especially his implicit view of Irish national identity can be firmly placed into a well documented tradition, traceable to the Gaelic poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which sees the Catholic religion as an essential element of it.²³ It can be argued that Kavanagh's principal fault was that he, instead of criticising and questioning this strand of public memory, as would well befit a historian, blindly accepted it and used it for his own sectarian politics, which essentially replicated the old Musgravian view, only with exchanged binaries.

'Revisionism' and 1798

Partly due to its resonance with the official ideology of the nascent independent Irish state, Kavanagh's picture of the rebellion remained practically unchallenged until the rise of historical 'revisionism' in the 1960s, which attempted to destabilise the nationalist narrative of Irish history. The term 'revisionist' is notoriously hard to define in Irish historiography, as it is still very much a moot point even in relatively recent debates, and it remains doubtful whether this term can be consistently applied to any clearly defined group of historians. However, both the proponents and the critics largely agree on the fact that there was a distinctive trend in Irish historiography, datable to the 1930s, but most

²¹ Kavanagh vii.

²² Whelan, "'98 after '98" 171.

²³ The evolution of different concepts of Irish national identity was brilliantly traced in Joep Leersen, *Mere Irish and Fior-Ghael: Studies in the Idea of Irish Nationality, Its Development and Literary Expression Prior to the Nineteenth Century* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1997).

prominent in the years 1960-1990,²⁴ which shared certain characteristics both in its theoretical presuppositions and arguably also its political motivations.

On the theoretical level, it was informed by the positivist theory of history, famously formulated by K. R. Popper, which, as it was already outlined in the theoretical chapter, combined a belief in objectivity in history with a deep mistrust of larger historical narratives, including nationalist ones. This theory, at least, seems to lie behind the frequent evocation of the ‘true’ historiography/‘false’ mythology dichotomy in many texts associated with revisionism. Such an attitude is, for example, easily traceable in the following quotes from the lecture by the historian F. S. L. Lyons as reprinted in the *Field Day Anthology*:

There is, of course, another sense in which we may legitimately pray for deliverance – from the false history that has for too long masqueraded as the real thing. It has become fashionable recently to speak much of the contrast between myth and history and there have been even some gestures towards demythologising certain aspects of our past.²⁵

Or:

Revisionism is proper revisionism if it is a response to new evidence which, after being duly tested, brings us nearer to a truth independent of the wishes and aspirations of those for whom truth consists solely of what happens to coincide with those wishes and aspirations.²⁶

On the practical and political level, there were also more immediate reasons for the deconstruction of nationalism, which included a reaction to the provincialism of post-independence Ireland, its triumphalism and the dated anti-British stance, and after the beginning of the ‘Troubles,’ also an effort to maintain a distance from the ideological

²⁴ For an overview of the “revisionist” debate, see for example D. George Boyce, Alan O’Day, eds, *The Making of Modern Irish History: Revisionism and the Revisionist Controversy* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), or Seamus Deane, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol. III (Derry: W.W. Norton & Co Inc, 1991) 561-611. The most influential critiques of “revisionism” include Brendan Bradshaw, “Nationalism and Historical Scholarship in Modern Ireland,” *Irish Historical Studies* 26.104 (Nov. 1989): 329-351 and Seamus Deane, “Wherever Green is Read,” *Interpreting Irish History: The Debate on Historical Revisionism*, ed. Ciaran Brady (Dublin: Irish Academic Press 1994) 234-5. A balanced and at the same time highly personal account can be found in Tom Dunne, *Rebellions* 78-101.

²⁵ F. S. L. Lyons, “The Burden of Our History,” *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing*, Vol III 580.

²⁶ Lyons 581.

basis of the IRA campaign in the North. Both theory and politics thus contributed to a historical approach characterised by a marked irreverence to established nationalist pieties, such as the persecution of Catholics during the Penal Laws, the British blame for the Famine, or the heroism of the 1916 insurgents.

The most important historiographical reflection of 1798, associated with ‘revisionism’ is undoubtedly the monumental *The Year of Liberty* (1969) by Thomas Pakenham,²⁷ which has not yet been superseded as a source of factual information about the rebellion, especially from government sources. Also Marianne Elliott’s magisterial biography *Wolfe Tone, Prophet of Irish Independence* (1989) has been labelled as ‘revisionist’ as it draws attention to the incongruities between Wolfe Tone’s original thoughts and his subsequent cult.²⁸ Other ‘revisionist’ treatments of 1798 have rather the character of summaries – most prominently, they include R.B. McDowell’s chapter in *A New History of Ireland* (1986) and Roy Foster’s discussion of the rebellion in his influential *Modern Ireland* (1989).²⁹

The crucial feature of the ‘revisionist’ view vis à vis 1798 was the emphasis on the contradiction between the lofty idealism of the United Irishmen and the bloody sectarian conflict, characteristic of much of the actual fighting, especially in County Wexford. In this, it openly contradicted the earlier radical nationalist interpretation initiated by Madden and adopted by various physical force nationalist movements, including the IRA, which have celebrated the United Irishmen as prophets and martyrs. At the same time, by its emphasis on sectarianism it removed much of the heroic light from the Catholic interpretation associated with Kavanagh. In short, what had been previously seen as a heroic struggle for national independence, became, in the provocative words of the historian Roy Foster, one of the figures most commonly associated with revisionism: “a brave, tragic but essentially reactive and atavistic jacquerie.”³⁰

²⁷ Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty: The Story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969).

²⁸ Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone, Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989).

²⁹ Robert B. McDowell, “The Age of the United Irishmen: Revolution and the Union 1794-1800,” *A New History of Ireland IV*, ed. Moody and Vaughan (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986) 339-373. R.F. Foster, “‘Enthusiasm Defying Punishment’: Revolution, Republicanism and Reaction,” *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1989) 259-286.

³⁰ R.F. Foster, “Remembering 1798” 218. This statement appeared as an (admittedly reductive) summary of the above-mentioned monograph by Pakenham and the earlier treatment of the Wexford episode of the

Critics of the ‘revisionist’ interpretation have pointed out that it came dangerously close to moving the whole circle and returning to the old loyalist interpretation associated with Sir Richard Musgrave. However, this condemning view cannot be entirely substantiated if only for the fact that the ‘revisionist’ treatments of 1798, especially Pakenham’s *The Year of Liberty*, paid significant attention to the role of government atrocities in provoking the rebellion and – in direct contradiction to Musgrave – did not in any way attempt to exculpate the Dublin administration. Despite the fact that the works in question have been criticised for downplaying the inspirational value of the United Irishmen, the ‘revisionist’ emphasis on the sectarian outrages committed by both sides of the conflict has proved an important *caveat* for any future interpretations.

The Post-Revisionist Interpretation and its Critics

It is probably because of its iconoclastic thrust and lack of a clear unifying narrative that the ‘revisionist’ view of 1798 never managed to capture public imagination in a way which would be remotely comparable to Madden or Kavanagh. In the fictional sphere, it served as an inspiration for only one novel, albeit an important one – Thomas Flanagan’s *The Year of the French*, which will be analysed in Chapter Six. In the 1990s, it was moreover challenged by a new generation of historians with Kevin Whelan as their prominent speaker, who suggested a large-scale reinterpretation of the event.

Their contribution should be seen in the political context of this decade which saw the first successes of the peace process in Northern Ireland as well as an unprecedented economic growth which signalled the advent of the Celtic Tiger era. The main strategy of these historians was, to paraphrase a very insightful statement of Jim Shanahan, to shift the emphasis from what actually happened to what *might* have happened.³¹ Accordingly, the ‘post-revisionists,’ as they called themselves, concentrated on the spread of the United Irish ideology and the massive politicisation of broad segments of the population in the decade immediately preceding the rising. The emphasis on the United Irishmen was a logical step – after all, the inclusive message of an organisation with a membership of more than 250,000 in 1798 was perhaps not to be so easily dismissed in the manner of

rebellion by Charles Dickson. See Charles Dickson, *The Wexford Rising in 1798: Its Causes and its Course* (1955; repr. London: Constable, 1997).

³¹ Shanahan 41.

the ‘revisionists’ and some of their nineteenth-century predecessors.³² In this way, the new interpretation diverged from the revisionist one already on the basic level of the selection of facts.

In contrast to earlier accounts, the rebellion was presented as essentially well organised and the appearance of chaos noted by many contemporaries was explained by the fact that the central part of the United Irish plan, the seizure of Dublin, failed due to the arrest of the most prominent leaders by the government.³³ Based on pioneering local studies, which revealed a far larger involvement of United Irishmen in County Wexford than it had been previously estimated,³⁴ the Wexford episode of the rising ceased to be regarded as spontaneous and disconnected from the political developments in the rest of the country. Rather, emphasis was laid on the essential unity of the insurrection, in Whelan’s words, “what happened in Wexford was of a piece with what happened in Antrim and Down.”³⁵ This enabled the post-revisionist historians to lay due stress on the “modernity of the United Irish project, its forward-looking, democratic dimension,”³⁶ as well as its links to revolutionary movements in America and France – features which were to a great degree a legacy of the Protestant radicals from the Northern counties. In this way, the inspiration of the rebellion for contemporary politics was brought to the fore.

The all-pervasive stress on the political aspects of the rebellion was accompanied by an equally massive effort to disprove all earlier interpretations which foregrounded the role of sectarianism in the conflict. This was achieved principally by Kevin Whelan, who, in his insightful analysis of the nineteenth-century accounts of the event, showed that their authors had various political reasons for stressing the sectarian aspect and that their works should therefore not be regarded as trustworthy.³⁷ For the same reason, later revisionist accounts, such as Pakenham’s *Year of Liberty*, which tended to rely on these

³² For the information on United Irish membership, see Pakenham 52.

³³ Kevin Whelan, “Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion in County Wexford,” *The Mighty Wave*, ed. Keogh and Furlong (Dublin: Four Courts Press 1996) 23.

³⁴ The most influential local study in this respect was Louis Cullen, “The 1798 Rebellion in Wexford: United Irish Organisation, Membership, Leadership,” *Wexford: History and Society*, ed. K. Whelan and W. Nolan (Dublin: Geography Publications, 1987) 248-95.

³⁵ Whelan, “Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion” 34.

³⁶ Whelan, “Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion” 34.

³⁷ Especially Whelan, “‘98 after ‘98.”

accounts, were also largely dismissed. What sectarianism there remained in the rebellion was firmly laid at the door of the Dublin government – it was regarded as a deliberate insertion on the part of those in power in order to break up the fragile alliance between the Catholics and Protestant radicals inside the United Irish movement.

In this way, the post-revisionist historians integrated the 1798 rebellion back into a larger historical narrative, which, while remaining broadly nationalist in essence, differed from earlier nationalist versions in its emphasis on the inclusiveness of Irish national identity, searching for a common historical ground for all the religious and ethnic groups inhabiting the island. This had obvious political connections to the ongoing peace process in Northern Ireland, as well as the climax of Ireland perceiving itself as a modern open-minded EU country, while the specific occasion was provided by the approaching bicentenary celebrations in 1998, which were very much informed by this particular interpretation.

Nevertheless, the political edge of the post-revisionist version was achieved inevitably at the cost of a dismissal or glossing over significant portions of the documentary material. This may seem legitimate (and inevitable) in the framework of Hayden White's findings – interestingly enough, Kevin Whelan seemed to be aware of White's theory when he criticised the poor theoretical grounding of his predecessors³⁸ – but it may seem problematic from the ethical point of view. The main omission, according to Whelan's critics, was the avoidance of the question of responsibility of radical republicans for the massive bloodshed which accompanied the rebellion. The deliberate effort to avoid the theme of war and atrocities is well illustrated by the following passage from an already quoted article by Kevin Whelan. After summarising his interpretation and outlining the ideological content of the upcoming celebrations, namely the discarding of the sectarian interpretation and the stress on the modernity and essential unity of the rebellion, he states the following:

³⁸ In Kevin Whelan, "The Revisionist Debate in Ireland," *boundary 2* 31.1(Spring 2004): 179, Whelan speaks about "the challenge of structuralism to their [revisionist] ontology," referring to White as a prominent example.

And if we are to fully re-engage with this invigorating version of the United Irishman, we must also relinquish our obsession with the military aspects of 1798, with pikes and deaths, murder, mayhem and martyrdom. [...] the gory details of the campaign can only distract us from the enduring legacy of '98 – the political vision and moral choices which impelled men and women into the field in 1798. It is that political vision we need to reclaim and remember, not the physical defeat of the revolution on the bloody battlefields of '98.³⁹

This intentional downplaying of the more sinister aspects of the rising has, quite naturally, attracted criticism on ethical grounds. The authors of the post-revisionist interpretation have been accused of creating a sanitised version of the insurrection for the purposes of the bicentenary celebrations together with such mundane objectives as the promotion of tourism. Even more importantly, they were blamed for essentially reviving an older nationalist view of the rebellion which had laid the blame for all the bloodshed on one side only.⁴⁰

One of the critics of the post-revisionist interpretation was Ian McBride, whose articles illustrate the difficulty of subsuming the Presbyterian tradition into the unifying narrative proposed by Whelan and his colleagues. In his work, McBride emphasised the separate identity of this group both at the time of the rebellion and in its subsequent interpretation, arguing that “Presbyterians have their own proprietorial interest in the Republican past, and their own, alternative modes of reclaiming '98.”⁴¹ This argument is highly relevant for the literary part of this thesis as, indeed, distinctive traits of such interpretation can be found in literary reflections of 1798 written by or focusing on Northern Irish Presbyterians.

Perhaps the most interesting of these critical perspectives was chosen by the historian Tom Dunne. The motivation for his merciless attack on the post-revisionist interpretation, which he repeatedly describes as ultra-nationalist, is not historical positivism connected

³⁹ Whelan, “Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion” 34.

⁴⁰ For these dissenting voices, see e.g. R.F. Foster, “Remembering 1798,” Ian McBride, “Reclaiming the Rebellion: 1798 in 1998,” *Irish Historical Studies* 31.123 (May 1999): 395-410 or the works by Tom Dunne to be quoted later. While these attacks come from various perspectives, they share the basic ethical objections.

⁴¹ Ian McBride, “Reclaiming the Rebellion,” 400. Other relevant articles by McBride include Ian McBride, “‘When Ulster joined Ireland’: Anti-Popery, Presbyterian Radicalism and Irish Republicanism in the 1790s,” *Past & Present* 157 (Nov. 1997): 63-93 and Ian McBride, “Memory and Forgetting: Ulster Presbyterians and 1798,” *The 1798 rebellion: a bicentennial perspective*, ed. Thomas Bartlett, Daire Keogh and Kevin Whelan (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1999) 478-496.

with the Popperian distrust of large historical narratives, as in the case of the ‘revisionists,’ but rather the ethical commitment of keeping the ‘memory of the dead’ and possibly healing the traumas of the past, which brings his approach close to the philosophy of history outlined by Paul Ricoeur.

Dunne’s commitment has moreover a strong personal element – as a Catholic native of New Ross, County Wexford, the scene of one of the bloodiest battles of the insurrection, he grew up surrounded by the folklore of 1798 and became aware of the strong sense of trauma still surrounding the events. In connection to the ‘politically correct’ interpretation of the rebellion chosen for the purposes of the bicentenary commemoration he argues: “The temptation has always been there – and has usually been given into – to make a horrific past palatable, and this has not only robbed people of their history, but has made it more difficult for us as a community to face the still lethal legacies of that time in our own day.”⁴²

Accordingly, his research concentrated, in a marked contrast to the post-revisionists, on the most traumatic and controversial events of the Wexford rebellion, the battle of New Ross and especially the massacre at Scullabogue, the most terrible rebel atrocity of the whole rising, in which more than a hundred Protestant civilians were burnt alive. Moreover, he switched his attention from the ideologues and leaders of the rebellion to the common participants, especially the Wexford peasants. Drawing from a range of sources, including literature and folklore, Dunne argues that the rank and file of the Wexford insurgent army, consisting largely of Irish speakers, saw the struggle in the light of former anti-colonial conflicts, articulated in essentially sectarian terms, and that the United Irish ideas, rapidly spreading in the 1790s, constituted merely a thin layer imposed on these older patterns which was not given enough time to take deeper roots.

It is also of interest that Dunne, in a marked contrast to the ‘revisionist’ historians mentioned above, operates inside a post-colonial theoretical framework, especially the project of subaltern studies. Dunne’s aim is therefore not to create a positivist picture of the history of 1798 “as it actually happened,” but rather “to let the subaltern speak, that is to recover the hidden history of the rural poor from the dominant historical narratives –

⁴² Tom Dunne, “Wexford’s Comóradh ’98: Politics, Heritage and History,” *History Ireland*, 6.2 (Summer 1998): 51.

and ideologies – of the elites,”⁴³ among which he includes not only imperialism, but also nationalism, into which the peasant perspective was subsumed.⁴⁴

Dunne’s approach found its most comprehensive expression in his 2004 monograph *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory and 1798*, which is an exceptional work not only for its historiographical value, but even more so for its unique layout, which brings together the personal and the public, the past and the present, and history and literature with the surprising result of a greater, not lesser coherence. As the title partially indicates, *Rebellions* is a combination of personal memoirs, a history and a meta-history. The first part of the book traces Dunne’s childhood in New Ross and his family tradition, his disappointing experience as a short-term member of Christian Brothers, and his subsequent intellectual and academic development. The memoirs are followed by a brilliant analysis of the historiography of 1798 with a clear polemical focus against the bicentenary interpretation, culminating in a minute history of the events of 5 June 1798, which Dunne sees as crucial and defining for the rebellion as a whole due to the coincidence of the decisive battle of New Ross and the above mentioned Scullabogue massacre.

In formal terms, Dunne’s monograph represents an interesting parallel to some of the fictional works to be treated in the following chapters, which also rejected traditional form for the sake of an experimental one in order to connect the historical, the metahistorical and the personal, as well as to establish links between the present, the past, and the future. In any case, the result of this combination is that Dunne, as a historian, plays with remarkably open cards – he does not hide the polemical drive of his work behind any pretence of detached objectivity as the earlier revisionists have been accused of, and chooses to show both the political and personal reasons for the particular direction of his research.

In spite of Dunne’s powerful critique, however, we cannot regard Kevin Whelan’s effort to construct an interpretation of history which would serve a benign political purpose as fundamentally illegitimate. As it has been demonstrated in the previous

⁴³ Dunne, “Wexford’s Comóradh” 53.

⁴⁴ This can be regarded as an exceptional position in Irish historiography and literary criticism, where post-colonial theory tends to be used almost exclusively by nationalist scholars.

chapter, the most problematic feature of Ricoeur's ethics of history (which seems to be largely shared by Tom Dunne) is its conservatism, most forcefully expressed in his statement that a historian has an unpaid debt towards the people of the past. This dissymmetric, hierarchical relationship would ultimately prevent, if taken in its most radical sense, any transformation of the interpretation of the past in order to implement a change in the present, which would ultimately contribute to an essentially static social system. In terms of the discussion of the 1798 rebellion, it might be correct to construct historical narratives which would underpin an inclusive national identity in the present, such as in the peace process in Northern Ireland, but as both Ricoeur and Tom Dunne have reminded us, it is ethically unacceptable, and potentially dangerous, if such interpretations gloss over the suffering of victims of past events. Drawing on the themes discussed in Chapter One it might be argued that despite Ernest Renan's famous statement that forgetting and historical error are instrumental in the construction of collective identities,⁴⁵ the example of the 1798 rebellion in Ireland shows that reconciliation, in full knowledge of the traumas of the past, may prove a more lasting model.

Such a 'reconciliatory' interpretation in the case of 1798, however, would require a balanced perspective, which would take into account both the inspirational value of the United Irishmen and the horror at the bloody nature of the ensuing violence. A balanced view of this kind is notably lacking in most of the historiographical reflections discussed here, as they are very often polemical in nature. The following chapters will pay due attention to the manner in which the basic tensions inherent in the historical event of the rebellion have been solved in literary reflections of 1798, trying to draw comparisons between historiography and literature.

⁴⁵ "Forgetting, I would even go so far as to say historical error, is a crucial factor in the creation of a nation." Ernst Renan, "What is a nation?" trans. Martin Thom, *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 2003) 11.

CHAPTER THREE

A Long Tradition of 1798 Novels and Plays: Literary Reflections of the Rebellion, 1900-1916

As it was mentioned in the introduction, the main focus of this thesis is on novels and plays about 1798 written after the year 1916, partly because the previous period has been already treated by other critics and partly because of the higher prominence of innovative approaches, relevant to the method of this thesis, in the later works, especially from the second half of the twentieth century.

Despite this qualitative difference, however, there is also evidence which places these innovative novels and plays in a continuity, a tradition of fictional writing about 1798, which can be traced, according to the information given by Jim Shanahan, as far back as 1799, only a year after the rebellion, when the first novel about the event was published.¹ This continuity can be established along two lines. The first of them is political – despite Shanahan’s argument that later twentieth century fiction about 1798 is, in comparison to the majority of such novels written in the nineteenth century, less concerned with the immediate political message and more oriented into the past than into the future, this is, in fact, true only about a part of the material in question.²

The continuing political relevance of the 1798 rebellion until these days can be easily seen from the historiographical debates described in Chapter Two and it is hardly surprising that this aspect was reflected in twentieth-century fiction and drama as well. The most important historical reason for this relevance is, of course, the conflict in Northern Ireland, perceived as unresolved throughout most of the twentieth century. The connection of 1798 to this conflict is undeniable – the United Irish movement, which gave rise to the rebellion, originated in Belfast, and the events of 1798, in various conflicting interpretations, have served as inspiration for both sides of the political and

¹ The novel in question is [‘A Lady’], *The Rebel: A Tale of the Times* (1799; repr. Dublin: P. Wogan, W. Porter, J. Rice, J. Halpen, H. Colbert, B. Dornin, G. Folingsby, and J Stockdale, 1801). See Shanahan 88.

² This argument is made by Shanahan in the discussion of Frank Mathew’s proto-modernist novel *The Wood of the Brambles* (London: John Lane, 1896), which he sees as prefiguring the direction that many twentieth-century novels about 1798 would take. (See Jim Shanahan, *An ‘Unburied Corpse’: The 1798 Rebellion in Fiction 1799-1898*, Diss. TCD 2006, 267-276.) A similar comment is also expressed in the brief analysis of Flanagan’s *The Year of the French* at the end of his thesis (Shanahan 304).

religious divide. For this reason, an obvious continuity can be traced between fictional works treating the Northern aspect of the rebellion across the time boundary of 1916, especially concerning the role of the Presbyterians in the event and to a certain degree also the social and class aspect of 1798, rather neglected in fictional works treating other geographical areas of the rebellion.

Related to the political theme, but at the same time distinctively literary, is the motif of the allegorical female figure representing Ireland, quite suitable for fictional works dealing with a period which was crucial for the formation of Irish national identity. In the context of 1798-related literature, this trope can be traced already from the poems of Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin (1766-1837), a United Irishman and a Gaelic poet, and ballads in English such as *The Shan Van Vocht*, contemporary with the rebellion.³ Subsequently, it was used in nineteenth-century novels such as *My Lords of Strogue* (1879), discussed by Shanahan,⁴ prominently appeared in W.B. Yeats's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) and was ultimately given highly modern, and largely critical, treatments in Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* and Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*.

The second line of continuity can be described as formal and is characterised by the variegated use of literary genres and conventions. The question of genre is highly relevant to the approach of this thesis as it, in a similar way as in the work of Hayden White, addresses the issue of narrative forms that are available for the presentation of history. According to Jim Shanahan, the generic forms used in 1798 novels in the nineteenth century included the conservative narrative of the anti-Jacobin novel, deployed to criticise the insurgents for their seemingly arbitrary rebellion against divine order, the conciliatory plot of the 'national tale,' the tragic, or satirical story of the Big House novel, the Gothic tale and most importantly, the historical novel, as it was first instantiated in the 1820s by Sir Walter Scott. However, these forms could only partially accommodate the historical experience and always contributed to certain distortions. This was shown, for example, by James Cahalan concerning the last of the genres mentioned – the underlying

³ For information about the ballad, see Moylan 22.

⁴ See Lewis Wingfield, *My Lords of Strogue. A Chronicle of Ireland, from the Convention to the Union*, 3 vols. (London: Richard Bentley, 1879) and Shanahan 255-256.

belief in historical progress and the happy endings of Scott's novels do not easily accommodate to the tumultuous and often traumatic character of Irish history.⁵

The continuity lies in the fact that many of these genres, or at least some of their features, continued to be used also at the beginning of the twentieth century and after 1916, but often (especially in the later period) with a greater degree of inventiveness as opposed to blind imitation. The most accomplished of these texts, such as Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque* and Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French* possibly succeeded in overcoming the above-mentioned limits, which was arguably achieved by a higher degree of self-reflexivity as regards their own medium.

The continuity between fictional treatments of 1798 written before and after the chosen boundary of 1916 shall be explored on a limited sample of texts written in the first sixteen years of the twentieth century. As it was shown by Eileen Reilly, who, in her thesis and article, explored historical and political novels from 1880 to 1914, this was a period of heightened political and cultural debate, centred around the question of Irish national identity and the potential future political independence of Ireland.⁶ The numerous novels and plays about 1798 naturally reflected this debate, often having "less to do with the rebellion itself than with contemporary preoccupations and anxieties."⁷ Because of this political immediacy, these novels have, although written in the twentieth century, more in common with their nineteenth-century predecessors than with their twentieth-century successors, which have generally higher literary ambitions and their politics is often less explicit. For its liminal status, the period of the early twentieth century is therefore very convenient for exploring the lines of continuity described above.⁸

⁵ James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983) 1-15 and *passim*.

⁶ Eileen Reilly, "Who Fears to Speak of '98? The Rebellion in Historical Novels, 1880-1914," *Eighteenth-Century Life* 22.3 (November 1998): 118.

⁷ Reilly, "Who Fears to Speak" 125.

⁸ According to Reilly and my own research, the following 11 novels were published in the years 1900-1916 on the topic of 1798 (or in some cases, the related rising of Robert Emmet in 1803): George Gilbert, pseud. of Mary Lucy Arthur, *The Island of Sorrow* (London: John Long, 1903); Louie Bennet, *A Prisoner of His Word* (Dublin: Maunsell, 1903); Mathias McDonnell Bodkin, *True Man and Traitor* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1910); William Buckley, *Croppies Lie Down. A Tale of Ireland in '98* (London: Duckworth, 1903); George A. Birmingham, pseud. of James Owen Hannay, *The Northern Iron* (London: Methuen, 1907); Emily

In her analysis, Reilly divided the corpus of 1798 novels in question into two groups, roughly designated as nationalist and loyalist, and explored various shades of political opinion expressed in them, arguably far more variegated than those contained in historiographical interpretations existing at that time. This chapter, in accordance with its principal aim, which is to illustrate the continuity between literary reflections of 1798 before and after 1916, shall follow a far more selective method. A related reason for this selectiveness is to devote enough attention to texts that are interesting from the literary point of view, a perspective which is lacking in Reilly's article due to its political focus. As a result, much of the material in question had to be omitted for reasons of space, especially 1798 novels with a straightforward political message and rather imitative formal features, which were rather abundant in the first sixteen years of the twentieth century.⁹

All in all, four texts (two novels, one collection of interconnected tales and one play) from the period 1900-1916 have been chosen for analysis. Two of the texts in question, George A. Birmingham's novel *The Northern Iron* (1907) and Andrew James's "set of tales" *The Nabob* (1911) were written by authors from Northern Ireland and focus on the Northern Irish dimension of the rebellion, and thus illustrate the first line of continuity mentioned above. *The Northern Iron*, expressing an interesting version of non-militant and inclusive Presbyterian nationalism, is of interest principally for its politics, which finds many parallels in later Northern Irish treatments of 1798. *The Nabob* has a contrasting political outlook, since it is, despite considerable sympathies for the rebels, loyalist in tone, an opinion which is generally not to be found in literary reflections of 1798 written after 1916. Nevertheless, many common features can be found between James's description of the mentality of Northern Irish Presbyterians and later treatments of the same in, for instance, Stewart Parker's play *Northern Star*, one of the principal

Lawless & F. Bullock, *The Races of Castlebar* (London: Murray, 1914); William Randal McDonnell, *Ardnaree* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1911); Francis Sheehy Skeffington, *In Dark and Evil Days* (Dublin: James Duffy, 1916); Andrew James, pseud of James Andrew Strahan, *The Nabob. A Tale of Ninety-Eight* (1911, repr. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006); Katherine Tynan, *A King's Woman* (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1902); R. H Wright, *A Plain Man's Tale* (Belfast: McCaw, Stevenson & Orr, 1904).

⁹ An interesting illustration of this fact is that even the well-known pacifist Francis Sheehy-Skeffington, who had many original ideas about the politics of his days, could be disappointingly unimaginative when writing about 1798. All in all, his novel *In Dark and Evil Days* (1916) is a conventional story about the Wexford rebellion, emphasising the motif of revenge and paradoxically, given the opinions of the author, praising physical force nationalism.

works to be analysed in this thesis. Moreover, *The Nabob* is also fascinating in its reference to various literary genres and conventions, and thus forms an important link to the second, formal line of continuity.

The third of the texts, William Buckley's *Croppies Lie Down*, which focuses on the Wexford episode of the rebellion, was chosen partly because of its high esteem among the critics (despite the fact that its literary quality is rather uneven), and partly because of its transitional status on the border between a straightforward nationalistic statement, more than common among the novels of the period, and a much more balanced approach found in later works. An important link can be made between this early novel and later works about 1798 also due to its interesting and ambivalent treatment of the 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan' trope, personified in its principal heroine.

Precisely due to the prominent discussion of this trope in two of the most outstanding later literary reflections of 1798, Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* and Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*, a degree of attention should be devoted also to the most famous literary expression of this trope, Yeats's one-act play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902),¹⁰ which falls into the period in question and is set against the background of 1798.

A Plea for Inclusive National Identity: George A. Birmingham's *The Northern Iron*

The first of the texts to be briefly analysed is George A. Birmingham's *The Northern Iron* (1907), a light-hearted novel with serious overtones, which, as it has been mentioned, have interesting echoes in works to be treated later in this thesis. George A. Birmingham was the pseudonym of the Belfast born Church of Ireland clergyman Rev. James Owen Hannay (1865-1950), who was an extremely prolific writer, having published nearly sixty novels and plays during his life. As it has been the case with many Irish Protestants, especially of Northern Irish origins, he had an ambivalent relationship to Irish nationalism, which has often had a tendency towards the exclusion of non-Catholics. A lifelong advocate of an inclusive Irish national identity and initially also a Gaelic League activist, he gradually alienated much of the nationalist public, especially

¹⁰ William Butler Yeats, "Cathleen Ni Houlihan," *Collected Works II, The Plays*, ed. David R. Clark and Rosalind Clark (Houndmills and New York: Palgrave, 2001) 83-93.

after the controversies which accompanied his novel *The Seething Pot* (1905) and his play *General John Regan* (1913). Eventually he moved to England where he spent the rest of his life.¹¹

The Northern Iron is a novel full of adventure and romance, presumably aimed at a young audience, but it nevertheless mirrors its author's interesting politics and contains many motifs which are to be found in more serious literary treatments of 1798 written by Northern Irish Protestants, such as the novel *Man Flourishing* (1973) by Sam Hanna Bell or Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*. The book focuses on the Ulster dimension of the rebellion and most of its action takes place among Northern Irish Presbyterians, the main character being Neal Ward, the son of a Presbyterian minister. As a challenge to the most popular historiographical interpretation of the time, the 'faith and fatherland' version of Patrick F. Kavanagh, *The Northern Iron* takes pains to assert the centrality of the Presbyterians in the story of the rebellion and the importance of the ideas which led them into the field. In its insistence on the ideology of the United Irishmen, *The Northern Iron* strikingly resembles the post-revisionist interpretation of 1798, established in the 1990s. Presbyterian theology, French Enlightenment thought and American Revolution are all referred to, and a passionate plea for the unity of Irishmen of all religious persuasions is made at various places of the novel, for example in the description of the United Irish army before the battle of Antrim, which contains an invocation of the valour of both the Catholic descendants of Eoghan Rua Ó Néill and the Protestant defenders of Derry in 1689, now ready to fight for a common cause.¹² An even more direct expression of this idea can be found in the symbolic device of a signed Greek lexicon donated to the main hero's father, the minister Micah Ward, by his fellow captives in a Scottish prison after the rebellion:

There followed a list of twenty names. Four of them belonged to men of the Roman Catholic faith, six of them were the names of Presbyterians, ten were of those who accepted the teaching of that other Church which, trammelled for centuries by connection with the State, hampered with riches secured to

¹¹ For biographical details, see Robert Welch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 47-48 and Patrick Maume, "Hannay, James Owen ('George A. Birmingham')," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Vol 4, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 444-447.

¹² Birmingham 206.

her by the bayonets of a foreign power, dragged down very often by officials placed over her by Englishmen, has yet in spite of all won glory. [...]

Thus far off in a desolate Scottish fortress, after the total failure of every plan, in the hour of Ireland's most hopeless degradation, the great dream which had fired the imagination of Tone and Neilson and the others, the dream of all Irishmen uniting in a common love of their country, a love which should transcend the differences of rival creeds, found a realisation.¹³

In spite of this admittedly overblown rhetoric, the novel cannot be regarded as a straightforwardly nationalistic text which praises the rebellion without reservations. Birmingham's broad concept of Irish identity seems to include moderate loyalists as well as rebels, as it is illustrated by the character of Lord Dunseveric, one of the novel's principal positive characters. Despite fighting on the opposite side, he acts as one of the several father figures for Neal in the course of the story, helps him to escape from persecution and eventually becomes his father-in-law. Moreover, the novel criticises the more violent elements in the United Irish movement, personified by Neal's uncle Donald Ward, who is presented as a brave man, but rather reckless and without pity. The fact that he is a returned emigrant from America can be read as a critique of the radicalism of the American component of the nationalist movement, dating back to the Fenians.

An important link to later literary treatments of the rebellion is also the historical character of James Hope, who, along with Lord Dunseveric, plays a crucial role in the education of Neal (and the intended reader along with him). Of definite interest is his invocation of the class base of the struggle, which subsequently found much resonance in the works of Northern Irish writers of the socialist persuasion, in the context of this thesis especially Stewart Parker and Sam Hanna Bell. In reminiscence of the patriotism of the 1780s Volunteer movement the character of Hope states:

In those days we had all Ireland united – the landlords, the merchants, and the farming people. Now it is not so. Our landlords won then what they wanted – freedom and power. They have ruled Ireland since 1782. The merchants and manufacturers also won what they chiefly wanted – the opportunity of fair and free trade. They have grown rich, and are every year growing richer. They bid fair to make Ireland a great commercial nation – what she ought to be, the link between the Old World and the

¹³ Birmingham 318. Also quoted in Reilly, "Who Fears to Speak" 123.

New. But both the landlords and the traders have been selfish. Having gained the object of their desires, they are unwilling to share either power or riches with the people.¹⁴

For these reasons it can be maintained that *The Northern Iron*, despite its shortcomings in purely literary terms and its refusal to come to grips with more sinister aspects of the rebellion (sectarianism on the part of the rebels, for example, is hardly addressed at all) already contains some elements of the ideological perspective of later works by Northern Irish authors which treated 1798 or the conflict in Northern Ireland in general.¹⁵ The novel thus forms an interesting link between the relatively numerous nineteenth-century novels focusing on the 'Presbyterian' aspect of 1798, and these later texts.¹⁶

Northern Irish Gothic: Andrew James's *The Nabob*

An interesting feature of early twentieth-century literary treatments of the rebellion is the relative prominence of novels which are Unionist in tone, a marked contrast to novels and plays written after 1916, which, despite sometimes being critical of nationalism, never speak explicitly in favour of the union with Great Britain, even in the case of Northern Ireland. Eileen Reilly mentions six Unionist novels in her article (four of them written before 1900), commenting especially on Mary Lucy Arthur's novel *The Island of Sorrow* (1903) and its outspoken lament over the absence of a coherent historical narrative from the loyalist point of view, which would refute the much more prominent nationalist version.¹⁷ A frequent strategy of other Unionist novels, noted already by

¹⁴ Birmingham 115.

¹⁵ The class analysis of the conflict has been identified as a consistent thread in contemporary Northern Irish drama in Eva Urban, *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011).

¹⁶ According to Shanahan, the 'Presbyterian' strand started to appear in 1798 novels as early as the 1820s with such publications as John Gamble, *Charlton: Or, Scenes in the North of Ireland; A Tale*, 3 vols. (London: Baldwin, Cradock, and Joy, 1823) and James McHenry, *O'Halloran; Or, The Insurgent Chief. An Irish Historical Tale of 1798. By Solomon Secondsight* (Chiswick: C.S. Arnold and Simpkin and Marshall, 1824). The interest was revived in the 1870s with the publication of Mrs Charles Montague Clarke, *Strong as Death: A Story of the Irish Rebellion* (1875; repr. Aberdeen: Moran, 1898). This novel was followed in 1887 by Mary Damant, *Peggy Thornhill: A Tale of the Irish Rebellion* (London: W.H. Allen, 1887) and in the next year by the immensely popular W.G Lyttle, *Betsy Gray; Or, Hearts of Down: A Tale of Ninety-Eight* (1888; repr. Newcastle, Northern Ireland: Mourne Observer, 1968). Shanahan's information testifies to the deep roots of this particular focus of interpretation, which was rather underrepresented in historiography of the nineteenth century.

¹⁷ Reilly, "Who Fears to Speak" 123.

Shanahan in the nineteenth century, however, was to localise and personalise the rebellion, to keep the larger historical picture in the background and to portray the events from the local Protestants' perspective. As Shanahan observed, this enabled the authors to avoid a direct clash with the nationalist version especially as regards the question of the infamous role of the government in the conflict, which has been generally agreed upon at least since the last third of the nineteenth century.¹⁸ Such seems to be, for example, the strategy of Emily Lawless and Shan Bullock's *Race of Castlebar* (1914), which, although ostensibly presenting the events through the eyes of an 'outside' narrator, an English traveller to Ireland, actually relies heavily on the eyewitness account of Bishop Stock and largely concentrates on the sufferings of the Protestant community in County Mayo during the French invasion.

A different approach, and far more convincing in literary terms, was chosen by Andrew James (the pseudonym of James Andrew Strahan, a Belfast law professor) in his book *The Nabob: A Tale of Ninety-Eight* (1911), so far the only of the early twentieth-century literary treatments of 1798 to be republished in recent times.¹⁹ Rather than a novel, *The Nabob* is a series of interconnected tales centred around the Presbyterian community in County Antrim (serialised in a magazine before their first publication in book form), which owe as much to oral traditions of storytelling as to the literary influences to be discussed below.

The stories of *The Nabob* are divided into two parts. The first one, entitled "1798," is told in Ulster Scots about a hundred years after the rebellion by "the old schoolmaster," who had learned about the events from his father, a member of the local yeomanry, and it concentrates on the violent events before and after the rebellion when government violence, personified by the yeomanry colonel Starkie, called "The Nabob," elicited a spiral of revenge and further retribution. In contrast to other Unionist novels, therefore, the theme of government violence lies at the centre of the story. The title of the other part, "Sixty Years After," carries a clear Scottian allusion and is narrated by Michael

¹⁸ Shanahan 220, 251-53.

¹⁹ The book was republished in 2006 by Four Courts Press in an annotated edition and supplemented with an afterword by John Wilson Foster. The reasons for the republication seem to be twofold – the book's extraordinary readability and a renewed interest in Ulster Scots culture in connection to the peace process in Northern Ireland. For biographical information on Strahan see John Wilson Foster, "Afterword," James 164.

MacDonnell, a returned emigrant from America and France, who is finally able to put to rest the ghosts nourished by the violent events recounted in the first part.

It is not difficult to find evidence of the broadly Unionist tone of the book, especially in the first part, where the flow of the narrative is interspersed by “the old schoolmaster’s” frequent commentaries and explanations. The separate identity of the Ulster Presbyterians is very much emphasised, not only by the use of Ulster Scots and the description of the distinctive traits of the community, but also by the articulation of their essential difference from other Irishmen, especially Catholics. So among the causes of the high Presbyterian support of the United Irishmen the old schoolmaster prominently mentions Lord Donegall’s evictions of the 1770s, when poor Presbyterians were turned out of their lands “to pit in Catholics that wad pay higher rent and be mair humble.”²⁰ This amounts to a paradoxical statement that the Presbyterian resentment against the Catholics contributed to the rebellion, which was nominally supposed to unite the creeds. Catholic outrages against Protestants in the South of Ireland are also given as one of the principal reasons why the Presbyterian interest in the United Irish cause waned after 1797:

The deists thought that because they had ceased to care about sects and dogmas these had ceased to be o’ ony importance, but the constant murders o’ Protestants in the South made mony o’ them doubt whether they hadna made a mistake, while as for the rale auld Presbyterians they began to say that as soon as they had turned the English out they wad hae to fight for their ain lives wi’ the papists.²¹

However, this rather straightforwardly Unionist analysis of 1798, as much as it may chime with the author’s journalistic writings during the Home Rule crisis,²² does not by far constitute the entire message concerning 1798 that is featured in the book, and much more subtle analyses lie there for the reader to explore. For example, a highly interesting parallel can be drawn with Stewart Parker’s play *Northern Star* concerning the critique of

²⁰ James 65. Interestingly, a similar argument can be found in Ian McBride’s above-mentioned article “When Ulster joined Ireland,” which emphasises “anti-popery” as an integral element of the independent spirit of the Ulster Presbyterians even in the years leading to the 1798 rebellion, this time on a more ideological level.

²¹ James 52.

²² For an analysis of the staunch Unionist strand in Strahan’s essays, especially in the years 1919-22, see J.W. Foster, “Afterword,” James 166.

the Irish (and particularly Presbyterian) propensity to embrace large causes instead of trying to improve minor, but more perfectable, matters in ordinary life. After describing the “madness,” which the French Revolution caused in Ulster, when suddenly “everywhar they were taaking o’ liberty and equality and fraternity, and everywhar they were forming societies and clubs and associations for the advancement o’ democratic principles,” the schoolmaster utters a general comment: “Ah, me! principles hay aye been the curse o’ Ireland: instead o’ trying to get the shoe eased where it pinches, like sensible folk, they are aye struggling for some principle or other that, if they got it, wad mak’ not a whut o’ difference to onybody.”²³

This might be regarded as a slightly light-hearted version of a typical conservative critique of radicalism of any kind, but the narrator goes on to pursue the analysis in greater depth, connecting this propensity to certain aspects of Presbyterian doctrine and history. This becomes especially clear in the third story, “Davie the Devil,” whose protagonist, David Dunbar, a devoted United Irish radical, is transformed by the violence of the times into a cruel man who inflicts dreadful torture on his enemies. The old schoolmaster makes an explicit link between David’s cruelty and his devotion to principle when he states that “naebody at ’98 was cruel but the men o’ conscience,” and then takes great length to connect this “ower strict conscience” to his family history, which was characterised by a strong “Covenanting spirit” and staunch Presbyterianism.²⁴ In such way, this dangerous devotion to principles is acknowledged as lying at the core of the Ulster Presbyterian identity, forming a highly ambiguous legacy, admirable and lethal at the same time.

The most powerful comment on Irish history which can be gleaned from the pages of *The Nabob*, however, is the idea of circularity, of nightmarish repetition of violence, which is closely interwoven with the Gothic dimension of the tales. It can be read, no doubt, as a literary articulation of “the traumatic pattern of Irish history,” characterised by periodic violent outbreaks, most famously expressed by Stephen Dedalus’s statement in Joyce’s *Ulysses*, “History [...] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake.”²⁵ According to Joep Leersen, this particular conceptualisation of history has been shared by

²³ James 65-66.

²⁴ James 45-46.

²⁵ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986) 28.

both communities in Northern Ireland,²⁶ its occurrence in a 1911 Unionist novel can serve only as a further proof of his argument.

The concept of the ‘vicious circle’ in *The Nabob* goes far beyond the commonplace idea that violence engenders violence and that, by implication, the drastic methods of the government in suppressing the United Irish movement elicited similar reaction from the local Presbyterian (and to a certain degree also Catholic) communities. Firstly, the circle, or rather spiral of violence, automatically acquired a large historical span in the perception of the original readers by the obvious reference to the violent events of the Home Rule crisis, which broke out in Ulster shortly after the book’s publication. Secondly, and more importantly, the Gothic elements give this violence a certain irrational, almost mystic quality, which cannot be easily described in terms of any historical laws of cause and effect, and which ensures its perseverance “beyond the grave,”²⁷ as the ghost of the Nabob himself admits in the last of the tales. In fact, the tales of the first part of the book give us the history of a whole pack of revengeful spectres, which transform the province of Ulster into a kind of a nightmarish haunted house.

This is again an idea which finds many parallels not only in the play *Northern Star*, which, after all, takes place in a haunted house as well, but in all of Stewart Parker’s oeuvre. However, there is a significant difference between the two authors in the way how the situation is solved and the ghosts are exorcised or finally put to rest. In contrast to the complex picture to be encountered in Parker’s work,²⁸ James Andrew chose a much more straightforward, but admittedly far less convincing manner of resolution.

In order to achieve this resolution in the second set of tales, Andrew made use of various literary conventions. One of them is the allusion to Scott, mentioned earlier – by placing the tales 60 years after the rebellion, he makes a clear reference to the conciliatory mode of *Waverley*, constructed around a completely different concept of history, which, rather than a traumatic circle, emphasises progress and reconciliation, including by implication forgetfulness on the part of the historically defeated. The second strategy is to ‘domesticate the conflict,’ to narrow the haunted area from the whole

²⁶ Joep Leerssen, “Monument and Trauma: Varieties of Remembrance,” *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2001) 222.

²⁷ James 125.

²⁸ For the significance of ghosts in *Northern Star*, see Chapter Seven, pages 156-57.

county or province to the house of Dundonnell, the former dwelling place of the Nabob Starkie, so that conventions of the traditional Gothic tale and to a certain degree also of the Big House novel could be straightforwardly applied. To this house the heir of the original owners, Michael MacDonnell, returns after a life spent in America and France, manages to put to rest the ghosts of Starkie and his wife, and establishes a new line by marrying the niece of Mrs Starkie. His successful quest, however, is limited to purely domestic matters (his main task is to find the remains of Starkie's lost son) and contains neither realistic nor symbolic reference to the possible solution of the historical conflict which generated these ghosts.

While the conscious use of various literary genres and allusions to 'make sense of the rebellion' is a frequent feature of twentieth-century literary reflections of 1798, especially from the later period, the example of *The Nabob* cannot be regarded as satisfactory as it generates a strong impression of an escapist fantasy, especially given the political conditions in Northern Ireland around time of the book's publication. The "old schoolmaster," telling his story a hundred years later, might have thought that "the world's much better than it was when I was young" and that time had healed most of the wounds of 1798,²⁹ but, sadly, this statement was not only at odds with reality, but in contradiction with much that had been narrated in the actual tales themselves.

Despite this shortcoming, which is noted also by J.W. Foster in the afterword, *The Nabob* can be regarded as a highly exceptional text in the context of its times. Especially its disquieting treatment of the nightmarish circle of violence in Northern Ireland, prominent in the first set of tales, carries a powerful message for the future. The rebellion could be a time when a "window of opportunity" for a positive change briefly opened,³⁰ but it also became the cause and inspiration of much unnecessary violence in the future. This point was taken up by authors to be treated later in this study, most prominently Stewart Parker and Thomas Flanagan.

²⁹ James 46.

³⁰ This is the view proposed by Kevin Whelan. See "Reinterpreting the 1798 Rebellion in County Wexford," *The Mighty Wave*, ed. Keogh and Furlong (Dublin: Four Courts Press 1996) 9.

An Ambiguous Novel: William Buckley's *Croppies Lie Down*

From the aesthetic point of view, probably the most interesting of the early twentieth-century 1798 novels, usually half forgotten and written by little-known authors, was William Buckley's *Croppies Lie Down* (1903).³¹ It was described by Cahalan as "the best novel on 1798 during the Literary Revival, and in fact the best Irish historical novel published on any subject during this period."³² The main reason for such praise was its perceived "outstanding realism," observable mainly in the lack of romance in the plot and its tragic ending, which carries "the realistic message of the novel: this is the way it was."³³

Cahalan's statement, however, should be read against the general methodological approach of his book, which compares Irish historical novels to the conciliatory model of Sir Walter Scott, noting the inappropriateness of Scott's happy endings to the Irish historical experience. Nevertheless, such a generally conceived realism does not necessarily imply "the fidelity to the facts of history," which was highly praised in Buckley's novel by F. Stephen Brown.³⁴

In reality, *Croppies Lie Down*, an extensive novel focused on the rebellion in Wexford, contains many historical distortions typical of the nationalist interpretation of 1798, as it had developed by the turn of the nineteenth century. Similarly to a number of nineteenth-century novels analysed by Shanahan, it gives high prominence to the conspiracy theory, mentioned already in the discussion of Patrick F. Kavanagh, that the rebellion was deliberately provoked by British government, especially Lord Castlereagh, in order to facilitate the passing of the Act of Union, a fact which, like most conspiracy theories, lacks any definite historical proof. This lapse of accuracy can be possibly

³¹ Biographical information on Buckley is extremely scarce. The *Oxford Companion* states merely that he was born in Cork and that his only other novel was *Cambia Party* (1907), "set in the maritime community of Youghal." (See Welch 104.) F. Stephen Brown, quoted by Cahalan, writes about the same novel: "In places it will be disagreeable for the people of Youghal. Pictures of Cork snobbery unfavourable to Cork people, and on the whole disagreeable and sordid." See F. Stephen J. Brown, *Ireland in Fiction: A Guide to Irish Novels, Tales, Romances, and Folklore* (1919; repr. Shannon: Irish University press, 1969) 44. Quoted in Cahalan 104.

³² Cahalan 103. Also Reilly, although she chose to mention the novel only in the footnotes, comments upon its exceptional literary quality: "This novel was the most powerful and best written of the 1798 novels and, perhaps, of the historical novels in general." Eileen Reilly, *Fictional histories: an examination of Irish historical and political novels, 1880-1914*, Diss. Oxford 1997, 79.

³³ Cahalan 103, 107.

³⁴ F. Stephen J. Brown, "Irish Historical Fiction," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review of Letters, Philosophy and Science*, 4.15 (Sep. 1915): 449. Quoted in Cahalan 103.

explained by the popular perceptions of the author's times, and even by the exigencies of the plot, which is dependent on the activities of government agents and schemers. However, a more serious objection could be raised concerning the portrayal of rebel atrocities in the novel. As much as Cahalan praises the book for not neglecting them, noting the instance of the main female protagonist's father being unnecessarily shot by the rebels,³⁵ the depiction of historically attested atrocities, such as the massacre at Scullabogue, is highly problematic.

A definite tendency can be noted, similar to the one observed by Tom Dunne in the 1990s historiography of the rebellion, to exculpate the otherwise heroic rebels from this terrible deed.³⁶ The strategy chosen by Buckley is slightly more subtle than that of the nationalist novel *The Forge of Clohogue* (1885) by John Murphy,³⁷ which let the barn be burnt by retreating British soldiers instead of rebels, but the effect is essentially the same – someone else is blamed. In the case of *Croppies Lie Down*, the perpetrator is the government spy and the ultimate villain of the book Steve Harrigan, who persuades the retreating rebels to commit this horrible crime in order to get rid of an uncomfortable witness among the prisoners. In this way the blame is lifted from the shoulders of the insurgent army as a whole and placed on one individual, and ultimately on the government side as this individual happens to be on its payroll.³⁸

While in the overall treatment of the rebellion the novel can be regarded, in many instances, as significantly influenced by the 'faith and fatherland' interpretation, the true merit of the book should be seen in the portrayal of its characters and the tragic symbolism contained in the development of the plot on the personal level. Similarly to other Irish historical novels, this plot centres on the "genteel Protestant heroine,"³⁹ Irene Neville, an heiress to a large estate, who is courted simultaneously by three men whose significance can be interpreted symbolically.

As her name indicates, Irene can be easily perceived as a female representation of Ireland, a familiar trope traceable back through the eighteenth-century *aisling* poets to the

³⁵ Cahalan 107.

³⁶ See Tom Dunne, *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory and 1798* (Dublin: Lilliput Press 2004)128, 141.

³⁷ James Murphy, *The Forge of Clohogue: A Story of the Rebellion of '98* (Dublin: Sealy, Bryers and Walker, 1885). The novel is analysed in Shanahan 233.

³⁸ For the relevant passage, see Buckley 350-366.

³⁹ For a discussion of the "Protestant heroine" motif see Cahalan 106.

Middle Ages, which was revived in nationalist rhetoric at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as the discussion of the play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* will show.⁴⁰ This interpretation is supported by the development of Irene as a character in the novel. While at the beginning she is presented as sharing many prejudices of her religion and social class, after witnessing the crimes perpetrated by the government forces on local peasant women shortly before the rebellion, she is transformed by pity, and from that moment her character, in a way, serves as a representative of *both* Protestants and Catholics.⁴¹ The image of Irene as ‘an Earth goddess’ (which is, after all, the ultimate origin of the Cathleen Ni Houlihan trope)⁴² of a kind is moreover strengthened in the scene where she, after selling a part of her property to her future husband Philip Gash, delivers the land in a paraphrase of a mediaeval ritual by symbolically handing him rosebuds from a half destroyed bush:

“There, sir,” she said, handing them to him with a pretty curtsy, “you are now seized of the land and all building or tenements whatsoever thereupon, with all riparian rights, to have and to hold as long as grass grows and water runs in the land of Eire.”⁴³

The three men competing for Irene’s attention are the heroic United Irishman Devereux, the English officer Ralph Heathcote, and the government schemer and fraud, Philip Gash. While this constellation gives enough material for a typical black and white, nationalist melodrama, it is only the first of these characters who can be described as melodramatic. Shanahan has argued that the issue of legitimacy was an often raised question in nineteenth-century novels about 1798 and *Croppies Lie Down*, despite belonging to the early twentieth century, shares this feature and projects it into its principal characters.⁴⁴ It is precisely the hero Devereux who is carefully construed as the

⁴⁰ While “Irene” quite clearly indicates “Ireland” in both sound and spelling, it is of note that the choice of her name is unusual and is in contrast with those used by revivalists, who, in order to give expression to the same trope, tended to return to names from previous traditions.

⁴¹ For the relevant passage, see Buckley 73.

⁴² The analysis of the origins of this trope in mediaeval Irish texts (with a related critique from the point of view of gender) can be found in the chapter “An Siombolachas Baineann 1,” Máirín Nic Eoin, *B’Ait Leo Bean: Gnéithe den Idé-eolaíocht Inscne i dTraidisiún Líteartha na Gaeilge* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1998) 33-78.

⁴³ Buckley 433.

⁴⁴ Shanahan 220 and *passim*.

most 'legitimate' of the book's characters, entirely in keeping with the 'faith and fatherland' interpretation, which saw Irish Catholics of the 'old stock' as the only true Irishmen. Devereux belongs to a family which, in pre-Cromwellian times, had built a castle at the place where the building known as the Hermitage, the scene of much important action of the novel, currently stands, significantly owned by his antagonist, Philip Gash. In an argument with the latter character, Devereux defends his legitimacy against the accusation that he is "the son of a base-born peasant who could neither read nor write" in the following way, explicitly invoking faith and fatherland: "Yes [...] but still the son of a gentleman who scorned to sell his faith or his country. Who with unshaken eye saw the stranger in his lands and the hare couch upon his hearth-stone."⁴⁵

Despite his obvious attractiveness for the readership (he was not only a model Catholic Irishman, but also a French soldier who was a personal friend of both Wolfe Tone and Napper Tandy), however, Devereux remains in the background throughout most of the novel, and we get little insight into his personal feelings. He moreover shares the frustration and tragic end of the other main characters: although he ultimately manages to win the heart of Irene, he does not marry her and is shot at the end of the novel by a yeoman during his final fight with Gash.

The second of Irene's suitors, the English major Heathcote, also emerges as a rather positive character, despite his initial lack of feeling when confronted with the suffering of the tortured peasantry. The construction of an English soldier as a likeable person in a nationalist Irish historical novel is not such an unusual thing as Cahalan seems to suggest⁴⁶ – according to Reilly, Heathcote's Englishness is a familiar trick of nationalist novels of the period, which helps to establish him as an impartial figure, all the more credible in his persistent criticism of the mismanagement of Ireland and the cruelty of militia and yeomanry units, as well as his occasional praise of the bravery of the rebels.⁴⁷ Similarly to Devereux, also this model heroic soldier (despite being from the opposite side) fails to achieve any of his objectives: he does not win the hand of Irene either, and although he eventually succeeds at obtaining an official warrant from the King to inquire

⁴⁵ Buckley 507.

⁴⁶ Cahalan 106

⁴⁷ Reilly, *Fictional Histories* 79.

into the machinations of Gash and the spy Harrigan, he is murdered by the latter before he reaches any success whatsoever.

Paradoxically, it is the last of the rivals for Irene, Philip Gash, who is the true central character of the novel, despite remaining simultaneously a villain. He is the least legitimate of the three characters – and doubly so, being an illegitimate offspring of the Luttrell family, who had themselves illegitimately acquired their property from their rightful owners, the Devereux, in Cromwellian times. Moreover, in order to better himself, he actively participates in Lord Castlereagh's conspiracy in favour of the Union, not hesitating to deceive even his master Castlereagh in the process. Due to his talent in plotting, he becomes the one who finally gets the prize and marries Irene in the end, albeit only for a short while.

An interpretation lies at hand which would be in keeping with the faith and fatherland version of 1798 that Gash's success together with the failure of his rivals symbolises the ultimate seizure of Ireland by fraudulent, unworthy men of the wrong religion and ancestry. However, it cannot hold due to other aspects of Gash's character, as well as the tragic ending of the story. Surprisingly enough, he is not construed as a melodramatic villain despite all the potential he shows for this role (this distinction being reserved for Harrigan). At various places in the book he is presented as being able to question his acts and has definitely a weak stomach for the barbarities perpetrated as a consequence of the conspiracy in which he takes part. Most importantly, however, his love for Irene is sincere, which is shown not only by defending her several times against the violence of loyalist soldiers, but especially towards the end of the book, when he chooses to stay in the country because of her, trying to help his tenants, although it is clear that he will expose himself to Castlereagh's wrath at the discovery of his fraud. Moreover, his fate is even more pitiable than that of the two characters mentioned previously. Not only is he condemned by Irene when she finally discovers by what means he had won her, but actually kills her by accident in his final fight with Devereux, and ultimately commits suicide as the only solution left to him.

The symbolic significance of the contrast between Devereux and Gash is underscored in the scene at the beginning of the novel, when Irene, because of her beauty, is compared by Heathcote to Clorinda, the heroine of Tasso's *Jerusalem Delivered*. This compliment,

however, anticipates Irene's fate, as Clorinda was mistakenly killed by her lover. Irene's reply to this compliment is quite telling: "Poor Clorinda [...] her fate was pitiful, though she was happy in it, seeing her death came from a hand she loved, but Tasso should have spared her to die fighting by her lover's side and shielding his life with her own."⁴⁸ If we regard Irene's fate through the prism of this allusion, it is impossible to avoid a certain ambiguity. Seemingly, her wish is fulfilled – she is accidentally stabbed by Gash when trying to protect Devereux – but as Gash loves her as well, the original pattern from Tasso is also retained to a certain degree.

The ambiguity of Irene's death therefore highlights the contrast between Devereux as an ideal lover and Gash as a real one, and it can be concluded that thanks to this contrast, Buckley's novel, on the general level, captures well the tragic feeling resulting from the unattainability of ideals and the inevitable evil contained in real human action, such as that taken by Gash. Despite its historical inaccuracies and nationalist bias, *Croppies Lie Down* is thus able to transform the tragic story of 1798 into a message of a more general validity, anticipating the strategy of many later twentieth-century fictional reflections of 1798. This might well prove a better way to understand the 'realism' of the novel, so highly praised by Cahalan.

The Epitome of the Woman of Ireland Trope: W.B. Yeats's and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*

Drama focusing on 1789 in this period was significantly less variegated, the main output consisting of patriotic melodramas, extremely successful pieces of popular theatre produced mainly in the Queen's Theatre in Dublin, which usually centred around mythologised heroes of the republican pantheon, most significantly Theobald Wolfe Tone and Father Murphy.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, these relatively straightforward plays, despite being highly entertaining, have little connection to the post-1916 literary treatments of the rebellion apart from the use of melodramatic style in one of the episodes of Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, which will be treated in its due place.

⁴⁸ Buckley 71.

⁴⁹ An edition of these plays, along with a valuable introductory essay, can be found in Cheryl Herr, ed., *For the Land She Loved: Irish Political Melodramas, 1890-1925* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991).

The opposite is true about another play, hardly less straightforward if much more famous, although it comes from a different tradition altogether. The play in question is no other than W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory's one-act *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*. Much has been written about the influence of this play on the consequent development of Irish nationalism, its role in radicalising the public opinion, as well as its uneasy position in the Yeats cannon.⁵⁰ For the purpose of this thesis, however, it represents a vital link between the use of the Woman of Ireland motif in earlier Irish language traditions, and the later twentieth-century ironic reworkings of the same motif in Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque* and Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*.

The 1798 rebellion, more exactly the landing of the French expedition in Killala, serves in the play as a mere backdrop for a symbolic re-enactment of a highly particular version of the allegorical female motif. This specific moment in history appears to have been chosen because of the perception of 1798 as the archetypal struggle for Irish independence, connected to the availability of the Irish-speaking peasant environment in the Mayo episode of the rising, which was suitable for the introduction of the Woman of Ireland trope.

Henry Merritt, in his highly perceptive article "Dead Many Times: Cathleen ni Houlihan, Yeats, Two Old Women, and a Vampire," describes the genesis of the central character of the Poor Old Woman, who transforms into a radiant young maiden at the end of the play, out of various sources in Irish folklore.⁵¹ According to Merritt, it was primarily Lady Gregory who combined the familiar figure of the Seanbhean Bhocht, known for example from the eponymous 1798 ballad, with the character of the girl Caitlín Ní hUallacháin, who appears as a personification of Ireland in two poems by the eighteenth-century Tipperary poet Liam Dall Ó hÍfearnáin.⁵²

⁵⁰ See, for example, Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia 2006) 31-35.

⁵¹ Henry Merritt, "Dead Many Times: Cathleen ni Houlihan, Yeats, Two Old Women, and a Vampire," *The Modern Language Review* 96.3 (Jul. 2001): 644-653.

⁵² A highly interesting discussion concerning the use of peasant names for the Woman of Ireland figure in eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry can be found in Máirín Nic Eoin, "Secrets and Disguises? Caitlín Ní Uallacháin and Other Female Personages in Eighteenth-Century Irish Political Poetry," *Eighteenth-Century Ireland / Iris an dá chultúr* 11 (1996): 7-45.

Although both figures represent Ireland in their original contexts, Merritt emphasises that there was no previous connection between them in the Irish tradition.⁵³ This might be, however, considered as a weak point in his argument as the ‘*cailleach/spéirbhean* transformation,’ or the change of the female symbol of Ireland (who has developed from the pagan goddess of sovereignty) from an ugly old woman into a beautiful young girl is arguably an established trope in the Gaelic tradition, appearing as early as *Eachtra Mac Echach Muigmedoin*, a prose tale from around the year 1400.⁵⁴

In this tale, however, the transformation of the old hag with blackened limbs, enormous green teeth and crooked nose into the most beautiful of women after the hero is willing to lie with her, serves as an allegory of the hardships and fights the young hero has to undergo in order to obtain kingship.⁵⁵ By offering real reward, it therefore lacks the element of the unconditional blood sacrifice present in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, which made Merritt, in an elaborate argument, call this particular version of the allegorical female “vampiric.” In a further contrast to the rather complex and variegated native tradition, moreover, Yeats’s and Gregory’s play, although offering nothing but death to its hero Michael Gillane, conspicuously does not contain any trace of the disillusioned, bitter *aisling*, common in the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Gaelic tradition and present also in the poetry of the poet Micheál Óg Ó Longáin, a direct participant in the rising.⁵⁶

⁵³ Merritt 647.

⁵⁴ “Eachtra Mac Echach Muigmedoin,” ed. and trans. Whitley Stokes, *Revue Celtique* 24 (1903): 190-207.

⁵⁵ This is essentially the argument found in Micheál Mac Craith, “L’Attaque: Úrscéal faoi Stiúir,” *Macalla* [Galway] (1985): 20-21. The tale had also more immediate political implications as it has been demonstrated that it was composed in order to support the claim of the Ó Néill family to the high kingship of Tara. See Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990) 249.

⁵⁶ For the most comprehensive treatment of the eighteenth-century *aisling*, a specific poetic genre in which the allegorical female appears to the poet in a dream, see Breandán Ó Buachalla, *Aisling Ghéar: na Stiobhartaigh agus an tAos Léinn, 1603–1788* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1996). Micheál Ó Longáin was a Gaelic poet and a member of the United Irishmen, in whose poetry traditional Jacobite forms, full of sectarian vocabulary, create an ambiguous mixture with the new ideology. For an edition of his poetry, see Rónán Ó Donnachadha, ed., *Micheál Ó Longáin, File* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1994), for critical analysis see Tom Dunne, *Rebellions* 279-83; Tom Dunne, “Subaltern Voices? Poetry in Irish, Popular Insurgency and the 1798 Rebellion,” *Eighteenth Century Life* 22.3 (1998): 31-44 and Radvan Markus “‘Níl an Focal Sin Againn:’ Orality, Literacy, and Accounts of the 1798 Rebellion,” *New Hibernia Review* 14.1 (Spring 2010): 112-27.

Yeats's and Gregory's play, as a straightforward nationalist appeal,⁵⁷ therefore lacks the complexity of both the original tradition from which it sprang and other contemporaneous treatments of the Woman of Ireland motif in the English language as in William Buckley's novel *Croppies Lie Down*. This feature attracted criticism in later works which are yet to be treated in this thesis. As Ondřej Pilný has argued, Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* features a "vampiric, voracious version of Cathleen Ni Houlihan" in the character of the Phantom Bride,⁵⁸ and an implicit critique of the allegorical female appears also in Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*, which features the *aisling* as one of its principal themes.⁵⁹ In this way, *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* represents an important reference point for later literary treatments of 1798, albeit of an essentially negative, or at least ambiguous, kind.

The works analysed in this chapter share the foregrounding of the political message that is implicit in the given interpretation of the rebellion with other literary reflections of 1798 from the chosen period (as well as most of their nineteenth-century predecessors). These messages differ substantially from one another – in fact, all the four works discussed present distinct political statements, ranging from the physical-force nationalism of Yeats's and Gregory's play, through the Catholic nationalism of *Croppies Lie Down*, to the moderate, inclusive nationalism of George Birmingham and the Unionist perspective of *The Nabob*. In accordance with the findings of Eileen Reilly, this testifies to the liveliness of the national debate at the beginning of the twentieth century, and to the importance of 1798 within it.

⁵⁷ The main reason for this straightforward nationalism, otherwise not so prominent in Yeats's oeuvre, lies mainly in the fact that he desperately "needed to re-establish the credentials he had lost with the nationalists after *The Countess Cathleen*" – see Pilný 32.

⁵⁸ Pilný 145.

⁵⁹ In this context, it is correct to mention also Denis Johnston's play *The Old Lady Says 'No!'* (1929), loosely connected to the theme of 1798 through the character of Robert Emmet, the principal instigator of the short-lived rising of 1803. The figure of the shape-shifting allegorical woman is a powerful satirical presence in the play, and specific lines from Yeats's and Lady Gregory's play are given parodic treatment. See Denis Johnston, "The Old Lady Says 'No!'" *Selected Plays of Denis Johnston* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1983) 17-87. References to *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* in the play are discussed, for example, in Pilný 95-97.

While it is possible to find approximate historiographical parallels to the interpretations of 1798 implicit in these works, it is clear even at this stage that literary treatments of the rebellion are by no means limited by the historiographical views discussed in Chapter Two and that, according to the theories of Nünning and Berninger described in the first chapter, they should be judged in their own right. While it can be plausibly argued that *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* comes close to the Young Ireland/Fenian romantic nationalist interpretation of 1798 that drew from the histories of Madden and Byrne, the dependence of Buckley's novel on the 'faith and fatherland' model is much more ambiguous, as it transpires from the symbolic significance of the characters. In the case of *The Northern Iron*, the classification becomes even more problematic since the closest historiographical model, the post-revisionist interpretation of the 1990s, originated more than 80 years after the novel's publication. As regards the other of the two Northern Irish works discussed in this chapter, James Andrew's *The Nabob*, it is difficult to find any historiographical parallel whatsoever, except for some relatively recent articles by Ian McBride. This richness of opinion, despite the lack of historical accuracy noted at least in the case of *Croppies Lie Down*, is a proof of the potential of fictional works to bring innovative interpretations of historical events.

This trend will be confirmed in the discussion of later twentieth-century works with larger literary ambitions. As it has been already stated, the connection to the conflict in Northern Ireland, noted as prominent in this chapter, will play a significant role in this analysis. Apart from that, an increasing attention will be devoted to the formal means of representing the 1798 rebellion in fiction and drama, some of which, such as the motif of ghosts and the Woman of Ireland trope, display continuity with the pre-1916 period.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Variety of Approaches: Literary Reflections of the Rebellion, 1916-2000

Arriving finally to the main focus of this thesis, the present chapter attempts to give a chronological overview of all the major, and most of the minor, novels and plays about 1798 written in the period 1916-2000, with the exception of the three outstanding works chosen for thorough analysis in separate chapters.

Compared with the previous period, the topic of 1798 started to be significantly less popular in literature after 1916. In contrast to the eleven novels published on the topic in the relatively short period 1900-1916, only eight (and one short story) were published in the long seventy-four years between 1916 and 1990.¹ Significantly, four of these novels were written in Irish. A certain return of 1798 as a more common literary theme can be traced to the 1990s with the approaching bicentenary of the event, when five novels were published (one of them in Irish), although generally of uneven literary quality.² Altogether, thirteen 1798 novels were published in the period treated in this chapter.³

The popularity of 1798 drama is more difficult to assess, as the rebellion, possibly with the exception of the genre of melodrama briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, has never become a common topic in plays. Consequently, only five relevant plays were written in the period between 1916 and 2000, including one in Irish, one first staged in

¹ These novels include: Marjorie Bowen, *Dark Rosaleen* (London: W. Collins, 1932); Seán Mac Maoláin, *Iolar agus Stionnach* (Dublin: Oifig Díolta Foilseacháin Rialtais, 1938); Francis MacManus, *Men Withering* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1939); Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, *L'Attaque* (1962; repr. Cork: Mercier Press, 1998); Annraoi Ó Liatháin, *Picí Loch Garman* (Dublin: Sairseál agus Dil, 1964); Sam Hanna Bell, *A Man Flourishing* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1973); Proinsias Mac an Bheatha, *Cnoc na hUamha* (Dublin: Oifig Foilseacháin Náisiúnta, 1978) and Thomas Flanagan, *The Year of the French* (London: Arrow Books Ltd., 1979). The short story in question is John McArdle, "It's Handy When People Don't Die," *It's Handy When People Don't Die and Other Stories* (Swords: Poolbeg Press, 1981) 38-64.

² These novels include Gretta Curran Browne, *The Fire on the Hill* (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1991); Cathleen O'Farrell, *The Fiddler of Kilbroney* (Dingle: Brandon Book Publishers, 1994); Colm Mac Confhaola, *Ceol an Phiobaire* (Dublin: Coiscéim, 1997); Harry McHugh, *The Road to Vinegar Hill* (Cork: The Mercier Press, 1998) and Gabrielle Warnock, *The Silk Weaver* (London: Trident Press, 1999).

³ The total number of 1798 novels published in the twentieth century thus amounts to twenty-four, which compares quite unfavourably to the fifty-two novels, which were, according to Jim Shanahan's information, published in the nineteenth century. See Jim Shanahan, *An 'Unburied Corpse': The 1798 Rebellion in Fiction 1799-1898*, Diss. TCD 2006, 308-311.

the bicentenary year 1998 and one which has never been staged.⁴ It is of definite interest that all of these plays were written by Northern Irish authors and are set in Ulster.

The reasons for the decrease in popularity of the topic of 1798 in novels should be most probably looked for in the relative diminishing of the political significance and the controversial status of the rebellion after the objectives of the rebels were at least partially achieved with the foundation of the Irish independent state. Since that time, the political implications of 1798, while still important, have been largely limited to the conflict in Northern Ireland. A further cause is the importance of the Easter Rising in 1916, which, as a more recent event, managed to eclipse 1798 to a certain degree. Significantly, no work about 1798 managed to produce such public controversy as, for example, Sean O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars*.

The shared feature of the early twentieth-century works discussed in the previous chapter was that they, regardless of their implied political opinion, contributed to the lively public discussion regarding Irish national identity and the political future of Ireland. No such common denominator can be found for the literary reflections of 1798 from the later period. Rather, the authors chose a variety of approaches, which generally highlight the political aspects in novels and plays connected to Northern Ireland, but in other works are often more distanced from politics and rather past-oriented. An increasing variety was also present in formal terms. As was the case with the early twentieth-century novels about 1798, also most of the works to be discussed in this chapter are still realistic and relatively conventional. Nevertheless, there are more exceptions in comparison to the previous period, as other paths began to be explored, using forms that included lyrical language and literary and mythical allusions. These innovative approaches are of ultimate interest for this study and their discussion will culminate in connection to the three works chosen for separate analysis. The general thematic trends emerging from the variety of approaches will be briefly discussed in the

⁴ The plays include: Gerald MacNamara, *Who Fears to Speak* (first staged in 1929), published in Kathleen Danaher, ed., "The Plays of Gerald MacNamara," *The Journal of Irish Literature*, 14.2, 14.3 (May/September 1988): 125-41; Séamus Ó Néill, *Faill ar an bhFeart* (1967), published in Séamus Ó Néill, *Faill ar an bhFeart* (Dublin: Sairseál agus Dil, 1967); Stewart Parker, *Northern Star* (1984), published in Stewart Parker, *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen, 2000) 2-82; Gary Mitchell, *Tearing the Loom* (1998), published in Gary Mitchell, *Tearing the Loom and in a Little World of Our Own* (London: Nick Hern Books, 1998) 63-124, and John Hewitt, *The McCrackens* (never staged), published in John Hewitt, *Two Plays*, ed. Damian Smyth (Belfast: Lagan Press 1999) 19-71.

conclusion. Following the distribution of publication dates along the years, this chapter will proceed in chronological order, discussing the most important works from the 1920s and 1930s, 1960s, and each successive decade after that.

King Lear and the Last Stand of Gaelic Ireland: Francis MacManus's *Men Withering*

Significantly, the first literary treatment of 1798 after 1916 came from Northern Ireland in the form of Gerald MacNamara's satirical play *Who Fears to Speak* (1929). This delightful one-act, which parodies popular melodrama and satirizes the incompetence of the original United Irishmen while paying a tribute to their principles, is regarded as a minor play in MacNamara's canon which does not achieve the comic heights and the satirical edge of his masterpieces *Suzanne and the Sovereigns* (1907) and *Thompson in Tir-na-n-Og* (1912).⁵ However, it finds an interesting echo in the first flashback scene of Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, which has the same setting – the famous Muddlers' Club – and features similar motifs. This fact can be again regarded as a proof of a close connection between many novels and plays treating Northern Irish aspects of the rebellion.

Nevertheless, the first literary reflection of 1798 with higher literary ambitions to be published after the Easter Rising was Francis MacManus's novel *Men Withering*, which, however, appeared as late as 1939.⁶ It is the last, and arguably the best part of a trilogy centred around the life of the eighteenth-century poet Donnacha Ruadh Mac Conmara, the preceding two parts being *Stand up and Give Challenge* (1934) and *Candle for the Proud* (1936).⁷ While much of the novel's action takes place immediately before and during the 1798 rebellion, it is not a typical 1798 novel as it does not present its events

⁵ Published in Danaher 21-58 and 70-89.

⁶ Two other novels were published before *Men Withering*: Marjorie Bowen, *Dark Rosaleen* (1932) a romantic novel about Lord Edward Fitzgerald, and Seán Mac Maoláin, *Iolar agus Sionnach* (1938), an equally romanticising book about the Irish speakers of County Antrim during the rebellion. The only interesting point about the latter of these novels, according to Alan Titley, is that it thematises the feelings of mistrust between the Ulster Catholics and Presbyterians on the eve of the rebellion. It might be added that in this respect, it largely shares the view of *The Nabob* and the historiographical essays of Ian McBride discussed in the previous chapter, despite approaching the subject from the Catholic side. See Alan Titley, *An tÚrscéal Gaeilge* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1991) 349.

⁷ *Men Withering* is praised as the best book of the trilogy in James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983) 128, the main reason being its rich language and lyrical style.

directly, but as mediated through the perception of a protagonist whose residence in County Waterford prevents him from witnessing any of the significant battles, and who is moreover an old and blind man already at the very beginning of the novel. Therefore most of the events of the rebellion appear ‘off-stage,’ in the form of stories brought by other characters.

This unusual feature, as much as it may be to a certain degree dictated by the evidence about the historical Mac Conmara, has also an important symbolic relevance. As the plural in the title indicates, the “withering” of Donnacha during the last years of his life stands in a synecdochic sense for the dwindling and death of his whole culture, that of the “Hidden Ireland,” to use the title of Daniel Corkery’s book which served MacManus as the main source and inspiration.⁸ In his own words, Donnacha is presented as the only remaining representative of the old Gaelic order: “The good men are all dead, and I am left.”⁹ It is therefore entirely in keeping with the general view of the novel that he, similarly to his entire culture as viewed by MacManus, does not take any significant part in the events and becomes largely a passive victim of historical forces.

In fact, all Donnacha’s actions in relation to the rebellion turn out to be ironic. For example, after being entrusted the documents of the United Irishman Mr Hume at the beginning of the novel, he is cheated into their delivery by the local magistrate, Mr Felton, thus unwittingly turning an informer. Later, after returning to his son’s family in the village of Knocknaree, he distinguishes himself by challenging with a stream of insults the English soldiers who came to burn the houses, thus gaining the respect of the benevolent landlord Mr Dundee. While he does not endanger anybody in this case, his action is nevertheless entirely pointless.

In the *Dictionary of Irish Literature*, Dennis Cotter argues that “MacManus’s *oeuvre* is best viewed, like Paul Claudel’s, as the fruit of a mind which accepted willingly and liberatingly the dogmas of orthodox Catholic scholasticism.”¹⁰ Although Cahalan correctly argues that in MacManus’s work in general propaganda never got precedence

⁸ See Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (1924; repr. Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1941). The influence is discussed in Cahalan 122.

⁹ MacManus 15.

¹⁰ Denis Cotter, “Francis MacManus,” *Dictionary of Irish Literature M-Z*, eds. Owen D. Edwards and Robert Hogan (London: Aldwych Press, 1996) 787-89.

over art,¹¹ the overall Catholic tone of *Men Withering* has significant impact on the interpretation of the 1798 rebellion in the novel.

The portrayal of the events mirrors to a certain degree the interpretation of Patrick F. Kavanagh, discussed in Chapter Two, albeit with important modifications. Kavanagh's influence can be seen most clearly from the fact that role of the United Irishmen is presented as entirely marginal, and their ideology does not take any hold at all among the peasant population. A very telling case is that of the above-mentioned Mr Hume, a Presbyterian United Irish activist, significantly disguised as a "seller of German spectacles," thus symbolically aiming to return sight to the Irish peasants. However, he not only fails to 'open the eyes' of the already blind Donnacha, but, due to the above-mentioned trick on the part of the local magistrate, ends being involuntarily informed upon.¹²

The second-hand report of the rising that we get in the novel is focused exclusively on Wexford and, in the allocation of causes and effects, largely follows the familiar Kavanagh line, bearing witness to the ongoing popularity of this particular interpretation.¹³ The essentially loyal peasantry, which, apart from the vestiges of Jacobitism, does not have any political aims, is goaded into rebellion by government violence. After the famous burning of Father Murphy's chapel in Boolavogue,¹⁴ the restraining power of the Catholic church is removed, and the heroic priests march out at the head of the insurgent peasantry. In contrast to Kavanagh's view, however, the rebels are not motivated by the high-blown ideals of 'faith and fatherland', but mainly by the need of self defence and the urge of revenge. In this bleak picture, MacManus removes much of the romantic flavour from 1798, in a way anticipating the even more iconoclastic approach of Thomas Flanagan in *The Year of the French*.

Due to the overall perspective, 1798 appears in the novel as the last stand of Gaelic Ireland against the oppressor, and consequently, MacManus's view of the rebellion acquires an inevitable sectarian tone. This tone is, however, generally not achieved by a

¹¹ "MacManus can sound the propagandist in his essays, but in his fiction he always sought [...] to serve Art, not Church." Cahalan 124.

¹² For the episode, see MacManus 19-86.

¹³ See especially MacManus 259-270.

¹⁴ That the burning of the chapel provided an incentive to the rebellion in Wexford actually seems to be a completely unfounded popular myth, as it is denied in Kavanagh's history itself – see Patrick F. Kavanagh, *Popular History of the Insurrection of 1798* (Dublin: Guy and Co Ltd., 1898) 93.

negative portrayal of Protestants: although a figure of a fiercely anti-Irish Protestant minister appears, we can also find an opposite example of the landlord Mr Dundee, who treats his tenants well, tries to protect them against the outrages of the soldiers, and even suffers bodily injury in an argument with fellow members of his class, who advocate brutal measures against the Catholics.¹⁵ Despite Dundee's positive traits, which arguably succeed in making him a model Christian regardless of the denominational difference, he is not viewed, and possibly cannot even become, a real Irishman. This title is reserved, in a rather essentialist manner, only to those of Donnacha's background, the original Gaels. In contrast to the ideals of the United Irishmen, the initiators of the rebellion, no possibility is allowed for any kind of unity among the different denominations and cultures in Ireland, since there is no real communication among them in the novel. This brings *Men Withering* into sharp contrast with novels in the Irish language that focus on the reaction of Irish speakers to 1798, such as Colm Mac Conhaola's *Ceol an Phiobaire* or Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*, in which the interaction between the anti-colonialist and often sectarian native tradition, and the inclusive message of the United Irishmen is presented in a more complex and ambiguous way.¹⁶

While the essentialist view of Irish national identity implicit in the novel might present an obstacle for the modern reader, there are other qualities in *Men Withering* which make it a worthy example of an artistically successful twentieth-century fictional treatment of 1798. Consider, for example, the highly evocative and lyrical use of language, which succeeds splendidly in delivering the main themes of the novel. This feature distinguishes MacManus's book from the overwhelming majority of 1798 novels written before 1916 and anticipates poetic uses of language in Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*, Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French* and John McArdle's short story "It's Handy When People Don't Die."

¹⁵ For the episode, see MacManus 202-3.

¹⁶ The final judgement of the matter should be ultimately based on the available historical evidence offered by contemporaneous Irish language reflections of the rising. This evidence, however, can be interpreted in various ways. While Tom Dunne pointed to the fact that many Irish language poems and songs from the rebellion are full of sectarian elements, this can be partially explained by the tenacity of the Jacobite poetic tradition echoed in them. In the article "'Níl an Focal Sin Againn: Orality, Literacy, and Accounts of the 1798 Rebellion,'" *New Hibernia Review* 14.1 (Spring 2010): 112-27, I have argued for a balanced interpretation of this phenomenon at least in connection to the poet and United Irishman Mícheál Óg Ó Longáin. For Tom Dunne's analysis, see especially Tom Dunne, "Subaltern Voices? Poetry in Irish, Popular Insurgency and the 1798 Rebellion," *Eighteenth Century Life* 22.3 (1998): 31-44.

Moreover, *Men Withering* is the first 1798 novel (if we choose to disregard the rather sketchy mention of Clorinda's tale in *Croppies Lie Down*) which consciously chooses the method of literary or mythical allusion to give an underlying structure to the story, thus anticipating the elaborate uses of this method in the works of Eoghan Ó Tuairisc and Stewart Parker. This method is shared by all three books of McManus's trilogy. While in *Stand up and Give Challenge* and *Candle for the Proud*, the protagonist is, in turn, likened to Odysseus and the biblical figure of Job, in *Men Withering*, the corresponding figure is, quite fittingly, the old and powerless King Lear.

The function of this character from Shakespeare's eponymous play as an underlying metaphor for the fate of both Donnacha and the Gaels becomes clear already from the fact that lines uttered by Lear in Shakespeare's play are quoted in the epigraph: "I will die bravely, like a bridegroom. What? I will be jovial: come, come; I am a king, My masters, know you that."¹⁷ Moreover, it is present also structurally in the text, e.g. in the important symbolic function of the weather. In a similar (albeit admittedly less complex) way as the storm in Act III of *King Lear*, the winds, storms and rain in *Men Withering* represent inevitable death of the protagonist as well as the turbulent forces of human society which brought about the decay of his culture. The symbolic connection is made clear in the following passage, which can also serve as a brilliant example of the evocative use of lyrical language mentioned above:

The dread of mortality, the terror of the inevitable shrouding of the body, fanned him [Donnacha] icily, till shrinking like a cat from the cold outer-world to the warmth before the fire, he wished desperately in his half-sleep for everlasting shelter against the inappeasable winds of death. He could feel them, those ceaseless winds, flowing about him, crumbling him as a desiccate lump of earth is crumbled in a heavy rainfall, pulverising him back into the dust from which he had come [...]. As he sank now into his half-animal sleep, his fingers twitching on the blanket, he carried with him the thought of his own decay as though it were the destiny of the people among whom he lived. He was going. So were they.¹⁸

¹⁷ MacManus 10.

¹⁸ MacManus 28. The entire passage is quoted also in Cahalan (129) as an example of the use of lyrical language and the merits of twentieth-century Irish historical fiction in comparison with the nineteenth century.

Admittedly, MacManus's rather straightforward use of Lear lacks the subtle ironic interplay which is present both in the works of the modernist fathers of the mythical method, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot, and the later literary treatments of 1798 by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc and Stewart Parker, who also used literary and mythical allusion. Nevertheless, it enables him to add tragic dignity to the last days of his protagonist without the necessity of including any romanticising elements that are abundant in his main source, Corkery's *Hidden Ireland*. In this way, MacManus is able to extract a more general meaning from the story of 1798, which displays a distinct feature, ascribed by Benedict Kiely to the whole of his work – “bitter” acceptance of Ireland's tumultuous history and human fate in general.¹⁹

Presbyterians and the Irish Language: Séamas Ó Néill's play *Faill ar an bhFeart*

Men Withering stands out as an isolated achievement in the area of 1798 fiction as its publication was followed by a more than 20 year long gap before the next significant 1798 novel was published – Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque* (1962). Apart from this remarkable novel, two other Irish language fictional treatments of the rebellion were published during the 1960s, although of much lower literary ambitions than Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's masterpiece. Interestingly, no English language novels or plays were published during this decade.

The first of the Irish language works, the novel *Píci Loch Garman* [Pikes of Wexford] (1964) by Annraoi Ó Liatháin is a rather conventional story about revenge, based on the Kavanagh interpretation and accordingly devoting much praise to the resourcefulness of the priest leaders of the Wexford rebellion, contrasting them favourably to the indecisive Protestant gentlemen, such as Bagenal Harvey.²⁰ Apart from testifying to the tenacity of the ‘faith and fatherland’ view of 1798, which re-emerges in

¹⁹ Benedict Kiely, “Praise God for Ireland: The Novels of Francis MacManus,” *Irish Monthly* 76 (Sept. 1948): 404.

²⁰ The rather limited interpretation of 1798 contained in the novel was noticed also by Eoghan Ó hAnluain in his otherwise positive review: “Seachnaíonn sé ar fad nach mór cúlra casta an eirí amach i Loch Garman um Shamhradh na bliana 1798, go háirithe ceist an chreidimh ba bhun leis an deargfhuath agus an bhrúidiúlacht...” [He almost entirely avoids the complicated background of the Wexford rising in the summer of 1798, especially the question of religion which was the cause of much bitter hatred and brutality...] See Eoghan Ó hAnluain, “Review: Píci Loch Garman,” *Comhar* 23.12 (Dec. 1964): 35.

novels well until the end of the twentieth century, it fails to throw any new perspective on the event in question and remains a rather unremarkable realistic novel.

More interesting (although also relatively conventional from the purely literary point of view) is the play *Faill ar an bhFeart* [Opportunity for a Miracle] (1967) by Séamus Ó Néill (1910-81), a prolific writer and journalist from County Down.²¹ Similarly to the earlier novel *Iolar agus Sionnach* by Seán Mac Maoláin,²² the play is set in Ulster. Interestingly enough, however, the action does not take place among Irish speakers, but rather centres around the Presbyterian minister James Porter (1753-1798), a sympathiser of the United Irishmen and author of the popular satire *Billy Bluff and Squire Firebrand* (1796), directed at the aristocracy.²³ In *Faill ar an bhFeart* he is (under the Irish version of his name, “Séamas Poirtéir”) presented mainly as an idealist who continues to defend his politics in confrontation with various characters until being granted a martyr’s death at the end of the play. While the focus on Presbyterians is a commonplace in novels and plays treating the Ulster rebellion, it is relatively surprising in the context of Irish language texts, which, quite naturally from the historical point of view, tend to have Gaelic speaking Catholics as their protagonists and gravitate towards the Wexford and especially the Connacht episodes.

Another unusual feature of Ó Néill’s play is that despite its sustained admiration for Portéir (Porter) as a man of holy principles, it does not give any ready answers to the many questions raised by 1798, but rather keeps them suspended in numerous discussions. So, for example, in Portéir’s discussion with the Catholic priest Ó hÍr in Act I, the protagonist’s Presbyterian radicalism, which sees the ideals of the French Revolution as a continuation of the spirit of Reformation, is confronted with Catholic conservatism and avoidance of violent action even in the face of oppression. At the same time, the validity of both points of view is dramatically acknowledged as the priest stays

²¹ Apart from his well-known children’s poem *Subh Milis* [Sweet jam] (1949), the author gained recognition mainly for his novel *Tonn Tuille* (1947) and *Máire Nic Artáin* (1959), a tragic love story set in divided Belfast during the First World War. See Lesa Ní Mhunchaile, “Ó Néill, Séamas,” *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Vol 7, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 795-796 and Robert Welch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 450.

²² See page 70, footnote 6 of this study.

²³ For biographical information about Porter, see C.J. Woods, “Porter, James,” *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Vol 8, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 232-233.

a faithful friend of the minister even during the scene of his trial. The reasons for the subsequent conversion of the Presbyterians towards Unionism are given with considerable understanding in Portéir's dialogue with his son Alasdar, who after participating in the battle of Ballynahinch complains bitterly about the lack of commitment on the part of the Catholics (significantly calling them with the sectarian slur *Pápairí* [papists]) and brings up the story about the atrocity in Scullabogue, which the father, in his idealism, refuses to believe.²⁴ In another dialogue, in this case with the grandmother of a fallen rebel, Portéir and the United Irishmen are accused of doing too little for poor people,²⁵ thus expressing the class-based criticism that winds like a thread through various fictional treatments of 1798 by many Northern authors. All in all, *Faill ar an bhFeart*, despite being, in aesthetic terms, a rather conventional play, can serve as an interesting example of an Irish-language literary reflection of the rebellion which shares the motifs as well as much of the ideological focus of many other literary representations of 1798 of Northern Irish provenance. It is a proof of the fact, exemplified by this thesis in general, that no strict line can be drawn between the English- and Irish-language treatments of the rebellion.²⁶

The Crumbling of Morality: Sam Hanna Bell's *Man Flourishing*

The 1970s saw a renewed interest in 1798 due to the relevance of the historical event in relation to the incipient 'Troubles' in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, all the three 1798 novels published in the course of this decade, Sam Hanna Bell's *Man Flourishing* (1973), Proinseas Mac an Bheatha's *Cnoc na hUamha* (1978) and Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French* (1979) use the rebellion to address the situation in Northern Ireland, albeit in different ways.

Starting with the most conventional of the three, *Cnoc na hUamha* is an Irish language novel about the family of the Belfast United Irishman Henry Joy McCracken, who subsequently became the main character of Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*. The novel, with its emphasis on Belfast and the United Irish ideology, as well as its socialist

²⁴ Ó Néill 98.

²⁵ Ó Néill 110.

²⁶ The connection of the Presbyterians to the Irish language might not be as contradictory as it seems. The topic is explored historically in Pádraig Ó Snodaigh, *Hidden Ulster, Protestants and the Irish Language* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 1995).

leanings connected the character of James Hope, displays many parallels with other literary reflections of 1798 by Northern Irish authors discussed in this thesis. Of interest is also the emphasis on the cultural efforts of some of the Belfast United Irishmen, manifested mainly in the organization of the Belfast Harp Festival, and their connections to the Irish language. Nevertheless, the novel can be criticised for a lack of originality in its plot, which more or less copies the historical events with the addition of a few elements of romance. Another problematic point is its wholesale celebratory attitude to the United Irishmen, which, similarly to the post-revisionist interpretation of the 1990s, lays all the blame for the bloodshed on the government side only.

The interpretation of 1798 in *Man Flourishing* is undoubtedly more interesting and complex. Sam Hanna Bell (1909-1990) was, unlike many other authors discussed in this thesis, a prominent literary figure, best known probably for his successful novel *December Bride* (1951). He was of Ulster Scots Presbyterian origin and left-leaning political opinions, which makes him a typical member of the Northern Irish radical strand of writing about 1798, represented in this thesis by Stewart Parker and to a degree also by George A. Birmingham.²⁷ These writers shared a focus on Presbyterian radicalism of the 1790s, which they did not interpret in a straightforward nationalistic way, but rather as an inspiration for present radical politics that always included the emancipation of the lower classes.

This feature is very much present also in the novel *Man Flourishing*, the title of which consciously paraphrases the title of the earlier book by MacManus. Similarly to *Men Withering*, Sam Hanna Bell's novel focuses on the life of one individual, James Gault, who serves as a representative of his whole community, in this case the Ulster Presbyterians. In both novels, moreover, the 1798 rebellion appears rather in the background, despite remaining crucial for the development of the plot.

As the titles indicate, however, the fates of both protagonists, Donnacha Ruadh Mac Conmara and James Gault, provide a significant contrast. Whereas the former starts as an

²⁷ For biographical information see Welch 40 and John Devitt, "Bell, Sam Hanna," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Vol 1, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 428-429. The author's background is thoroughly discussed in Douglas Carson, "The Antiphon, the Banderol, and the Hollow Ball: Sam Hanna Bell, 1909-1990," *The Irish Review*, 9 (Autumn 1990): 91-99. For comprehensive information, see Sean MacMahon, *Sam Hanna Bell: A Biography* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1999).

old blind man and at the end of the novel dies in poverty, but in peace, the latter is introduced as a young rebel, forced to hide in Belfast in the aftermath of the rebellion, and ends as a flourishing and respected merchant; however, the peace of his mind remains questionable.

The title of Bell's novel should be therefore taken ironically – in fact, the main topic of the story, as in MacManus's book, is also “withering,” although in this case in the moral, not physical sense. As Edna Longley succinctly puts it, “Bell has a Trollopian finger on the fine gradations whereby morality crumbles before worldly temptation, as the spirit of '98 crumbled before the Union, prosperity, and change.”²⁸ James Gault (and by synecdoche the Presbyterians in general) has a big price to pay for worldly success – including the gradual loss of his religious and political principles, the near breaking of family ties, and even the bad conscience of his wife who had secretly committed a murder.

It may seem from this synopsis that 1798 features as a mere idealised starting point for the moral decline of the protagonist, and that the novel does not have much to offer as regards the interpretation of the historical event in question, but it is not exactly so. The ambiguity of the rebellion, which James Gault and many of his fellow Presbyterians joined on idealistic grounds is both discussed by and embodied in the ambivalent and mysterious figure of the Doctor, the Machiavellian ‘godfather’ of the Belfast underworld, who rescues Gault from his pursuers and for some time shelters him in his house. Declaring himself a man of revolutionary sympathies, he nevertheless criticises the United Irishmen for naive pageantry and for their neglect of the demands of the lower classes, unsuccessfully voiced by men like James Hope – an argument we can come across already in George A. Birmingham and which will re-emerge in Stewart Parker.²⁹

However, the alternative to the United Irish rebellion that is advocated by the diabolic Doctor – the wholesale assassination of all the important members of the Dublin government – sounds outrageous. Together with other criminal methods not only proposed, but actually applied by this sinister character throughout the course of the novel inevitably reminds the reader of terrorist acts perpetrated by the IRA, thus

²⁸ Edna Longley, *The Living Stream: Literature and Revisionism in Ireland* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1994) 102.

²⁹ For the relevant passage, see Bell 42.

emphasising the difference between ideology and Realpolitik, Thomas Paine and Machiavelli, in other words the “great gap between a gallous story and a dirty deed.”³⁰

Another similarity between *A Man Flourishing* and other 1798 novels and plays written by Northern Irish Protestants (especially Stewart Parker, as it will be seen) consists in the deep analysis of the role of religion, more specifically Presbyterian Calvinism, in the conflict and its aftermath. Whereas Stewart Parker largely centres his play *Northern Star* around the concept of predestination, Sam Hanna Bell traces the development of Presbyterianism from a radical doctrine which had inspired the rebels of 1798 to fight for equal human rights to a master ideology used to legitimise the massive inequalities of developing capitalism.

The connection between Protestantism (and Calvinism in particular) and the rise of Capitalism was suggested already by Max Weber in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904-1905). In this seminal text, Weber argues that Protestantism facilitated the advance of capitalism by stressing the spiritual value of work in contrast to contemplation, but also by the influence of the Calvinist concept of divine election, which is visibly manifested by worldly success.³¹ The latter concept, however, can very easily degenerate into a tautology, which simply identifies material riches with God’s grace, thus sidestepping any possible questions of morality, so important to the original Calvinists.

The story of *A Man Flourishing* develops exactly along these lines. At one point of the novel, Gault’s merchant friend, Pringle Hazlett, applies the words of Psalm One on the outcome of the 1798 rebellion: “Whatsoever he [i.e. the godly, moral person] doeth, it shall prosper. As for the ungodly, it is not so with them: but they are like the chaff, which the wind scattereth away from the face of the earth.”³² On hearing that, the protagonist still maintains his reservations. However, the whole story of Gault’s rise in the city can be seen as an illustration of a ‘tautological’ interpretation of this Biblical text – his material success becomes sanctified by the society regardless of the number of moral compromises he has to make in the process.

³⁰ John Millington Synge, “The Playboy of the Western World,” *The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998) 144.

³¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons (Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, 2003).

³² Bell 120.

The change of his opinions can be clearly seen in his attitude towards the growing class of the urban poor, who are kept from starving by a charity run by the wives of leading city merchants. After being asked by his brother-in-law, “And why do they have to get their food that way?” James answers: “Because they are shiftless. They are useless to themselves and the town.”³³ This remark, along with Gault’s subsequent harsh treatment of the strike movement, which his brother-in-law joins, amply shows how far the attitudes of James Gault and the Belfast Presbyterians had moved from the idealism of the 1790s. In this way, Bell was obliquely criticising the leaders of the Ulster Protestant community of the 1970s for ignoring social issues and exploiting sectarianism to buttress social inequality.

Crossing the Boundary between Life and Death: John McArdle Short Story “It’s Handy When People Don’t Die”

The most remarkable event in the 1980s, concerning fictional treatments of 1798, was the first staging of Stewart Parker’s play *Northern Star*, which will, due to its outstanding literary merit and richness of ideas, be treated in a separate chapter. The only other literary work with the rebellion as its principal theme to be published during this decade was John McArdle’s short story “It’s Handy When People Don’t Die” (1981), which was made into an eponymous film.³⁴

It is impossible to disagree with Jim Shanahan that there are striking similarities between this story and the proto-modernist novel *The Wood of the Brambles* (1896) by Frank Mathew:³⁵ rather than addressing the question of how the rebellion should best be interpreted, both texts trace the perceptions of an essentially passive hero during the time of war and revolutionary upheaval when all social institutions and constructs seem to crumble.³⁶ Instead of placing the events in a larger historical context, as it is the case with

³³ Bell 218.

³⁴ The film was directed by Tommy McArdle and released in 1980. The short story was published subsequently in 1981 in an eponymous collection (see footnote 1 of this chapter). John McArdle (1938) is a short story writer, playwright and actor. Apart from the short story collection he has written the plays *Two Houses* (first staged in 1984), *Pláigh* (in Irish, 1988), *Celebration* (1989), and *Out of that Childhood Country*. (1992). Some biographical information can be found in “John McArdle,” *Ricorso*, 30 March 2012 <http://www.ricorso.net/rx/az-data/authors/Mc/McArdle_J/life.htm>.

³⁵ See page 45, footnote 2 of the present study.

³⁶ Shanahan 302.

all the other works treated in this thesis, the short story concentrates rather on the microcosm of a single village in County Wexford after the men had gone fighting under the leadership of F. Murphy, who is, in fact, the only historical figure mentioned. Similarly to MacManus's *Men Withering*, it is a story of people not directly involved in the rebellion, but in this case, the rebellion itself is not thematised, except in its most general outlines as a period of 'the world upside down,' and most importantly, a time when 'people die.'

Interestingly, even such a seemingly apolitical treatment of the rebellion could assume political significance at the time of the Northern Irish 'Troubles.' The author himself described the topicality of the short story and film in the following way: "I was trying to relate the position of the ordinary people of Wexford at the time to that of the people of Northern Ireland today. In both cases, they really don't know what they're fighting for. It's about the sufferers – the people who are left behind."³⁷

The action is structured along the highly subjective impressions of the main character Art, a person who, possibly due to a mental disability or just being 'different,' lives on the margins of the village society. After he deserts the group of villagers marching to rebellion because they do not pay any attention to his existence, he ends up as the only adult man left in the village apart from the village cripple. He does not, however, join the women, but hides from them in his house, out of the fear of "how mad the women would be when the corpses all came back and he wasn't among them."³⁸ After he symbolically dies by falling on a lakeside rock in exhaustion during the initial march, he leads a quasi-ghost existence, venturing out of his house only at night.³⁹

The time-space he inhabits from that time on is characterised by a perpetual blurring of boundaries of multiple nature. The instability of personal identity is indicated already by the naming strategy of the short story – in a similar way as in Pádraic Ó Conaire's Kafkaesque novel *Deoraíocht* [Exile] only the main character (and F. Murphy, who, however, never appears in person) is known by name, the other villagers are given nicknames according to how Art perceives them – such as "The Brown Girl," "The

³⁷ "It's Handy When People Don't Die," *Irish Film and TV Database*, 27 Nov. 2006, 14 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.tcd.ie/irishfilm/showfilm.php?fid=56696> Evening Herald 1/10/1981:8> .

³⁸ McArdle 45.

³⁹ For the passage about the symbolic death see McArdle 43-4.

Cripple,” or “The Cobbler That Had Time to Talk.” Similarly, the border between man and nature disappears as Art’s body seems to blend several times into the surrounding countryside, and the valley where the village is set acquires a body of its own, which is indicated by the fact that Art consistently refers to the rock in its middle, which serves as a place of gathering, as the “belly button.”

Also boundaries of gender are called into question. Art appears as a person of troubled manhood, frustrated in his courtship of The Brown Girl, and transgresses gender stereotypes by shrinking from the fight and frequently crying for various reasons. In the following passage, which describes Art’s initial joining of the rebels, the famous pike of ’98 becomes a troubled sexual symbol:

The blade of the pike trailed the rocks and made like horse’s dust along the slipe-track and, by the time he reached the men, it was cabbered like a set of teeth and the point lay sideways like a dead man’s head. He stood it up on the heel of its shaft like the rest of the men. It was as long as any of theirs.⁴⁰

However, the most important boundary crossing concerns the divide between life and death. This can be already illustrated by the liminal existence of the main character and subsequently also The Brown Girl, who becomes mad from grief over the deaths of her father and her sweetheart. In a memorable scene Art encounters her sleeping under a pile of the dead men’s clothes, which makes him ask her the question: “Are you dead?”⁴¹ In fact, the dead seem to completely dominate the world of the village, as the abandoned inhabitants are most frequently seen at the occasions of wakes, keens, and funerals. This is reinforced by several linguistic images in which the dead change places with the living, such as when a dead rebel is brought into the village: “[...] the corpse pulled the horse in at his own front door and the big man riding behind him got off” or, “Tonight all night the valley would be lively with the corpse.”⁴²

These motifs make the short story “It’s Handy When People Don’t Die,” in a similar way as the *Wood of the Brambles* in the nineteenth century, a highly exceptional fictional treatment of 1798, which keeps the question of political interpretation implicit, and rather

⁴⁰ McArdle 42.

⁴¹ McArdle 51.

⁴² McArdle 46.

explores the rebellion as an example of a liminal time-space which puts into question the givens of more ordinary spaces and times.

The Exuberant Music of the Piper: Colm Mac Confhaola's *Ceol an Phiobaire*

Most probably due to the approaching bicentenary, the 1990s can be seen as the most prolific decade after 1916, as far as literary reflections of 1798 are concerned. Altogether six novels and two plays (one of which, John Hewitt's *The McCrackens*, had been written fifty years before) were published in the course of this period. This may compare unfavourably with the boom of 1798 novels around 1898, but still testifies to the importance of 1798 in this recent decade – a fact which can be also illustrated by the number of historiographical publications of the period, discussed in Chapter Two. Apart from the bicentenary itself, the reasons for this can be seen also in an increased political significance of the rebellion in relation to the peace process in Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, the works generally failed to match the quality of the outstanding novels and plays which had emerged in the preceding decades. Out of the six novels, Gabrielle Warnock's *The Silk Weaver* (1998) is principally a story of love and betrayal which uses the rebellion merely as a suitable background, and Harry McHugh's *The Road to Vinegar Hill: A 1798 Love Story* (1999) is another, this time very conventional, novel of tragic love, unfolding against the background of the 'faith and fatherland' interpretation, to the tenaciousness of which it testifies.⁴³ *The Fiddler of Kilbroney* by Cathleen O'Farrell (1994) is of more interest as it engages more seriously with the political aspects of the rebellion. In many respects, this novel can be considered as the only direct fictional expression of the post-revisionist interpretation of 1798. Similarly to this particular historiographical view the focus of the novel is on the 1790s, rather than on the rebellion itself. Moreover, it places great emphasis on the contacts of the United Irishmen with France and on the penetration of their forward-looking thought among all levels of the society in County Down, where most of the action is set. Significantly, it denies any sectarian input in the rebellion prior to the establishment of the Orange Order, and dismisses sectarian divisions as caused by "a few theological beliefs and superstitious

⁴³ Works of 1798-related popular literature include also Gretta Curran Browne, *The Fire on the Hill* (1991).

fears,”⁴⁴ which might be very much in line with the ahistorical Enlightenment thought of the United Irishmen, but is hardly supportable in the face of the available historical evidence. Despite the fact that the novel pays attention to previously neglected issues, such as the position of women, it generally lacks the deeper insight of the more artistically successful literary treatments of 1798, which, while often sympathetic to the aims of the United Irishmen, did not fear to engage with the more controversial aspects of the rising.

In comparison to the previous three works, Colm Mac Confhaola’s Irish-language novel *Ceol an Phiobaire* [The Music of the Piper] (1997), despite certain shortcomings in terms of structure, deserves more attention as an attempt to integrate the events of 1798 into an ambitious narrative, which combines several interesting threads. As in the case of Eoghan Ó Tuairisc’s *L’Attaque*, the story is written largely from the perspective of ordinary Irish-speaking peasants who took part in the rebellion. In this case the focus is on the men from the Barony of Bantry, who, according to Tom Dunne, formed the largest part of the attack force during the battle of New Ross, the most important military encounter of the Wexford episode.⁴⁵ Unlike Eoghan Ó Tuairisc’s novel, however, *Ceol an Phiobaire* does not limit itself to depicting the events of the rebellion, but presents them only as the climax of a story written in the established genre of the Big House novel. In fact, Mac Craith praises the book as the very first Big House novel written in Irish.⁴⁶ In keeping with this larger layout, the story does not begin in 1798, but starts already in 1793, when the narrator and central character Cathal Ó Ceallaigh returns home from France, where he had attended a college. Most of the subsequent events revolve around his home village Butcher’s Grove, dominated by the local landlord Constantine Butcher.

As Mícheál Mac Craith has pointed out, it is Butcher who turns out to attract the greatest deal of attention in the story, very much in contrast to Cathal himself, who, quite fittingly for the hero of a historical novel, seems to possess not a small portion of

⁴⁴ O’Farrell 313.

⁴⁵ Tom Dunne, *Rebellions: Memoir, Memory and 1798* (Dublin: Lilliput Press 2004) 217-221. For the discussion of their language background see Dunne, *Rebellions* 175-177.

⁴⁶ Mícheál Mac Craith, “Ceol an Phiobaire: úrscéal 1798, úrscéal Gaeilge an Tí Mhóir,” *Féilscríbhinn Ghearáid Mhic Eoin*, ed. D. Ó hAodha and D. Ó Baoill, forthcoming.

Waverleyan insipidity.⁴⁷ Butcher's attractiveness lies in a rare combination of a great number of exciting vices with a few redeeming virtues. The rather sympathetic portrayal of Butcher is the more surprising as he is a type who rarely possesses any positive traits at all in Irish historical fiction – he is a descendant of Cromwellian settlers, full of contempt and racial prejudices against the native Irish, whom he sees as barbarians, and a fierce advocate of strict measures against the rebels. At the same time, however, his miserliness and pomposity make him an enticing comic character, and his ability to show magnanimity at the right moments guarantee him the reader's sympathies.

The subsequent fate of Butcher bears a crucial influence on the interpretation of the rebellion as a whole, which does not lack complexity. On the surface, the novel reveals a clear influence of the 1990s post-revisionist interpretation – in contrast to earlier views of the Wexford rebellion there is considerable stress laid on the United Irish element (the *Piobaire* in the title is in fact the United Irish agent Peadar Byrne, who eventually manages to enlist for the movement most of the members of the Irish-speaking community), and despite the broadly Catholic tone of the novel, the Wexford priest leaders are not given too much prominence. Neither does sectarianism come into question in any significant way; on the other hand, Ó Confhaola does not yield to the temptation “not to talk about the war,” as Roy Foster has it in his critique of the post-revisionists, and apart from government atrocities pays attention also to crimes committed by the rebel side.⁴⁸

Nowhere is it better to be seen than in the scene of the trial and execution of Constantine Butcher, which, significantly, takes place in a barn directly after the battle of New Ross, thus personifying and integrating into the plot the real atrocity at Scullabogue. Despite the efforts of his tenants to save him, he is condemned in a rather carnivalesque trial, reminiscent of the peasant courts in *The Wood of the Brambles*, and brutally piked to death.⁴⁹ Significantly, it is the death of Butcher and the wanton burning of his house, rather than the inevitable failure of the rising, which seals the fate of the Butcher's Grove community: the estate passes into the hands of the landlord's evil-tempered sons, who, after having barbarously punished the village, lay the estate's management into the hands

⁴⁷ Mac Craith, “Ceol an Phiobaire.”

⁴⁸ R.F. Foster, “Remembering 1798,” *The Irish Story* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 226.

⁴⁹ For the passage, see Mac Confhaola 321-324.

of the local informer, Eoinín Céitinn, and move out of the area. The surviving villagers, including Cathal and his wife, are left no choice but to emigrate to America.

The main flaw (but at the same time also often a source of richness) of the novel might be seen in a certain intemperance in interweaving various strands of the narrative, which apart from the topic of 1798 and elements of the Big House novel include purely humorous stories (often with scatological plots), love relationships of the main characters, and treatment of previously rarely represented aspects of village life, such as premarital sex or abortion. As the author works as a translator and is a linguist, it is not surprising that one of the most important aspects of the novel is linguistic – not only is it written in a mixture of English and Irish according to the language used by the characters in a given situation, but frequently also conversations in Greek and Latin appear, and similarly to nineteenth-century Irish novels in English, examples of strong Hiberno-English are used for humorous purposes. The price for this linguistic exuberance, however, are frequent explanations in brackets and footnotes, which, despite being vindicated in the novel by an elaborate fictional manuscript history, still leave an impression of being forced and diminish the reader's pleasure. While the different strands of the novel do not always work well together, the variety included in *Ceol an Phiobaire* nevertheless serves as a proof of the ongoing potential of the 1798 rebellion for innovative fictional treatment. Of special interest is also the integral place of humour in the book, which, while being a common mark of the Big House novel from Maria Edgeworth onwards, appears only rarely in 1798 fiction and drama.

Daemonic Violence: Gary Mitchell's Play *Tearing the Loom*

The only 1798 play written in the 1990s, Gary Mitchell's *Tearing the Loom* (first staged in 1998), testifies to the continuing relevance of 1798 for Northern Ireland.⁵⁰ As Eva Urban correctly argues, the play is essentially present-oriented and instead of imposing any substantial interpretation upon the rebellion, it uses the event primarily as a suitable vehicle for treating paramilitary violence, which was threatening the Northern

⁵⁰ The decade also saw the publication of another play – *The McCrackens* by John Hewitt (published in 1999). The play was probably written shortly after 1948, but had never been previously staged or published. While it is rather a draft than a completed play, it shares many features of other Northern Irish literary reflections of 1798 – it puts emphasis on the United Irishmen and voices socialist opinions.

Irish peace process at the time.⁵¹ In contrast to the broader picture offered by Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, *Tearing the Loom* focuses almost exclusively on the tensions inside the Protestant community. All the action revolves around two families, the Hamills and the Moores, and dramatises the destructive influence of the political tensions of the times on the private and family lives of individuals. This is, of course, a common motif in the general context of Mitchell's work, which mirrors the deep penetration of political ideology into all realms of life in Northern Ireland.

The governing motif of Mitchell's play is similar to the much earlier set of tales *The Nabob* by James Andrew: unreasonable, daemonic violence, which does not stop at anything and is capable of destroying even the most intimate human relationships. We may recall, for example, that the favourite 'pastime' of the *The Nabob's* protagonist Starkie was hanging his victims in front of the eyes of their families. In *Tearing the Loom*, the central motif of violence is introduced already in the prologue, in which the Grand Master of the Orange Lodge Samuel Hamill forces his hesitating son William to murder an innocent Catholic woman. In his fanatic speech, aimed at persuading William, he almost obsessively returns to the motif of daemons, thus projecting his own daemonic characteristics into his victim, making her a scapegoat for all the real and fictitious crimes committed by Catholics in the course of the rising:

Samuel Remember all the children that she slaughtered from Wexford to Down. Hear their cries and think of their mothers, poor heavenly creatures, not like this daemon from hell. [...] Resist the feelings that many righteous men had felt before you. Indulge me and make of this wretch an example to all the daemons from hell.⁵²

This drastic scene is then echoed in the climax of the play, in which Samuel attempts to force his son to hang his former fiancée Ruth Moore for her involvement with the United Irishman Harry. Ruth escapes only by committing suicide, while all this violent action takes place directly in front of the eyes of her father and grandmother. Also in this scene, the motif of the daemonic is repeated, culminating with the grandmother Anne's

⁵¹ Eva Urban, *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011) 92.

⁵² Mitchell 67. Henceforth to be quoted parenthetically in the text.

statement: “It’s the work of daemons.” (122) In contrast to other authors of literary reflections of 1798 treated in this thesis, including, to a certain degree, even James Andrew, Mitchell refuses to give any historical or psychological explanation for this unbridled fanaticism and violence, focusing rather on its unmotivated, literally daemonic side.

The influence of ideologies on domestic life is internalised primarily in the Moore family. Its principal character is the father Robert, who, in a way, gradually develops into a symbolic Job figure, as he witnesses the deaths of both his children, David and Ruth, as well as the destruction of his loom, the source of his livelihood. As much as Eva Urban argues that Robert, like the Catholic victim of loyalist riots in 1997 Robert Hamill, is the “innocent victim” of the play,⁵³ his personality is more complicated for him to be only that. At the beginning of the play he is presented as a despotic father, who denies his children freedom of choice – he severely admonishes his son David for joining the Orange Lodge, and when his daughter Ruth chooses to follow the United Irishman Harry, he warns her: “If you step outside that door you are no daughter of mine.” (93) For this attitude, he is criticised by his mother Anne, who reminds him of his own membership in the secret Protestant agrarian group “Peep O Day Boys” (70) in the days of his youth and of the benevolent attitude of his own father, whose greatest gift to him was “liberty.” (74)

Robert’s motivation for this attitude, however, is understandable as he desperately strives to protect his home against the turbulence of the times. He repeatedly asserts the importance of his house against the political aims of his children, for example in the following exchange with his daughter:

Ruth It is not our liberty broken, when men are prevented from assembling together to discuss matters of great importance?

Robert Let me tell you what is of true importance, Ruth. Everything within these walls is of the utmost importance to us. Outside of them nothing can compare. (80)

or with his son:

⁵³ Urban 108.

David Father, we have do defend Ireland.

[...]

Robert Let me explain something to you, David. I own this house and everything in it. When I die I will pass it on to you. So, be very sure that this house and everything to do with it is the only part of Ireland that we need to protect. (84)

Nevertheless, this attitude proves not only essentially selfish, but also unrealistic as it is of course impossible for Robert to live an isolated existence. Even the initial engagement of Ruth to William Hamill has reasons connected to local politics – the Hamills are one of the most influential local families and Robert needs their support if his weaving business is to be successful.⁵⁴ All in all, while the preference of domestic life to abstract principles can be seen positively (and is often interpreted as such in other literary treatments of 1798, such as Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* or Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*), the failure to recognize the larger picture ultimately proves to be Robert's tragic fallacy.

On the other hand, also Robert's children, who certainly recognize the gravity of the situation and try to act politically in their own way, are not free from blame. The son David joins the Orange Lodge as a revolt against his father, but also due to an urge to defend his country, as he believes "that the United Irishmen are coming to destroy our country and kill us all" (84) and feels indignation at all the horrors perpetrated by Catholics against innocent Protestants in Wexford. However, he does not question his sources and simply believes anything that Samuel Hamill and his fellow Orangemen choose to tell him. When his grandmother Anne questions some of the obvious exaggerations in his description with the words "that's hearsay and story telling," he reacts with words which bear a definite mark of fanaticism: "you hear it the way you want to hear it and I'll hear it the way I know to be true." (87) Despite this, he does not become a complete fanatic in the manner of Samuel and, when mortally wounded at the end of the play, finds an opportunity to repent the deed of murder he committed under Samuel's command (113).

⁵⁴ This, of course, can be interpreted as mirroring the all-penetrating influence of paramilitary leaders in Northern Ireland's working-class areas.

The United Irish characters of the play, Robert's daughter Ruth and her lover Harry, are also, at times, culpable of an ideological distortion of reality, as in their construction of a ubiquitous English influence on the information that is being spread. For example, when Anne questions their decision to emigrate to France, saying that, "You wouldn't survive in France. I've heard that since the revolution people have been starving to death," Ruth argues that this is an invention of the English: "If the English want us to believe that people are dying in France as a result of the revolution then that is what we are going to be told." (104) When Anne defends herself that she has only heard it from her friends who had heard it from other friends, Ruth replies, to a rather humorous effect: "But if you keep going, eventually you will find that someone somewhere heard it from an Englishman." (105) This dialogue, along with David's case discussed above, illustrates not only the ideological bias of the characters, but the instability of information in any revolutionary processes and might as well hint at the unreliable nature of the media in contemporary Northern Ireland.

Nevertheless, both Ruth and Harry are generally portrayed in a positive light in the play, if only for the fact that they are at least capable of dreaming of a better future. Moreover, it is the United Irishman Harry who commits the greatest deed of self-sacrifice in the last act, when he emerges from hiding in the presence of his enemies, the Hamills, in order to volunteer to procure medical help for the wounded David. While the remorseless fanatic Samuel Hamill ensures that the play ends in wholesale tragedy and destruction, the United Irishmen still present a ray of hope in this otherwise utterly pessimistic play. This might be taken as a proof of the ongoing inspiration this movement has had for Northern Irish authors of many shades of political opinion⁵⁵ – despite all its controversies it therefore seems that 1798 has not lost its uniting potential.

⁵⁵ While Mitchell can hardly be described a typical Northern Irish loyalist (a sufficient proof might be the death threats he has received from Unionist paramilitaries), he certainly does not accept the ideals of United Irishmen without reservations. In an interview for *Back Stage West*, for example, he emphasised to the American public the separate identity of Northern Irish Protestants: "I think there's a lot of confusion here about Northern Ireland. Americans don't realize it's a completely different country; it's not Ireland at all. Even after I explain that I'm not Irish, they kind of forget. It's what they're taught. Catholics from Northern Ireland would want you to believe that it's all one country... a little illusion in their heads." Jean Schiffman, "Trust in Controversy: Playwright Gary Mitchell is unafraid to ask tough questions about Northern Ireland," *allBusiness*, 28 Oct. 1999, 14 Feb. 2012 <<http://www.allbusiness.com/services/amusement-recreation-services/4366222-1.html>>.

Summary of Trends

As was mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, the various novels and plays about 1798 written after 1916 are not particularly easy to classify. They display considerable variety in terms of the aspects of the rebellion chosen, dependence on particular historiographical interpretations, as well as position on the past/present orientation axis.⁵⁶ However, it can be argued from this chronological overview that two distinctive strands of writing about 1798 can be separated, especially in works of a more serious character.

The first of them, represented by Sam Hanna Bell, Séamus Ó Néill, Proinseas Mac an Bheatha and Garry Mitchell, focuses on the Northern aspect of the rebellion and the role of the Presbyterians in it. It has been shown already that this topic has a long tradition in 1798 fiction and drama, dating back to the nineteenth century and reappearing in early twentieth-century novels. Following Ansgar Nünning's terminology, it can be described as distinctively present-oriented, projecting contemporary issues into the past. This should not be necessarily considered as an anachronism because in turning to 1798, the Northern Irish authors directly examined some of the causes of the later conflict. Moreover, if we adopt the concept of Irish history as unresolved and 'circular,' as it is discussed in the work of Joep Leerssen,⁵⁷ the late twentieth-century 'Troubles' might be, in the same manner as the Home Rule crisis in relation to *The Nabob*, implicitly seen as a recurrence of the violent events of the rebellion.⁵⁸

A frequent feature of works treating the rebellion in the North is the class analysis of the conflict present in Bell's *A Man Flourishing*, the broadly socialist outlook of Mac an Bheatha's *Cnoc na hUamha* and the focus on the working classes present in Mitchell; generalising the point Eva Urban made about contemporary Northern Irish drama, this

⁵⁶ This analytical tool, used by Ansgar Nünning, determines whether the given historical novel concentrates on the reflection/interpretation of the past itself, or rather uses the past to address present problems. Arguably, every historical novel or play displays both features, but in different degrees. See Ansgar Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metafiktion, Band I* (Trier: WVT Trier, 1995) 106-110, and Chapter One, page 16 of this thesis.

⁵⁷ See Chapter Three, pages 55-56.

⁵⁸ This point is explicitly thematised in Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, cf. especially the quotation on page 149 of the present study.

particular emphasis might well constitute a consistent thread in recent Northern Irish writing.⁵⁹

From the 1970s onwards, 1798 has been increasingly interpreted in relation to the ‘Troubles’ in Northern Ireland, which can be attested also from the historiographical interpretations of the rebellion. This accounts for the fact that even John McArdle’s “It’s Handy When People Don’t Die,” an entirely lyrical story set in Wexford, was intended by the author to address the Northern Irish conflict.

The other strand, represented in this chapter primarily by MacManus and Colm Mac Confaola, centres around the role of Irish speakers in the rebellion. As much as Irish speaking characters necessarily featured also in 1798 novels from earlier periods, the explicit thematising of the role of Gaelic culture in relation to the rebellion in fiction is relatively recent and can indeed be dated first to MacManus. Arguably, this interest was facilitated by the popularity of books such as Daniel Corkery’s *Hidden Ireland* (1924), which drew attention to previously neglected Gaelic poets of the eighteenth century, or Richard Hayes’s *The Last Invasion of Ireland, When Connacht Rose* (1937),⁶⁰ which made available the oral traditions related to the Connacht episode of the rebellion, where the Irish speaking element was the most prominent. The fascination of this topic lies mainly in the interaction between the traditional society of Irish-speaking peasants and the progressive ideology of the United Irishmen, which can also account for its continuing relevance in historiography, as it can be illustrated by the recent work of Tom Dunne and Guy Beiner.⁶¹ As it has been shown, this interaction was largely suppressed in *Men Withering*, but more willingly embraced in *Ceol an Phiobaire*, most probably due to the influence of the post-revisionist interpretation of 1798.

The three outstanding works, which will be analysed in the following chapters, belong clearly to these two strands of 1798 literature. The Irish language and poetry features prominently as a theme in Eoghan Ó Tuairisc’s Irish-language novel *L’Attaque*, whereas Stewart Parker’s *Northern Star* is very much part of the Northern Irish tradition. The third

⁵⁹ See especially Urban 269.

⁶⁰ Richard Hayes, *The Last Invasion of Ireland, When Connacht Rose* (Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1937).

⁶¹ Guy Beiner’s groundbreaking monograph continues in the work of Hayes as it focuses on the oral traditions of the Connacht episode. See Guy Beiner, *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007). The relevant work of Tom Dunne was already discussed in Chapter Two.

of the works, Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French*, falls into both groups. While it focuses on the French campaign in the largely Irish speaking County Mayo and similarly to *Men Withering* features a Gaelic poet as one of its principal characters, it is also very much written against the background of the Northern Irish Troubles and implicitly explores connections between the earlier rebellion and the more recent conflict.

Nevertheless, all three works simultaneously transcend these traditions in important ways, especially if we take into account their formal features. As it was mentioned already, most of the texts discussed so far avoid experimentation and keep to a rather conventional realistic format. The notable exceptions are Andrew James's *The Nabob* with its Gothic elements, discussed in the previous chapter, MacManus's *Men Withering* with its lyrical language and the use of the allusion to *King Lear*, the mixture of styles and genres in Colm Mac Confhaola's *Ceol an Phiobaire* and, of course, the wholesale suspension of realism in the dream landscape of John McArdle's "It's Handy When People Don't Die." In the following chapters, literary techniques and experiments will become more prominent, indicating the wide possibilities of literary fiction and drama in treating historical topics.

CHAPTER FIVE

To Retain One's Humanity Even Among the Inhuman Terrors of War: The Mythical Method of Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*

One of the most inspiring and innovative literary reflections of 1798 is Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's remarkable Irish-language historical novel *L'Attaque*, published in 1962.¹ Thematically, it deals with the Connacht episode of the 1798 rebellion – the landing of a small French invasion force in County Mayo in August 1798 and the subsequent ill-fated campaign of the French and their Irish allies against the overwhelming English forces. Despite its lack of political and military importance in contrast to the Wexford and Ulster rebellions (in *Modern Ireland*, Roy Foster has famously described the campaign as a “footnote to Irish history”)² the Connacht episode has attracted the attention of novelists due to its unique combination of a remote, almost exotic, setting and a turbulent interaction of diverse social forces, with an added interest caused by the presence of the French. The topic emerged in historical novels already in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth (we can mention, for example, *The Races of Castlebar* by Emily Lawless and Shan F. Bullock, published in 1914), featured in Yeats's and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) and was most famously treated by Thomas Flanagan later in *The Year of the French* (1979).

In contrast to Flanagan's broad historical canvas, Ó Tuairisc's novel is much more limited in space and focus. From the point of view of time, it treats only the opening

¹ Born in Ballinasloe, Co Galway, in 1919, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (originally Eugene Watters) graduated from St Patrick's College in Dublin in 1945. He worked as a primary school teacher until 1969 when he decided to write professionally. One of the formative experiences of his life was a brief service as an officer in the Irish Army during the Second World War when he participated in the training of local defence forces whose purpose was to combat an eventual German invasion. War and conflict belonged to the principal themes of his work – apart from *L'Attaque*, arguably the most famous of his works, he wrote also the novel *Dé Luain* (1966), commemorating the 1916 Rising in Dublin, and the long modernist poem *Aifreann na Marbh* (1964), contrasting the banal life in Dublin during the so-called Emergency with the catastrophe of Hiroshima. He wrote also drama (for example *Lá Fhéile Michil* in 1967) and published in the English language as well – the most famous of these works being another modernist poem *The Weekend of Dermot and Grace* (1964). He died in 1982 shortly after finishing a translation of selected short stories by Máirtín Ó Cadhain *The Road to Bright City*. Extensive biographical information can be found in Máirín Nic Eoin, *Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, Beatha agus Saothar* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1988).

² R.F. Foster, *Modern Ireland 1600-1972* (London: Penguin Books, 1989) 280.

stages of the military campaign, ending strategically with the short-lived rebel victory at Castlebar, where the protagonist is mortally wounded. Moreover, in the novel's mere 139 pages the author largely leaves aside the English part of the equation in order to concentrate fully on the various tensions inside the insurgent army, mediated through the eyes of the ordinary Leitrim peasant Máirtín Caomhánach and a small group of his neighbours who had joined the United Irishmen, and subsequently take part in the fighting. The most interesting feature of the book, however, is not its plot, which is very slight, but its remarkable stylistic richness and symbolic texture.

Despite being described by James Cahalan as “one of the most interesting of all Irish historical novels,”³ *L'Attaque* has so far largely escaped wider scholarly attention. The lack of translations along with the complexity of its language and experimental features effectively prevented – with the notable exception of Cahalan – the proliferation of this work outside of the narrow circle of strictly Irish-language scholars. One of the aims of this chapter is therefore to partially compensate for this regrettable critical neglect by placing the novel into the context of other literary or historiographical treatments of 1798.

The Dual Structure of the Novel

Since the novel's publication there has been a disagreement among reviewers and critics regarding fundamental features of the work, which Alan Titley, in his characteristically rich idiom, has compared to “a beehive, an anthill after being stepped upon, a *melée* of cats in a bag, and red haired woman's fingernails.”⁴ Whatever doubts we may have regarding the proper place of fingernails in this simile, it is true that opinions have differed concerning such basic questions as, for example, genre placement – in turn, the book has been described as a traditional historical novel largely shaped after the model of Sir Walter Scott, an ‘unusual’ historical novel, a long short story, an epic,

³ James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983) 174. In spite of Cahalan's generally insightful analysis of the novel, there are passages which hint at an insufficient understanding of individual passages, such as in the discussion of ‘*Sonáí Bán Mac Reachtain's* death,’ where the characters are peculiarly confused. See Cahalan 174.

⁴ “*coirceog bheach agus nead seangán satailte agus coimheascar cat i mála agus ingne mná rua.*” Alan Titley, *An tÚrscéal Gaeilge* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1991) 404. For greater clarity, all longer quotes from Irish language texts referred to in this chapter will be in my own English translations with the original given in the footnotes.

and a prose poem.⁵ While Breandán Delap, in his *Úrscéalta Stairiúla na Gaeilge*, takes great pains to show that the novel is realistic in its description of the past, to the extent that he sees it as the first Irish language historical novel with a pretence at verisimilitude,⁶ this is contrary to the opinion of the reviewer ‘Flann Mac an tSaoir,’ who claimed that “as a story about the events of 1798 I do not think that it has great importance” and that it should be rather praised for its style and richness of images.⁷ Similarly, while one of the objects of critique on the part of the reviewers was its seeming lack of patriotic feeling (“what about the courage, the hope, the heroism, the resilience, the challenge, the long suffering?” wrote ‘Flann Mac an tSaoir,’)⁸ there were also opposite views, such as that of Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh, who commends the novel exactly for its vivid portrayal of the very concept of patriotism, nationalism and collective memory.⁹

Only two critics have offered an explanation for this inherent dualism lying at the core of the novel – Micheál Mac Craith and Alan Titley. Mac Craith looks for it on the level of literary influences, which combine the tradition of the European historical novel including not only Scott, but also Tolstoy, with mediaeval Irish texts of mythological significance and eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry,¹⁰ whereas Titley sees it in the author’s effort “to interweave realism and romance in order to reveal the ambitious idealism of war and the ugly sordidness which follows it.”¹¹ Both insights are greatly relevant for any understanding of the novel, although in Titley’s case, to anticipate one of the arguments of this chapter, it would be probably more revealing to use the word *miotás* [myth] instead of *rómánsaíocht* [romance].

Nevertheless, an even deeper structure can be uncovered if we pay attention to the general artistic method that the author tended to use in most of his work, a method which

⁵ Titley 403-4.

⁶ Breandán Delap, *Úrscéalta Stairiúla na Gaeilge* (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1993) 86.

⁷ “Mar scéal faoi 1798 ní measaim go bhfuil tábhacht mhór ag baint leis.” ‘Flann Mac an tSaoir,’ “Prós Filiúnta,” *Feasta* [Dublin] (Jun. 1962): 21.

⁸ “céard faoin misneach agus an dóchas agus an laochas, an do-chlaoiteach, an dúshlán, an fhadfhulaing?” ‘Flann Mac an tSaoir’ 21.

⁹ Seán Ó hÉigearthaigh, “L’Attaque,” *Comhar* [Dublin] (May 1962): 24.

¹⁰ Micheál Mac Craith, “L’Attaque: Úrscéal faoi Stiúir,” *Macalla* [Galway] (1985): 32-33.

¹¹ “an rómánsaíocht agus an réadachas a mheascadh le chéile chun idéalachas ardaidhmeannach na cogaióchta agus an suarachas gránna a leanann é a leiriú,” Titley 404.

he described most explicitly in his 1962 lecture “Religio Poetae.”¹² In keeping with the title of the essay, the role of the poet, taken in very general terms as a literary writer of any genre, is essentially religious, but with both Latin terms having much wider scope than in their usual sense. Pondering upon the Latin etymology of the word *religio*, which, according to some theories, originally meant “connection,” Ó Tuairisc argues that the main task of the poet is to shape a connection between the two basic cosmic principles described alternatively as man and God, body and soul, this world and the other, the concrete and the abstract, and ultimately, matter and form. Although this may seem as an articulation of traditional Platonism, Ó Tuairisc differs from Plato in the important aspect that he does not give ontological precedence to neither of the pair, but sees them as mutually dependent. For this reason, he argues against an overabundance of the abstract in poetry and rather advocates the creation of general meaning through the use of concrete imagery, based in experience.¹³

These considerations go a great deal to clarify the basic dual structure of *L’Attaque*. On the one hand, as the more insightful critics have pointed out, various features and techniques are used in the novel to place the action in a concrete historical setting and to give verisimilitude to the characters. Given the short space of the novel, these are rather cleverly inserted details than long descriptions. Nevertheless, sometimes special devices are used, such as the juxtaposition of two letters home written (or dictated) by two participants of the rising, the illiterate peasant “An Foghlaeir” Flannagáin, and the Protestant United Irish leader Robert Craigie, which reveal much of the mentality of their respective classes. Another example is the insertion of brief ‘dossiers’ of the members of Máirtín’s company during the scene of the final battle, which reveal their motivations and backgrounds. These techniques give the novel a firm realistic background despite its experimental features, which is lacking in the more impressionistic treatments of the rising, such as *The Wood of the Brambles* or the short story “It’s Handy When People Don’t Die.” Moreover, the underlying figure of synecdoche, used throughout the novel

¹² Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, “Religio Poetae,” *‘Religio Poetae’ agus Aistí eile*, ed. Máirín Nic Eoin (Dublin: An Clóchomhar, 1987) 11-21.

¹³ This basic theory is echoed when he, in other essays, gives more precision to his ideas about poetry and literature in general (which he never separates), for example in the description of the notion of “iomhá” [image], which includes a similar interdependence between the abstract and the concrete. See Ó Tuairisc, “Íomhá an Éin,” *Religio Poetae* 48-52.

with the result that, to a certain degree, the chosen episode stands for the whole rising and the central characters represent various strands of the insurgent army, also brings the novel very close to the tradition of the realistic historical novel, as it was established by Walter Scott.¹⁴ This realism therefore contributes to the fact that, contrary to the above-mentioned opinion of ‘Flann Mac an tSaoir,’ the novel is indeed relevant to our understanding of 1798 as well as the emerging concept of nationalism.

Yet, in keeping with Eoghan Ó Tuairisc’s theory of ‘religio,’ these realistic features are not used merely to accurately describe the rebellion as such, but are carefully framed to convey a more general message. To achieve this, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc chose a ‘mythical’ method, which uses frequent allusions to ancient Irish heroic narratives, such as *Táin Bó Cuailnge* and *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*, to give wider significance to the actions of the characters. In the use of this method, he was closer to its prototypical example in Ireland, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, than to MacManus’s *Men Withering*, discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas in MacManus, the relationship between Donnacha Rua and the archetypal character of King Lear is that of a straightforward simile – Donnacha is *like* Lear and therefore his suffering is significant – Eoghan Ó Tuairisc shares with Joyce an essentially ironic and ambiguous use of myth which casts doubt on the original mythical values of personal valour and heroism.

The Mythical Method, Cattle and Personal Heroism

Already the basic structuring of the novel into three parts bears strong mythical overtones. The first part, which tells about Máirtín’s parting with his newly wedded wife and his decision to join the rising after the landing of the French, is entitled “An gheas,” which can be best translated as “compulsion.” The meaning of the term in its original mythical context is that of a magical injunction or taboo, ungraspable by reason, which the hero cannot transgress without dire consequences and which is often used as a plot-initiating device – very significantly in *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráine* where the hero is placed under a ‘geas’ by the heroine to elope with her from the feast where she is

¹⁴ The ‘synecdochic’ approach is discussed in Delap 75, the influence of Scott in Mac Craith, “L’Attaque” 15-16.

supposed to marry the ageing Fionn Mac Cumhail.¹⁵ Accordingly, throughout the beginning of the book, Máirtín is often shown as failing to mentally grasp the reasons which made him go to war. His initial reaction to the news about the French invasion is negative (one of his more memorable phrases reads: “Damnú air mar phíce!” [to hell with the pike]),¹⁶ and even when we gain access into his mind, he always remains vague about the motivation which ultimately led him to make the decision to join the rising, in the success of which he does not believe.¹⁷ Only later in the book the reader is made aware of the fact that Máirtín’s original compulsion has much to do with his dreamlike meditations on the theme of the *aisling*, which occur several times in the novel. As *Gráinne* happens to be one of the names Irish language literature used for the symbolic woman of the *aisling*, Máirtín can be seen as put under a *geas* by personified Ireland to join the rising.¹⁸ This may remind us of the hero of Yeats’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*; Máirtín’s situation, however, differs in the important fact that his decision is subconscious and is made against his better understanding, as well as in the ambiguous nature of his visions, which will be described later.

The symbolic structure of the whole novel largely hinges on the central metaphor expressed by the title of the second part of the book, *Tóraíocht* [pursuit], which is clearly taken from the very title of *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne*. However, its meaning points also to the other of the two principal mediaeval inspirations of *L’Attaque – Táin Bó Cuailnge* (*tóraíocht* and *táin* can be seen as broad synonyms). As Mac Craith argues, the title of the third part, *Leaba dearg* [lair, but literally “red bed”], points to the symbolic end of this pursuit while maintaining the mythological connection by the association with

¹⁵ The connection to *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* is explored in Mac Craith, “L’Attaque” 19. The concept of *geas* or *geis* (in its original spelling) in Old Irish writing, especially in relation to kingship, is discussed in Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1990) 136-137. The most important fact in this connection is that the breaking of a *geis* invariably results in the death of its bearer.

¹⁶ Ó Tuairisc, *L’Attaque* 15.

¹⁷ A good example is the passage describing Máirtín’s reaction to the gathering of the rebels in Ó Tuairisc, *L’Attaque* 33-4. It ends with “D’fhiafraigh sé de féin den bhfichiú huair céard a thug dó bheith ar an láthair sin.” [He asked himself for the twentieth time what made him to come there.]

¹⁸ The connection between Máirtín’s compulsion and the female figure of the sovereignty myth is explored in Mac Craith, “L’Attaque” 19-24.

Leapacha Diarmada agus Gráinne [beds of Diarmuid and Gráinne], the places where the legendary lovers rested at night while on the run.¹⁹

On the realistic level, *tóraíocht* refers to the exhausting march of the insurgent army and the French from Ballina to Castlebar, but the mythical connections sharpen our awareness to other layers of meaning. Firstly, it describes the journey of the main character on the symbolic level. In contrast to the aims of his companions, stated in their dossiers during the scene of the final battle, Máirtín's goal has a mysterious ring to it: "to hunt from its lair the secret of his life which he did not understand." (121)²⁰ This secret may seem to refer, initially, to the proper meaning of the above-mentioned figure of the sovereignty myth, but as it shall be seen, it later achieves a much more general significance that is at odds with simply conceived nationalism. Secondly, the metaphor of pursuit has metaliterary meaning, which points to the effort of the author and of literature in general to discuss fundamental human questions. It is not by chance that the word *tóraíocht* is used also as the title of one of the parts of the lecture "Religio Poetae," delivered shortly after the novel's publication – the language of *L'Attaque* is clearly echoed in the phrases "through his art, without any guidance but that of his craft, the *Poeta* arrives at the fundamental meaning of the world," or "the poet to does not recognize any other aim, but to hunt for the truth, wherever it is, by means of words."²¹ As James Cahalan has pointed out, a similar multiple meaning is contained also in the closing sentence of the book, "Tá an Táin déanta," [The *Táin* has been completed] which does, through its mythological allusion, simultaneously refer to the end of the battle, the death of Máirtín, and the completion of the novel as a work of art.

While the allusions to *Tóraíocht Dhiarmada agus Ghráinne* have mainly structural function and acquire ironic overtones only in connection with the Woman of Ireland trope to be discussed later, the references to *Táin Bó Cuailnge* [Cattle Raid of Cooley] are more straightforwardly ironic. This can be easily seen by tracking two important motifs in the

¹⁹ Mac Craith, "L'Attaque" 22.

²⁰ "rún a bheatha nár thuig sé a sheilgeadh óna leaba dearg."

²¹ "Trí mheán a ealaíne, gan treoir ar bith ach treoir a cheardaíochta féin, tagann an *Poeta* ar bhunbhri na cruinne." "Ní aithníonn an *Poeta* aidhm ar bith eile ach an fhírinne, cibé áit a bhfuil sí, a shealgadh trí mheán na bhfocal." Ó Tuairisc, "Religio Poetae" 15, 16. As it is implied by the phrase "without any guidance but that of his craft," and supported by the context, the truth in question is no revealed dogma, but subjective artistic truth.

novel – the motif of cattle and the motif of personal heroism, personified mainly by Máirtín’s brother-in-law Lúcas Mistéil.

As the central theme of the *Táin* is the pursuit of the Brown Bull, all references to cattle in *L’Attaque* can be seen as implicitly bearing an allusion to this mythological text. In contrast to the *Táin*, however, the use of the cattle motif in Ó Tuairisc’s novel has a much more mundane flavour. In fact, the only non-ironic mention of cattle in *L’Attaque* occurs at the very beginning when Máirtín, induced by the lowing of cattle from the valley below engages in a reverie, which, in keeping with the tone of the beginning of the book, emphasises the motif of fertility and leads up to Máirtín’s desire to improve his life as a farmer:

The lowing of cattle. [...] It reminded him of the fragrance of reddish soil, the field full of golden ears of corn, the green common pasture covered with cow-dung and beaten by the split hooves of the beasts as the music of the lowing announced milking time. The word of the poet arose in his memory. Silk of the Kine. [...] He quickly threw another sod on top of the heap of turf. He himself had two goats, tied to a nearby furze bush. But with God’s help they will have one, he and Saidhbhín, a spotted cow, silk of the kine, and a comfortable place on the terrace of the mountain.²²

The use of the name Silk of the Kine anticipates the *aisling* motif and in it the subsequent development of the novel, as it refers to a famous eighteenth-century political poem *Droimeann Donn Dílis* [Beloved Brown White-Backed Cow], in which the cow, as a slightly down-to-earth version of the vision woman, clearly represents Ireland.²³ Nevertheless, the emphasis in this pastoral image is undoubtedly on domestic happiness, which, despite being shattered shortly afterwards, will remain an ideal right to the end of the book. This emphasis is supported in the passage by the desymbolising of the name “Silk of the Kine” and its return to the concrete image of the spotted cow.²⁴

²² Géimneach na mbó. [...] Samhlaíodh dó cumhracht na hithreach deargtha, an cuibhreann diasórga, an coimín glas faoi bhualtrach bó agus é in aon easair amháin faoi chrúbaí scoilte na mbeithíoch agus ceol a ngéimní ag fógairt uair na bleachta. Priocadh focal an fhíle i gcuimhne dó. Síoda na mbó. [...] Chuir sé fód isteach de shnap ar fhóir na cruaiche. Dhá ghabhar a bhí aige agus iad ar chuingir i measc an aitinn. Ach le cúnamh Dé bheadh sí acu lá éigin, aige féin agus ag Saidhbhín, bheadh an riabhaichín acu, síoda na mbó, agus áit sheascair ar léibheann an tsléibhe.

²³ The anonymous poem was published in Seán Ó Tuama and Thomas Kinsella, ed., *An Duanaire 1600-1900: Poems of the Dispossessed* (Mountrath, Portlaoise: The Dolmen Press, 1985) 310.

²⁴ Interestingly, the mention of “Silk of the Kine” calls to mind Stephen Dedalus’s internal monologue in the opening episode of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, where the name refers to the milkwoman. Both passages share the

When the cattle motif, however, becomes connected to that of war, irony becomes the dominant trope. This becomes clear already in the string of associations Máirtín's wife Saidhbhín has when looking at the picture of the holy manger immediately after the news of the French invasion reach their cabin. The image of the ox sheltering baby Jesus together with the threat of imminent war recall a local tale related to the battle of Aughrim:

Although it was not mentioned in the history book she used to read to Máirtín at the fireside, she had often heard of the slaughter the *Dutchies* made of Ó Ceallaigh's herd at Aughrim at the time of the big war. In that mad fight, a Frenchman's head was cut clean off his body. An iron ball, as Johnny Mistéil said, a shot from a big gun.²⁵ (14)

The connection of this rather ludicrous folk narrative with a decisive battle, the reminiscence of which could well serve as a motivation for the Mayo rebels, casts ironic doubt on the heroic endeavours of the insurgents from the very beginning.

The irony of such references deepens throughout the course of the novel. The Aughrim story, taken from the English-language folklore of the author's native Ballinasloe,²⁶ features also in the account the cattle drover Taimí Mac Niallais gives about the apprehensions accompanying the coming of the French:

After that people were saying that both sides would requisition the cows and sheep, every egg, potato and lump of butter in the area in order to feed the soldiers and that they would kill the beasts in vast numbers as the *Dutchies* did at Aughrim of the Slaughter...²⁷ (20)

Later in the novel, the members of Máirtín's company themselves turn into cattle drovers, and therefore ironic counterparts of the heroes of the *Táin*. At the first instance

basic ironic connection between a nationalist symbol and a concrete, rather down-to-earth image, although in Joyce's case the context is significantly more irreverent. See James Joyce, *Ulysses* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1986) 12.

²⁵ "Cé nach raibh trácht air sa leabhrán staire a léadh sí do Mháirtín cois tine, ba mhinic a chuala sí a hathair ag cur síos ar an ídiú a d'imir na *Dutchies* ar bhólacht Uí Cheallaigh ag Eachdhroim aimsir an chogaidh mhóir."

²⁶ Ó Tuairisc, "Béaloideas na Galltacha," *Religio Poetae* 108.

²⁷ "Bíothas á rá ina dhiaidh sin go ngabhfadh an dá thaobh seilbh ar na ba agus ar na caoirigh, ar gach ubh, gach práta agus gach glaicín ime sa dúiche chun an lucht troda a bheathú, agus go maróidís na beithigh ina sluaite gan áireamh mar a rinne na *Dutchies* ag Eachdhroim an Áir..."

they have to fight their way through the confusion of carts and cattle jamming the road to Ballina, the place where they meet the French and where they, to fulfil Mac Niallais's prediction, manage to partake of a double dinner of roasted beef. The irony reaches its climax during the battle of Castlebar when the insurgents attempt to break the enemy's ranks by driving a herd of cattle against the British artillery. While this was a well attested rebel tactic, highly successful, for example, in the battle of Enniscorthy during the Wexford episode,²⁸ Eoghan Ó Tuairisc presents it as a futile endeavour resulting in pointless slaughter, while making an explicit reference to *Táin Bó Cuailnge*:

They have turned into cattle drovers. The best of men. The valiant lions of poetry. Armed revolutionaries in uniform fighting for *Liberté* and *Egalité*, heroes of the finest Gaelic stock loyal to Róisín Dubh and the Silk of the Kine, were in the end nothing but cattle drovers driving the best Mayo beef before them as a defensive shield against Britain's artillery.

[...]

In a reluctant deluge of meat and bone, soft frightened eyes, and tails stretched between legs, the great herd moved down the slopes of the valley. No sound came from the multicoloured ranks of the enemy on the hill beyond, one could hear only the lament of the cattle, the voices of men urging them forward, and the merciless blows of wooden clubs. The creatures moved sniffing forward on the surface of the moor, their dribbling muzzles tasting the foul smell of gunpowder. The hill exploded into life and sent eighteen artillery shots right between their horns. Then the commotion was definitive. The herd panicked completely, tails stretched upwards, the clatter of hooves as the maddened animals tried to climb on each other's backs, the thumping of horns in a ferocious struggle, the chains beheading them and the canister shots splashing drops of blood and slices of meat into their eyes. The compressed mass of beef turned to flight, lowered their horns and performed an attack for the sake of *Liberté* back through the ranks of the revolutionaries until animals and pikemen alike were running as in the *Táin Bó Cuailnge* in all directions away from the non-epical realism of King George's artillery.²⁹ (109-110)

²⁸ See Thomas Pakenham, *The Year of Liberty: The Story of the Great Irish Rebellion of 1798* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1969) 199.

²⁹ "Ina ngiollaí tiomána a bhí siad. Na sárfhí. Leoin lánéachtacha na filíochta. Na réabhlóidithe in arm agus in éide ar son an *Liberté*, ar son an *Égalité*, na laochra de phríomhshliocht Gael a bhí dílis do Róisín Dubh agus do Shíoda na mBó, gan iontu i ndeireadh na dála ach giollaí tiomána agus mairteoil Mhaigh Eo á slad rompu mar sciath chosanta idir iad agus miotal na Breataine.

...

Ina rabharta doicheallach d'fheoil agus de chnámha, de shúile boga scaollmhara, d'eireabail sínte go ríghin idir na gabhail, ghluais an t-olltréad le fána sa ghleanntán síos. Ní raibh gíog as sraitheanna ildaite an namhad ar an ardán thall, ní raibh le cloisteáil ach olagón an eallaigh, glórtha na bhfear á mbascadh rompu, plancanna míthrócaireacha na geleith ailpín. Chuaigh na créatúir ag smúracht rompu amach ar an riasc, na

It is such passages as this that made probably the most insightful of the novel's critics, the above-mentioned Mícheál Mac Craith, to call *L'Attaque* the "anti-*Táin*" of Irish literature.³⁰

Since the *Táin* and Old Irish writing in general lays great stress on deeds of personal valour, also the ironic portrayal of personal heroism in *L'Attaque* can be seen as a mythological allusion. These references concentrate on the character of Máirtín's brother-in-law Lúcas Mistéil, the most committed of the Leitrim company of insurgents. Notwithstanding that similar figures of patriotic young men are often glorified in Irish historical novels, in *L'Attaque* Lúcas does not retain many positive traits. Already at the beginning of the novel, when the small company of United Irishmen gathers in a school, he is seen by Máirtín as impatient, "wearing a French uniform already in his mind," (25) and refusing the right of speech to his friends by shouting "all of us will go" (25) after the leader Robert Craigie's assurance that men with responsibilities at home do not yet have to join the rising.³¹ Already at this point he is compared unfavourably with Máirtín, who is aware of the full consequences of his decision.

At the gathering before the march to Ballina, where the French army waits for Irish recruits, we meet Lúcas without a hat, coat or scarf as he is expecting to be soon given his desired uniform (34), and his carelessness makes Saidhbhín implore Máirtín to keep an eye on him during the war (40). When he is appointed to the rank of sergeant, he quickly becomes overbearing and turns a blind eye on the suffering of his fellow soldiers, for example when the young drummer Jack Duprat asks him for permission to stop marching for a while and relieve his feet, injured by his ill-matched boots, in a nearby stream (66).

sróna pislíneacha sínte go talamh ag bolathú bhréantas an ghunnaphúdair. Phléasc an t-ardán ina bheatha agus lascadh ocht gcinn déag d'urchair ordanáis idir na hadharca orthu. Is ann a bhí an chaismirt críochnaithe. D'imigh an tréad chun scaoill ar fad, na heireabaill ina gcolgsheasamh, clagarnach na gerúb ag dreapadh le báiní ar chromáin a chéile, tuargaint na n-adharc i ngleic cuthaigh coimhlinte, an slabhra séidte á ndícheannadh agus an ceaineastar pléasctha ag scardadh braonacha fola agus stiallacha feola sna súile acu. Chas an meall dlúite mairteola ar chrúba sceimhle, thug fogha adharc-íslithe ar son an *Liberté* trí ranganna na réabhlóidithe ar ais nó gur ndeachaigh idir phíceadóirí agus bheithígh ina dTáin Bó Cuailnge ar sraoille reatha soir siar roimh réadachas neamheipiciúil ordanás an Rí Seoirse."

³⁰ "Déanta na fírinne d'fhéadfaí breathnú ar *L'Attaque* mar Fhrith-Tháin." [Truly, *L'Attaque* could be regarded as anti-*Táin*.] Mac Craith, "L'Attaque" 26.

³¹ "go raibh éide mhíleata na Fraince á chaitheamh cheana féin ag a dheartháir céile ina aigne istigh," "Rachaimid go léir!"

Also in this instance he is presented in a contrast to Máirtín, who solves the situation by contradicting his orders and helping Jack.

During the battle of Castlebar, Lúcas manages to shoot the first enemy, in which he is cheered by his companions. Ironically, however, this particular enemy turns to be their Protestant neighbour Hely Hankins, whom we remember from the following exchange, which took place between the village idiot Abbaí and one of the insurgents at the beginning of the book:

“Are you really going to murder the Yeos?” he [Abbaí] asked with eagerness. “Do you think Hely Hankins from Lochán will be with them? I hope old Hankins will be there and you will give him a proper one in his guts. Confound him, he gave me a rotten shilling when I was driving a herd of sheep for him to the fair at Droim an Fhíniola.

[...]

“Stop that chatter, Abbaí,” said Peadar Siúrtáin. “You should know that we are not rising for the sake of a rotten shilling, but for the sake of democracy.”³² (36)

The interplay between this passage and Lúcas’s deed in the battle shows very illustratively that personal commitment and idealism are no defence against the ugly reality of (civil) war, which, at least in the case of 1798, necessarily included the killing of neighbours by neighbours.

The ironic connection between Lúcas and the heroes of the *Táin* culminates in the scene of his death that inevitably takes place after he attempts to destroy a British cannon by running against it with a pike. Mac Craith has shown in great detail how this scene corresponds to a real episode from the later battle of Cooley, when the United Irish leader Barthelomew Teeling rode through the enemy’s crossfire in order to shoot a gunner who was inflicting great casualties among the insurgent ranks.³³ In contrast to the real event, however, and to its portrayal in Flanagan’s *The Year of the French*, in which Teeling’s

³² “An bhfuil sibh chun murdar ceart a imirt ar na Yeos?” d’fhiafraigh sé go cíocrach. “Meas tú an mbeidh Hely Hankins an Locháin amuigh leis na Yeos? Tá súil agam go mbeidh sean-Hankins ann agus go dtabharfaidh sibh sna putóga dó é. Scairt mhaidine ar an seanbhastard, thug sé scilling lofa dom lá a thiomáin mé scata caorach ar aonach Dhroim na Fhíniola.”

[...]

“Caith uait do chabaireacht, ‘Abbaí,’ arsa Peadar Siúrtáin. “Bíodh fhios agat nach ar son scillinge lofa ar bith atáimidne ag éirí amach, ach ar son an deamocrasáí.”

³³ Mac Craith, “L’Attaque” 27.

heroism is prominent,³⁴ Lúcas's action in *L'Attaque* is presented as entirely futile and pointless, while, through the use of the pike instead of pistol, brought deliberately close to the single combats of the *Táin*, where the spear features as the favourite weapon.³⁵

Although we will see later in this chapter that heroism, despite all the irony, has its place in *L'Attaque*, it is definitely not heroism in the traditional meaning of the word, epitomised in the underlying mythological texts, which are constantly satirised in the interplay between the two levels of the narrative.

The Aisling and the Ambiguous Reception of the United Irish Ideology

Having examined the basic double structure of the novel, the actual interpretation of the rising contained in it must be discussed. Given the novel's relatively early year of publication and its focus on Irish-speaking Catholic peasants, it is surprising that unlike MacManus's *Men Withering* (1939) or Annraoi Ó Liatháin's *Pící Loch Garman* (1964) it seems to contain hardly any trace of the influential interpretation of F. Patrick Kavanagh discussed in Chapter Two. In definite contrast to Kavanagh, there is room in the novel for the United Irishmen and their ideology, although no attempt is made to hide the fact that it became strangely distorted among the peasant population. Unlike the peasants of Kavanagh's Wexford, who join the fight out of sympathy with the Catholic cause, or, even more typically, because they are driven by unbearable oppression, Máirtín and his companions are indeed members of the United Irish organisation who have received at least some kind of political instruction (36). The small company of Leitrim peasants fulfils, as least nominally, the ideal of the union of creeds as promoted by Wolfe Tone, as they are led by the idealistic Protestant landowner Robert Craigie and the Presbyterian Mr Ormsby (a principally comic figure, but nevertheless treated sympathetically).

The portrayal of Robert Craigie strikes an interesting contrast to the pictures of Protestant United Irishmen in two comparable novels, MacManus's *Men Withering* and Flanagan's *The Year of the French*. In the first of the two, they are presented as virtuous and honourable, but an impenetrable boundary separates them from the withering 'Gaels,' who are defined in essentialist terms by their descent, language and religion, whereas in

³⁴ See Thomas Flanagan, *The Year of the French* (London: Arrow Books Ltd., 1979) 288.

³⁵ Mac Craith, "L'Attaque" 27.

Flanagan's account they usually resemble the traditional image of the Wexford United Irish general Bagenal Harvey, who repented to have unleashed dark forces which he had not comprehended properly until it was too late. Robert Craigie, on the other hand, is presented as an idealist who sincerely strives to overcome the embedded prejudices and understand his fellow countrymen.³⁶

In this highlighting of the positive message of the United Irishmen as an inspiration for the creation of an inclusive national identity, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc (similarly to Stewart Parker two decades later) in a certain manner anticipates the post-revisionist interpretation of Kevin Whelan and his colleagues in the 1990s. Similarly to Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* (and after all, also Colm Mac Confhaola's *Ceol an Phiobaire*, discussed in the previous chapter), however, he does not shrink from the horrors of the war and does not exculpate the insurgents from violent deeds committed by them. While the selected episode of the rising avoids the crucial issue of the massacre at Scullabogue, the chosen 'anti-heroic' format well enables the author to portray the atrocities on the rebel side. Again, a synecdochic approach is chosen: the killing of Hely Hankins discussed above serves as an example of neighbourly violence, while the brutal piking of two escaping enemy soldiers, which Máirtín performs in the heat of battle (126) stands for the general dehumanising effects of war as such. Unlike the post-revisionists, moreover, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc does not present these atrocities as aberrations, but in a certain sense as unavoidable consequences of the rising.

The United Irish message is moreover problematised by its ambiguous reception among the ordinary Irish-speaking peasants in the novel, a fact that is well in keeping with the available historical evidence.³⁷ This complex reaction is one of the main themes of the book, carefully and consciously elaborated by the author, if we are to trust the following quotation from a letter he wrote to James Cahalan, explaining his choice of the topic of the French invasion:

³⁶ This, at least, is made explicit in the letter he writes to his wife after having secretly watched the members of his company chanting the rosary at night (21).

³⁷ Most of the evidence comes from songs and poetry, especially from the output of Mícheál Ó Longáin. The relevant bibliography has been already mentioned in footnote 56 at the end of Chapter Three (page 65).

I was attracted by the theme of the impact of a dynamic, revolutionary, atheistic force upon a static peasant population who by sheer tribulation and passive resistance had survived a hundred years of a penal colonial regime coldly calculated to keep them socially, politically, and intellectually poor and impotent. Violence was rare amongst them, and their language had nothing of the sharp impact of the French word *attaque*.³⁸

In order to analyse the portrayal of this reaction in *L'Attaque*, it may be useful first to turn attention to the methods Ó Tuairisc chose to create an illusion of access into the peasant mind, significantly shaped by poetry and the oral tradition.³⁹ This effort can be traced already to the choice of the main historical source. Unlike Thomas Flanagan, whose novel draws from written documents, such as the eyewitness account of Joseph Stock, the Anglican Bishop of Killala, and is even shaped in a quasi-documentary fashion, Eoghan Ó Tuairisc chose Richard Hayes's study *The Last Invasion of Ireland, When Connacht Rose* (1937), at the time the only history book which attempted to reconstruct the events of the Connacht episode from oral sources.⁴⁰

Throughout the novel, a strong connection is made between peasant mentality and Gaelic poetry. This can be recognized already on the formal level: Mac Craith has pointed to the extent of how direct quotations from poetry permeate both the narrative and the direct speech of the characters and other examples could be added to his list (including the frequent use of traditional proverbs and idioms, which are an even more directly oral genre than poetry).⁴¹ Of interest are occasional anachronisms such as the use of the saying "Beidh lá eile ag an bPaorach," (42, 114) [Power will have another day] which originated first in 1799,⁴² or "Teacht an earraigh beidh an lá 'dul chun síneadh," (114) [with the coming of the spring the days will get longer] a line from *Cill Aodáin* by

³⁸ Cahalan 170.

³⁹ The extent of this influence is still, to a degree, a moot point among historians. While Daniel Corkery wholly embraced the view that eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry expressed the view of the Irish-speaking community in general, Louis Cullen held the opposite opinion. Tom Dunne essentially returned to the older view, while being much more critical to the tradition itself. See Daniel Corkery, *The Hidden Ireland: A Study of Gaelic Munster in the Eighteenth Century* (1924; repr. Dublin: M. H. Gill, 1941), Louis Cullen, "The Hidden Ireland: Re-assessment of a Concept," *Studia Hibernica* IX (1969): 7-47, and Tom Dunne, "Subaltern Voices? Poetry in Irish, Popular Insurgency and the 1798 Rebellion," *Eighteenth Century Life* 22.3 (1998): 31-44.

⁴⁰ Ó Tuairisc's historical sources are discussed in Nic Eoin, *Eoghan Ó Tuairisc* 161 and Cahalan 174.

⁴¹ Mac Craith, "L'Attaque" 23.

⁴² Terry Moylan, ed., *The Age of Revolution in the Irish Song Tradition, 1776-1815* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 2000) 80.

the poet Antaine Raiftearaí, who, according to Ciarán Ó Coigligh, was not even born at the time of the rising.⁴³ Even more conspicuously, an allusion can be found to Pádraig Pearse's *Fornocht do chonac thú* (1912) in a meditation on the *aisling* theme to be discussed further.⁴⁴ The reference to this widely known later poem indicates that rather than results of carelessness, the anachronisms are a deliberate assertion of the continuity of the Gaelic tradition in which Ó Tuairisc placed himself.

This tradition, which contributes greatly to the poetic beauty of the text, however, is not taken at its face value and used to formulate a definite political position as it is the case in MacManus's *Men Withering*. Instead, it is seen as problematic and inadequate to the new situation of the rebellion. In a crucial passage, which has a direct connection to the French title of the book (and echoes the words of Ó Tuairisc's letter quoted above), the parish priest of Máirtín's village explains to the local schoolmaster that the Irish language lacks a suitable expression to describe the new situation of the rebellion:

One word you said, Johnny, to shape the story into one single word. We do not have such a word. [...] We eat our portion, play our bit of music, suffer poverty and oppression and put up with the tyranny man inflicts upon man as if it was a punishment for the old man's sin in the garden between the two worlds. We accept God's will and say proverbs about the sweet fruits of patience and about the better days that will come and place all our hope in the afterlife. And look, Johnny, this philosophy shaped our language in such a way that you can't find any word for the dire necessity of this morning."

"Rising," said the Master.

"Poetic language, a term coming from the heart. This rising of yours is just a word from old tales, a shape of feeling which was born in the imagination of the poet and made its way into old people's sayings. This fine August morning, Mánas, we need another word. A term without abstraction which would explain to us our new necessity and the resolution in the hearts of the handful of men who set out on their journey."

He paused and blew his nose ferociously.

⁴³ According to Ciarán Ó Coigligh, Raiftearaí was born in 1799. See "Raiftearaí, Antaine," *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Vol 7, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009). Even if the poet was born in 1784, as Ó Tuama and Kinsella state, he was arguably too young at the time of the rising to have composed the poem or for it to have reached wider circulation. See Ó Tuama 248.

⁴⁴ "[...] thabharfadh sé cuid mhaith ar a háille a fheiceáil fornocht." [...he would give much to see her beauty naked.] Ó Tuairisc, *L'Attaque* 78, see page 113 of this thesis. The allusion has been noted also in Mac Craith, "L'Attaque" 23.

“Indeed,” he said after he had finished sneezing. “I have heard such a word abroad when I was young.”

“What word is it, Father?”

“*L’attaque*.”⁴⁵ (42)

The French word “*l’attaque*,” which made its way into the title of the book, is seen by the priest to be able to give a certain form and sharpness to feelings of resolution, which could otherwise be mediated only by an idiom overdependent on poetic imagination and ‘old people’s sayings’ – in short, traditional ways of expression unsuitable for the present purpose. It is possible to suggest that the contrast between the Irish and the French language as presented in this and other passages can be best interpreted in the framework of the theory of orality and literacy as epitomised in the work of Walter C. Ong, or Peter K. Fallon in the Irish context.⁴⁶ Roughly speaking, these theories describe the manner in which different technologies of communication shape our perception of the world. The oral mode of communication, predominant (albeit not exclusive) in the culture of the Irish-speaking peasants at the end of the eighteenth century, is characterised in Ong’s work by immediacy and closeness to human life, as well as the capability of creating great works of verbal art (such as Homer’s epics). On the other hand it is seen, simply

⁴⁵ “Focal amháin a dúirt tú, ’Johnny, an scéal a dhealbhú i bhfocal amháin. Níl an focal sin againn. [...] Caithimid ár gcuid agus déanaimid ár ngiota ceoil, fulaingmid an bochtanas agus an ghéarleanúint, cuirimid suas leis an tíorántacht a imreann an duine ar an duine óir is é an pionós é a thig de pheaca an tseandúine i ngairdín idir an dá shaol. Agus cuirimid ár dtoil le toil Dé agus canaimid an seanfhocal nach é lá na gaoithe lá na scolb, seans go mbeidh lá eile ag an bPaorach agus tá ár ndóchas uile ar an saol thall. Agus féach, ’Johnny, gur múnlaíodh an teanga dúinn den fhealsúnacht sin i slí is nach bhfuil focal ar bith i do bhéal agat do ghéarghá na maidine seo.”

“Éirí amach,” arsa an Máistir.

“Friotal fileata, téarma a thagann ón chroí. Níl san éirí amach sin agat ach focal fianáiochta, múnla mothaíochta a gineadh i samhliocht an fhile nó go mbeadh sé ina nathán cainte in agallamh na sean. Tá focal eile de dhíth orainn, a Mhánais, an mhaidin bhreá Lúnasa seo. Téarma gan teibíocht a chuirfeadh i gcéill dúinn an riachtanas nua seo againn agus an rún atá i gcroí an ghlaicín fear a d’imigh chun bóthair.”

Thost sé, fogha fíochmhar á thabhairt aige faoina shrón a shéideadh. “Sea mhaise,” ar seisean nuair bhí deireadh lena sheifidíl, “chuala mé focal mar sin ar an gcoigrích tráth bhí mé óg.”

“Cén focal é sin, a Athair?”

“*L’attaque*.”

⁴⁶ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge 1991); Peter K. Fallon, *Printing, Literacy, and Education in 18th Century Ireland: Why the Irish Speak English* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2005).

due to the technical necessity of memorising every single item of knowledge, also as highly conservative and dependent on traditional formulas.⁴⁷

The above quoted dialogue therefore reflects the difficulty oral cultures in general have in adapting to new situations: the two characters, who belong to the few literate members of the community, feel the necessity to borrow a word from a different language in order to describe the situation “without abstraction,” i.e. independent from the traditional conceptual systems of the oral culture.⁴⁸ The priest’s choice of French over English is thematically connected to the French invasion and is in keeping with the historical fact that during the Penal Laws, Irish Catholic priests were educated on the continent, often in France.

One of the most prominent genres of eighteenth-century Gaelic poetry is the *aisling* and it is hardly surprising, given the prominence of this poetry in the novel, that it is present also as one of the principal themes of *L’Attaque*. It appears not only in poetic echoes, but also in the dreams and meditations of the main character Máirtín Caomhánach, who, as a son of a poet and schoolmaster, is deeply influenced by poetry in his thinking. The presence of the vision woman functions on the one hand as a motivating force, but unlike the case of Yeats’s *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* discussed in Chapter Three, it is seen at the same time as problematic. In contrast to a typical eighteenth-century *aisling*, in which the poet encounters a female figure representing Ireland and receives from her a coded political message, Máirtín’s visions are much more ambiguous. In a dream passage, quoted also by Micheál Mac Craith, he connects the image of the allegorical female with the remembrance of his deceased mother and his wife, who he had left at home:

⁴⁷ “Since in a primary oral culture conceptualized knowledge that is not repeated aloud soon vanishes, oral societies must invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. This need establishes a highly traditionalist or conservative set of mind that with good reason inhibits intellectual experimentation.” Ong 41.

⁴⁸ I have attempted to use the orality/literacy theory to explain both the ambiguities in immediate Irish language reflections of the rebellion and the treatment of the oral culture in *L’Attaque* in the above-mentioned article “‘Nil an Focal Sin Againn:’ Orality, Literacy, and Accounts of the 1798 Rebellion,” *New Hibernia Review* 14.1 (Spring 2010): 112-27.

Ireland. The name continued to gather richness in his mind. He desired to reveal its secret, he would give much to see her beauty naked; but he failed, as he failed always, to incarnate and to gather the richness of the vision into an exact word, and nothing was revealed to him except for the stench of the smoke inside and the whining of the dog outside in the night. He felt a motherly bosom rise and fall under his cheek, and it saw the face leaning over him. Flax-coloured eyes with golden sparks swimming inside them.

They will not come to you, my love, he said.

With affection, he placed his hand on her waist. He felt a trembling inside her, movement of a new thing pushing forward to life in her womb, became jealous and envious of the pregnancy, and loathed the voice that was calling him through his nightmare to wake up.⁴⁹ (78)

Mac Craith rightly stresses the fact that it is impossible to separate the female figures in this and two similar passages. Even the mention of the pregnancy, which seems to point to Máirtín's wife Saidhbhín only, can be interpreted as referring to the rebellion itself being carried in Mother Ireland's womb.⁵⁰ This interpretation is supported by two other places in the novel, in which events of the rebellion are described in terms reminiscent of the act of giving birth. When the insurgents approach Castlebar through a mountain gap, it is seen as "the body of the revolution to be born through the old narrow pass,"⁵¹ (81) and similarly, shortly before his death, Máirtín crawls as an infant from the womb through a narrow passage between town houses in Castlebar to see the final rout of the enemy (133).

On the other hand, it is impossible, when reading the passage above and the other *aisling*-related passages, to avoid the impression that the real women are given definite priority in the text. This is true especially concerning Máirtín's wife Saidhbhín, whose eyes, described in exactly the same words also elsewhere in the novel (31), are recalled in

⁴⁹ "Éire. Lean an t-ainm ag cnuasach saibhris ina intinn. Ba mhian leis rún an ainm a nochtadh, thabharfadh sé cuid mhaith ar a háille a fheiceáil fornocht; ach chuaigh de, mar a chuaigh i gcónaí de, saibhreas na haislinge a ionchollú agus a chnuasach i bhfocal cruinn, agus níor nochtadh dó ach bréantas na toite istigh agus geonáil an mhadra san oíche amuigh. Mhóthaigh sé an brollach máithriúil ag éirí agus ag titim faoina leiceann, fuair se léargas ar an aghaidh a bhí claonta os a cionn. Súile ar ghoirme bhláth an lín agus aithinní beaga órga ar snámh iontu.

Ní rachaidh siad isteach ar an urlár chugat, a thaisce, ar seisean.

Leag sé lámh go ceanúil ar a coim. Mhóthaigh sé inti an chleitearnach, iomlat an ruda nua a bhí ag sracadh chun maireachtála ina broinn, agus chuaigh sé in éad agus i bhforad leis an toircheas a bhí ag teannadh chucu, ba ghráin leis an guth a bhí ag glaoch trína thromluí air chun éirí suas."

⁵⁰ Mac Craith, "L'Attaque" 23. For the other passages, see Ó Tuairisc, *L'Attaque* 102, 129.

⁵¹ "Corp na réabhlóide le saolú tríd an tseanbhearna chaol."

the image. Moreover, given the overall ambiguous presentation of the rising in *L'Attaque*, the child-rebellion carried by the allegorical female is inherently problematic, leading not only to the short-lived triumph at Castlebar, but also to horrors of war as well as the death of the main character. It may be therefore plausibly argued that by reference to the pregnancy, Ó Tuairisc implicitly, and by subtle means, problematises the nationalist myth by presenting the woman-Ireland (interestingly, as Mac Craith has pointed out, one of the names used for her in the Gaelic tradition was Sadhbh)⁵² as essentially barren, and in contrast to Saidhbhín, unable to bring real new life.

This critical distance is further corroborated by the inability of Máirtín to penetrate the *aisling*, to arrive at its deeper meaning, a theme that is present not only in this extract, but in numerous other passages in the novel. We may therefore conclude that the *aisling*, as much as it may motivate the characters, is treated in similar terms as the Irish language and the Gaelic tradition itself – as inherently problematic and only partially able to give form and expression to the situation which arose with the landing of the French.

This lack of form and resolution, which mark the native tradition, seem to be, in certain passages, compensated for by external influences – the United Irish message (personified by the company's captain Robert Craigie), and the presence of the French with their military training and the ideals of the French Revolution. For example, when Robert Craigie and Mr Ormsby finally arrive at the gathering of insurgents in the village of Crosaire, Máirtín experiences a feeling of relief: “The arrival of the gentry was like a relief of mind. Robert Craigie had control over the eruption of soul, his personality was able to restrain the ancestral heritage which made them set out for the road that morning.”⁵³ (38) To an even greater extent, also the French are seen as being able to give a certain more definite form to the peasant consciousness, shaped by long oppression and largely dependent on dated forms of oral culture, as it has been described above. The process of bestowing form is presented materially by the giving out of uniforms and imposing some kind of military order, but also emotionally and symbolically, as, for

⁵² Mac Craith, “L'Attaque” 22.

⁵³ “Ba gheall le faoiseamh aigne é do Mháirtín Dubh na huaisle a bheidh tagtha. Bhí an brúchtaíl anama faoi cheannas ag Robert Craigie, chuir a phearsantacht srian leis an dúchas sinseartha a spreag amach chun bóthair iad an mhaidin seo.”

example, when the reluctant Máirtín believes at the sighting of the French soldiers for the first time that there was a definite meaning to the impulse (presented initially in mythological terms as “an gheas”) which took him and his companions so far from home (48), or when the *Marseillaise* leads the soldiers of two nationalities and various religions and social classes into the final attack at Castlebar (115-24).

It is not surprising, however, given the historical evidence and the crucial role of irony in *L'Attaque*, that this process of ‘nation forming’ with the help of outside influence is at the same time ironically undermined throughout the novel. This tendency is especially prominent in the portrayal of the interaction between the French and the Irish. Significantly, the military uniforms, which have been mentioned as symbolising the new form of consciousness, are told to be frequently sold by the recruits for drink, something which chimes well with the descriptions provided in the eyewitness account of Bishop Stock.⁵⁴ A frequent device in the book is to juxtapose the more solemn passages with down-to-earth or even humorous situations – for example the description of Máirtín’s feelings at the first sighting of French soldiers is immediately followed by a dialogue in which the Irish soldiers are mocking the French language. French slogans like “Liberté, égalité, fraternité” appear in all sorts of irreverent contexts and also misunderstandings between the French and their Irish allies abound in the book, culminating in a chapter directly before the final battle in which general Humbert’s thoughts are presented when he is riding in front of the ranks of his army. In his internal monologue, punctuated by the frequent exclamation “que diable,” the French commander laments the state of ignorance and superstition which characterises, in his view, the Irish peasants, and does not hesitate to compare them to his former enemies, the Catholic peasants of La Vendée, who had rebelled against the revolutionary government in France (85-89).

Also the above-mentioned image of the *Marseillaise* leading both French and Irish soldiers into the final and successful attack on Castlebar features more than a touch of irony. As it has been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the powerful depiction of soldiers marching to victory singing “Allons, enfants de la patrie, le jour de gloire est arrivé” is, in a rather original way, interspersed by brief ‘dossiers’ of various members of

⁵⁴ Joseph Stock, *A narrative of What Passed at Killala, in the County Mayo, and the Parts Adjacent, During the French Invasion in the Summer of 1798* (Limerick: John and Thomas McAuliff, 1800) 30-31.

Máirtín's company from County Leitrim. These short paragraphs reveal not only large differences in personal background, education and interests of the soldiers, but also in their motivations for taking part in the conflict in the first place. Whereas Captain Robert Craigie wants to put into practice the ideals of the United Irishmen and "establish a republic in his native land following the constitutions of America and France,"⁵⁵ (120) the former wandering scholar Peadar Siurtáin has openly sectarian aims, "to release the Catholic faith from the persecution of the Dublin government, establish democracy and suppress Protestantism,"⁵⁶ (123) and the aims of the less educated soldiers are much more simple in the manner of "to do a little bit of fighting for the sake of Ireland."⁵⁷ (124) Judging from these examples it is clear that the unity and form brought by the French never becomes complete and ultimately fails even in the moments of its greatest triumph.

It may seem from what was discussed that the outcome of the novel are merely various types of failure – the traditional concept of heroism, the native tradition of the *aisling* and the ideals of the French Revolution are all, in turn, put under scrutiny and found inadequate. In spite of this, the novel should not be regarded as pessimistic. Significantly, the only aim which comes to fulfilment in the short space of the novel is the already-mentioned objective of the main character, Máirtín Caomhánach, "to hunt from its lair the secret of his life which he did not understand."⁵⁸ (121) He achieves this symbolic goal after being mortally wounded during the battle of Castlebar and during the ensuing scene of his death on a garbage heap in one of the side streets of the town. When the revelation comes, it immediately transcends the meaning of the *aisling* trope, which originally seemed to be the goal of Máirtín's pursuit. At first, it has the form of a negative statement, "cailltear gach cath" [every battle is lost],⁵⁹ but ultimately becomes more a

⁵⁵ "Poblacht a bhunú ina tír dhúchais ar lorg Bhunreacht Mheiriceá agus Bhunreacht na Fraince."

⁵⁶ "An creideamh Caitliceach a fhuascailt ó ghéarleanúint Rialtas Bhaile Átha Cliath, an daonlathas a bhunú, agus an Protastúnachas a chur faoi chois."

⁵⁷ "Spairn beag troda a dhéanamh ar son na hÉireann."

⁵⁸ For the Irish original, see page 101, footnote 20.

⁵⁹ To grasp fully the meaning of this crucial sentence, which has been understood by the reviewer Murchadh Mac Diarmada as a sign of deep pessimism, it is useful to compare this instance in *L'Attaque* to the use of the same phrase in Ó Tuairisc's essay "Canúnachas," where the context is the fight between civilisation and barbarism, conceived as the worship of popular idols of imperialism, nationalism, language, market etc.: "...cailltear gach cath a chuirtear ina coinne mar ní mór dúinn an cath céanna a throid arís agus arís eile..." [...every battle is lost which is waged against it [barbarism] as we have to fight the same battle

matter of feeling and images than of words,⁶⁰ as it is indicated, for example, by this passage: “[his mind] received a vision of the truth through transitory symbols of this world on the garbage dump behind the town, on the Monday of Judgement. He did not think by means of words any more, everything appeared, in an exceeding proportion, directly to his eyes.”⁶¹ (130)

Already the fact that the “secret of his life” is, contrary to Máirtín’s (presumed) expectations, not revealed in language, but in emotions and images, may be read as subversive of any ideology, United Irish, French revolutionary or otherwise, as these are primarily verbal constructs. This critique is also made explicit. During the scene of his death, as if in order to reach a higher insight, Máirtín, at least on a personal level, rejects war and the ideologies which led to it: he repents the brutal killing of two English soldiers, who were trying to escape from him, forgets the French slogan “vive la Revolution,” which was leading him into the battle (127), and tries to tear off pieces of green ribbon, a United Irish symbol, sown to the top of his stockings (130). Although *L’Attaque* cannot be considered a standard anti-war novel because the legitimacy of the Rising and the United Irish ideals are not questioned as such,⁶² the symbolic journey of the main character reveals a humanist, rather than militaristic, set of values: while battle cries and heroic deeds in combat are being consistently ironically undermined, much positive attention is drawn to seemingly insignificant deeds of compassion, such as when Máirtín, during an exhausting night march through rain and storm volunteers to search for his lost companion in the middle of a bog (72), or even more powerfully, when he, during an intermission in the battle, turns an insignificant beetle from its back on its legs to save it from death (99-100).

again and again...] Ó Tuairisc, “Canúnachas,” *Religio Poetae* 25. It becomes clear that the phrase signifies not the meaninglessness of any fight or effort, but only the impossibility of a final victory. For the review in question, see Murchadh Mac Diarmada, “L’Attaque fa Ionsaí!” *Agus* (May 1962): 20-21.

⁶⁰ The relevance of the concept of the image as a non-totalizing expression of reality has an interesting parallel in the novel *The Year of the French*. See page 136 of this thesis.

⁶¹ “Fuair sí léargas ar an bhfirinne trí shamhaltais díomuana an tsoil seo i láithreán fuílligh ar chúl an bhaile mhóir Lá an Luain. Níor mheabhraigh sí trí mheán na bhfocal níos mó, taibhsíodh gach rud go soiléir as cuimse di trí mhéan na súl.”

⁶² A sound judgement of the attitude of the novel towards war can be found in Mac Craith: “Ní féidir dul i muinín an fhoréigin gan an daonnacht a thruailliú agus a dhíluacháil. Glacann Ó Tuairisc le riachtanas an cogáiochta i *L’Attaque* ach ní dhéanann sé iarracht ar bith uafás na cogáiochta a mhaolú.” [It is impossible to resort to violence without leaving a stain on humanity and diminishing its value. Ó Tuairisc in *L’Attaque* accepts the necessity of war but makes no effort to mollify its horrors.] Mac Craith, “L’Attaque” 32.

These ‘unheroic’ deeds and friendly interchange on the basic human level are meaningful also on the level of interaction between various groups in the insurgent army – in fact, they become the only means of creating unity, given the general unreliability of ideological constructs in the book. For example Robert Craigie, who is, despite his well-meaning disposition, initially received ambivalently by the ordinary peasants due to his different religious and class background, virtually becomes one of them after he, in a rather humorous passage, partakes with his men of biscuits stolen by one of the soldiers from the French (89-90). We may also mention the scene where, during the night march in the second part of the book, the Irish soldiers willingly help the French to carry a piece of artillery over a rocky piece of road (74). Despite its lack of military glory, it seems to be the only passage in the novel when the French ideal of fraternité reaches its fulfilment at least for a short moment. True heroism, in the view of the novel, does not lie in heroic deeds on the battlefield, but in the ability to retain one’s humanity even among the inhuman terrors of war – and that is what remains after both the native *aisling*, symbolism and politics, and the ideals of the French Revolution ultimately prove barren.

Ó Tuairisc’s *L’Attaque* can be rightly considered an outstanding historical novel about 1798, especially for its ability to interweave, in a rather short space, a range of literary influences and for its highly successful application of the mythical method. While *L’Attaque* and *Ulysses* are in most respects very different books, it may be added that similarly to James Joyce’s masterpiece, the use of this method in *L’Attaque* is essentially ironic and therefore subversive to ideologies and mythologised historical narratives. The view of the rising emerging from the book is not only exceptionally balanced (especially if compared to the historiographical interpretations), but also, in the manner of the best literary texts treated in this thesis, able to make important general points, in this case mainly about the influence of war on the human condition. Of special interest is the treatment of the Irish language tradition in the novel, which is able to present the events from the rare perspective of the ordinary peasants while acknowledging its limits at the same time. Similarly to John McArdle, Ó Tuairisc focuses on the experience of

participants in the rebellion who have left little direct historical record and who had only limited understanding of the event and why they got involved in it. Along with the balanced portrayal of the rebellion in the novel, which does not downplay the suffering on either side of the conflict, it is especially this feature which brings *L'Attaque* close to the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur. It may be argued that in his novel *Ó Tuairisc* was able, in an imaginative way, to give expression to the memory of “the vanquished and lost,”⁶³ discussed in Chapter One of this thesis.

The two literary works to be discussed in the following chapters, Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French* and Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* share certain characteristics of *L'Attaque*, but add two important dimensions – the metahistorical level, which thematises the nature of history as such, and an increased topicality connected to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

⁶³ Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit. L'intrigue et le récit historique* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1983) 143. See also page 23 of this study.

CHAPTER SIX

“Bits of Broken Pottery”: the Fragmentary Method of Thomas

Flanagan’s *The Year of the French*

One of the most ambitious (as well as most successful) 1798 novels of the twentieth century is undoubtedly Thomas Flanagan’s *The Year of the French*, published in the United States in 1979. The author was a distinguished Irish scholar, who worked as a professor of literature and wrote widely about nineteenth-century Irish novels and Irish history.¹ Consequently, the book betrays much of his extensive and thorough scholarship, and contains much more minute historical detail than any of the other works of literature treated in this thesis. In addition, the novel is highly valuable for its interesting pseudo-documentary form, the challenging interpretation of 1798 it contains, as well as its powerful commentary on the nature of history itself.

The Year of the French, as the title indicates, is based on the same episode of the rebellion as Ó Tuairisc’s *L’Attaque* and inevitably contains some similar scenes. However, the differences between the two novels are possibly more striking than their common features. On the most obvious, realistic level, Flanagan’s book is much more extensive in both time and scope, which is hardly surprising given the difference in length. It follows the Franco-Irish army all the way from Killala to its final defeat at Ballinamuck and beyond, and offers a wide range of perspectives including various shades of the ‘English’ opinion.

Another difference can be found in the portrayal of the Irish-speaking peasant culture, prominent in both books. As it has been shown, *L’Attaque* is written prevalently from this culture’s perspective, which is achieved by the use of orally-based sources, intertextual

¹ Thomas Flanagan (1923-2002) was born in Greenwich, Connecticut as a third-generation Irish American, all his grandparents having emigrated from county Fermanagh. After finishing his studies he worked as Professor of English at the University of California in Berkeley and New York State University. Apart from *The Year of the French* he wrote two other historical novels, *Tenants of Time* (1988) and *At the End of the Hunt* (1994). His most important scholarly works include *The Irish Novelists, 1800-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958) and *There You Are: Writings on Irish and American Literature and History* (New York: The New York Review of Books 2004). For biographical information see Robert Welch, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Irish Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996) 197, and Owen D. Edwards, “Flanagan, Thomas,” *Dictionary of Irish Literature A-L*, eds. Owen D. Edwards and Robert Hogan (London: Aldwych Press, 1996) 444-447.

reference to Gaelic mythology and poetry, and after all, the very language of the book. In *The Year of the French*, despite the fact that it features the fictional Gaelic poet Owen MacCarthy as its principal character, this perspective constitutes merely one of its many voices. In fact, Gaelic peasants are more often viewed as if ‘from the outside’ than ‘from the inside.’ As Cahalan has argued, the predominance of the “upper-class points of view” in Flanagan’s novel therefore makes *The Year of the French* “a valuable complement” to *L’Attaque*.² Rather than a limitation, it is therefore more useful to regard this ‘external’ view of Gaelic culture simply as a result of the overall perspective of the book. As it will be shown, Flanagan was able to trace as many nuances and contradictions inside the English-language literary tradition as Ó Tuairisc was able in the Gaelic, predominantly oral one.

Maybe the most important difference between the two books in question, however, lies on the structural level. Whereas *L’Attaque*, similarly to the play *Northern Star*, uses the method of mythical and literary allusion in order to structure the events, make ironic connections, and to give wider significance to the actions of the characters, Flanagan’s novel purposefully defies any such structuring principle. This is very much given by the rather complex metahistorical undercurrent of the book, which has been only partially noted by the novel’s reviewers and critics.³ In the following lines, therefore, an attempt will be made to relate the way history is presented and reflected upon in *The Year of the French* to the existing interpretations of the 1798 rebellion in Irish historiography as well as to the relevant concepts in the theory of history, as they were discussed in the second and first chapter respectively.

***The Year of the French* and ‘Revisionism’**

In his monograph mentioned in Chapter One of the present study, Ansgar Nünning neatly divided the corpus of the British historical novel into the categories of documentary, realistic, revisionist, and metahistorical (along with the already discussed category of historiographic metafiction, which is, however hardly distinguishable from

² James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983) 198.

³ The only critic to draw attention to one of the numerous metahistorical passages in the book at least was Benedict Kiely. See: Benedict Kiely, “Thomas Flanagan: The Lessons in History,” *A Raid into Dark Corners and Other Essays* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000) 166.

the last type mentioned).⁴ It is of definite interest that *The Year of the French* largely defies these categories by virtually being ‘all at once.’

The category of documentary can be used to relate to the structure of the book, which intersperses passages in the third person mediated through various reflector-narrators with a collage of fictitious diaries, letters and eyewitness accounts, presented as written by a number of the novel’s characters. Moreover, at least one of these accounts, Arthur Vincent Broome’s *Impartial Narrative of What Passed at Killala in the Summer of 1798*,⁵ is clearly based on a real historical document and generally it can be argued that Flanagan’s book is most probably the most thoroughly researched novel on 1798 ever written. The quasi-documentary structure bears relation also to the metahistorical level of the text as it emphasises the fragmentary nature of the historical record, which, as it will be seen, is one of the principal themes of the book.

The terms realistic and revisionist, in Nünning’s typology, are largely defined by their relation to official historiography – while realistic novels endorse its findings and are complementary to it, revisionist novels challenge official pictures of history by creating alternative interpretations.⁶ While this distinction may have some validity in countries such as Great Britain, where history is not such a contested issue, it becomes problematic in cases such as the 1798 Irish rebellion, which, as it has been shown, has been constantly reinterpreted in historiography and politics well until the present day. Turning back to Flanagan’s novel, strong links can be established to the ‘revisionist’ strand of Irish historiography, analysed in the second chapter of this thesis. In spite of the fact that this strand clearly belonged to ‘official’ historiography, it was at the same time ‘revisionist’ as far as it achieved to destabilise the established nationalist version of Irish history.

The closeness of Flanagan’s own opinions to the ‘revisionist’ emphasis on the element of sectarianism in 1798 can be easily seen, for example, from his 1990 review of Marianne Elliot’s biography of Wolfe Tone. There Flanagan argues that in contradiction to Wolfe Tone’s ideals and to his great regret, “the rebellion had turned into sectarian

⁴ Ansgar Nünning, *Von historischer Fiktion zu historiographischer Metafiktion, Band I* (Trier: WVT Trier, 1995) 256-292.

⁵ Broome’s narrative is directly based on the already discussed eyewitness account of Joseph Stock, who was Protestant Bishop of Killala at the time of the French invasion. See Joseph Stock, *A narrative of What Passed at Killala, in the County Mayo, and the Parts Adjacent, During the French Invasion in the Summer of 1798* (Limerick: John and Thomas McAuliff, 1800).

⁶ Nünning 262-276.

violence at its most savage, Catholics and Protestants murdering each other under the banners of their rival creeds.”⁷ He also emphasises that Tone’s words of regret “are worth quoting also because today, in one part of Ireland, the sectarian killers on one side of the divide imagine that they act within a tradition of patriotic murder and martyrdom for which Tone lay down the terms, both by word and by example,”⁸ and praises Elliot along with Roy Foster as “one of a number of young Irish historians who offer to their countrymen the lenses of actuality rather than the mirrors of mythology.”⁹ This chimes both with the political motivation of the revisionist interpretation and its underlying theoretical assumptions, which, as it has been shown, combine Rankean belief in the objectivity in history with the distrust of larger historical narratives associated with Karl Raymund Popper.¹⁰

Evidence of this view of the rebellion can clearly be found also on the pages of the novel. The figure of the ‘regretting Wolfe Tone’ is reflected in the character of the Protestant United Irishman Malcolm Elliott, who, after witnessing the sectarian turn of the rising in Wexford becomes doubtful about the whole idea of rebellion and continues to act only on a vague principle of honour. When, at the desperate stage shortly before the final battle of Ballinamuck, the Killala curate Murphy, who sees the rebellion as a holy war against Protestants, is asked by the French general Humbert to deliver a speech to the insurgent army, the idealist Elliott loses the last of his illusions:

[...] And yet it was not as a Protestant that I took the greatest offence. I had once seen in our conspiracy a union of hearts, pledged to sweep away forever the rancorous discord of creeds by which our land was disfigured. It had proved a vain hope, nursed in Dublin and Belfast by city-bred men, lawyers and merchants and physicians. Beneath the dark skies of Ireland, between bog and ocean, moorland and hill, it crumbled to dust.¹¹

Seen in this light, the United Irish ideology absolutely fails to take hold among the rank and file of the insurgents and the United Irishmen, while they are presented in the

⁷ Thomas Flanagan, “Wolfe Tone,” *There You Are* 360.

⁸ Thomas Flanagan, “Wolfe Tone” 361.

⁹ Thomas Flanagan, “Wolfe Tone” 362.

¹⁰ See Chapter Two, pages 13-14 of this study.

¹¹ Thomas Flanagan, *The Year of the French* (London: Arrow Books Ltd., 1979) 367. Henceforth to be quoted parenthetically throughout the text.

book with human sympathies, are depicted as unrealistic dreamers with little knowledge of the circumstances that they planned to change by their intended revolution. By an ingenious way of juxtaposition, they are likened to the Girondist party of the French Revolution, which is the principal object of study of another character, the rich Catholic landlord and historian George Moore.¹² In his view, the Girondists were skilful and idealist orators, who, due to their lack of knowledge of practical politics, were soon swept away by the forces of history. In George Moore's own rather sarcastic words, which are, in the total context of the novel, clearly directed against the United Irishmen and other eloquent figures of Irish nationalism:

Above all else, the Girondists prided themselves upon their oratory, and doubtless it is by their oratory that they will be remembered. Of these circumstances, the first may be said to have defined their weakness, and the second may serve as their epitaph. "Here lie, headless, certain high-minded public figures. They spoke well." (67)

Flanagan's position as regards the interpretation of the rebellion, however, is far from adopting the 'British point of view' as the 'revisionists' have been, not entirely justly, accused of. Very much because he did not accept the black and white picture of the nationalist version of Irish history, he was able to subject certain aspects of the British policy to a very subtle and scathing critique, the more biting because it comes as if 'from within.'

One of the intriguing features of Flanagan's multiplicity of narrators is that they not only present the rebellion from different points of view and thus destabilise any definitive narrative of it, but that the individual narratives are often as if destabilised 'within themselves,' revealing some conflict inside the character in question. It is significant that some of the most interesting of these conflicts take place in the minds of two narrators who represent in the novel 'the British side' of the equation.

One of them is the fictitious Major General Sir Harold Wyndham, whose memoirs *Youthful Service: with Cornwallis in Ireland* provide a source of information on the British military campaign directed at suppressing the rebellion. Through the overall triumphalist tone of his account a definite misgiving recurrently emerges, connected to

¹² He was a real person, the grandfather of the famous Irish novelist of the same name.

the brutal manner of suppressing the rebellion, especially the wholesale massacre of the surviving Irish rebels during the battle of Ballinamuck. This misgiving finds expression in Wyndham's repeated efforts to exculpate his much admired commander, General Cornwallis, from this deed, for example when he states that the orders of Cornwallis to General Lake, who had immediate command during the fatal battle, were "open to interpretation." (316) Wyndham's continuing bad conscience, despite the fact that he did not take part in the battle directly, is betrayed by his almost obsessive returning to the theme of the massacre, which reveals that, deeply inside, he sees it as defining for the whole campaign.¹³

His efforts to dissolve this guilt in the triumphalist narrative of British imperialism result in passages of supreme irony, given the subsequent development of the Anglo-Irish relations. After praising the benefits of the Act of Union, he explains the place of Ireland in the British commercial interest:

A wealthy land Ireland can never be, but she has since the Union proved herself abundantly capable of acting as England's granary, shipping to us her cattle and the produce of her fields, and thus ensuring her own modest measure of our prosperity. And so should it continue, for so long that the potato proves able to supply her poor with a cheap and universal food. Ireland has had her continuing share of civil disturbances in this present century [...] but her population continues to grow. Indeed, as I pen these lines: more Irishmen stand up on her fields than at any other time in her troubled history. Long may flourish the Union and the potato, say I, and three huzzas for honest Paddy in his cabin. (404)

This passage, as Thomas Morrissey has observed, contains a definite ironic foreboding of the disaster of the Famine half a century later.¹⁴ Along with the whole of Wyndham's memoirs it is a proof of a particular strength of Flanagan's 'revisionist' position, which, by dismantling the black and white nationalist narrative, can acquire a degree of empathy with the British side and thus, paradoxically, make highly subtle enquiries into the more sinister aspects of the British conduct.

¹³ One might be tempted to draw a parallel with the treatment of the Scullabogue massacre in novels and histories treating the Wexford rebellion, analysed in chapters 2 and 3.

¹⁴ Thomas J. Morrissey, "Flanagan's *The Year of the French* and the Language of Multiple Truths," *Eire-Ireland* 19.3 (Fall 1984): 11.

This approach is present to an even greater degree in the development of Arthur Vincent Broome, the Protestant minister of Killala, one of the principal characters of the book and arguably its most important direct narrator. As it has been mentioned, his narrative of the rebellion is clearly modelled after the historical eyewitness account by Bishop Stock, whose palace served as temporary headquarters for the French army during the campaign. By transforming Bishop Stock into the fictional Reverend Broome, however, Flanagan succeeded in creating a much more subtle character, capable of profound inner change.¹⁵ Similarly to Wyndham, Broome is an Englishman who, at least at the beginning, appears to be proud of the British Empire and shares many typical English prejudices against the Irish peasants, whom he often describes as barbarous and dominated by superstition. However, his gift of empathy and deep-held Christian belief that every human being has equal value lead him to a reaction far different from the evasive tactics of Wyndham. In his account, he frequently pities the state of poverty in which the majority of Mayo peasants live, criticises the brutal government methods of suppressing the rebellion, and even displays an ambivalent desire to penetrate the Gaelic-speaking culture, as in this passage from the beginning of the novel:

Darkness hides them from me, and my sympathy is un-Christian and chill. Most earnestly do I wish to enter their lives, yet everywhere my wish is mocked ... by a cabin bursting with music, by the thronging foreign faces at markets and fair days, by dancers in a meadow, by the sounds of an alien speech. ... It seems to me a land furiously guarding its meager secrets, gloating over its incomprehensibility. (30)

His desperate effort to understand the world around him leads him to a state of puzzlement and eventually to a shattering of his deep-held 'British' values. His view of the peasant culture, even after he manages, to a certain degree, to get rid of his prejudices, is deeply ambivalent. On the one hand he describes it as something rooted in the dark ages, impenetrable by reason and potentially dangerous, especially after encounters with sinister characters such as the local rebel leader "Captain" O'Kane, who displays an indiscriminating hatred of Protestants and of the English language, and in a gesture

¹⁵ Flanagan describes the reasons for this transformation in "History as Fiction, Fiction as History," *There You Are* 426.

reminding of the latter-day Irish Free State censors throws the minister's books on the floor (504).¹⁶ On the other hand, this criticism remains only a minor strand of Broome's thought. The growth of his sympathy towards Gaelic culture is initiated especially by his encounters with Ferdy O'Donnell, a respected local farmer (and a historical personage) who joined the rebels due to the unjust imprisonment of his brother, and who, after the main body of the insurgent army had marched to Castlebar, was left in charge of the town of Killala. The main source of Broome's puzzlement is his inability to grasp the reason why O'Donnell, who is portrayed in highly positive colours and who, after the fatal defeat at Ballinamuck, made considerable efforts to defend the lives of loyalists against the infuriated crowd, had joined the apparently misguided and tragic rebellion in the first place. At several points in his conversations with O'Donnell, Broome experiences feelings of embarrassment, which lead him, for short moments, to consider the situation from the perspective of 'the other.' After O'Donnell mentions his listening to the Gaelic poems of Owen McCarthy, about "the ships that would come from France and the deliverance of the Gael," for instance, Broome reacts with a dismissive remark: "You might have found better entertainment for yourself than the words of a tavern bard." O'Donnell's initially angry, but in the end rather despondent reaction leads Broome to reconsideration:

"Tavern bard, is it?" he [O'Donnell] said fiercely. "'Tis little you know about us, or have ever troubled yourselves to learn." He might for that moment have been the abominable O'Kane, but his language, unlike O'Kane's, displayed no anger towards me. It was as though he hated history itself. "Our life has been a house with a door bolted and the shutters fastened tight." (508)

After witnessing the final massacre, which the government forces inflict upon the remaining Killala rebels, Broome, unlike Wyndham, can find no haven in the safe world of English values. This is amply illustrated in the epilogue, where Broome spends a part of winter with his brother in England, hoping for the comforting ritual of traditional

¹⁶ Calling back in mind the 'revisionist' strand of the novel, this negative image can be clearly linked to the reaction against the narrowmindedness of De Valera's Ireland, which incorporated the emphasis on Gaelic culture into an essentially backward looking and highly conservative state ideology. For the analysis of the revisionists' reaction to this ideology, especially in connection to Seán O'Faoláin, see Kevin Whelan, "The Revisionist Debate in Ireland," *boundary 2* 31.1 (Spring 2004): 186.

English Christmas to act as a “restorative” after the horrors he had lived through (618). His peace of mind, however, is deeply shaken during encounters with respected members of the English society.

One of them is the local vicar William Clifford, who, as a response to a discussion about the desperate situation in Ireland, lends Broome a copy of Malthus’s *Essay on the Principle of Population*, “commending it as a salutary Christian response to Rousseau and Godwin, reminding us of the inevitably melancholy nature of our earthly existence.” (622) This is, of course, yet another foreboding of the great Irish famine, to which the British responded (or rather failed to respond) along the same Malthusian principles combined with the doctrine of *laissez faire*. After Clifford describes the activities of a charitable society “which proposed to distribute Bibles in the west of Ireland,” Broome responds with bitter sarcasm: “[...] let them translate Mr Malthus into Gaelic, and thus instruct the poor that they starve by theorem and die to conclude a syllogism.” (624)

The second meeting is with Lord Glenthorne, an absentee landlord who happens to own a large part of County Mayo and is referred to by the peasants as the legendary figure of the “Big Lord.” Broome finds him a rather ascetic man of stern moral principles, devoted to philanthropic causes, such as the alleviation of chimney sweeps and the abolition of slavery. To Broome’s horror, however, Glenthorne proposes to finance his charitable activities by “improving” his Irish estates, which would include massive evictions (634).

The trajectory of Broome’s transformation thus involves a careful deconstruction of the terms ‘civilized’ and ‘barbarous’ contained in traditional English attitudes towards Ireland. Rather than turning into an Irish nationalist, however, Broome remains in an unsettled state at the end of the novel – uneasy in his Englishness, but unable to enter the still incomprehensible world of Mayo.

The Year of the French and Metahistory

By his simultaneous deconstruction of the nationalist interpretation of the rebellion and the narrative of British imperialism Flanagan managed to create a remarkably balanced account of the rebellion, a feature which is shared, in spite of different approaches, by all three outstanding literary works treated in the final chapters of this

thesis. However, *The Year of the French* is not only a historical novel about the 1798 rebellion, but to a large degree also a novel about historians and history itself. Turning back to Nünning's typology, the book might be considered, together with Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, as one of the two most self-consciously metahistorical works treated in this thesis. Apart from being documentary, realistic and revisionist at the same time, it amply fulfils Nünning's definition of the most progressive type of the historical novel, "historiographic metafiction," which is distinguished by an explicit raising of questions related to historiography and theory of history.¹⁷

The 'revisionist' position, as it was described above, is partly reflected also on the metahistorical level of the book. In accordance with the underlying historical positivism of the revisionist historians, the book is full of insistence on distinguishing between truth and myth, warning against the dangerous potential of mythologised histories. In this respect, the conflicting historical narratives which had informed the conduct of both the Mayo peasants (historical resentment against colonial dispossession) and the Protestant loyalists (the siege mentality of civilised colonisers among a sea of barbarians) are in turn explored and subjected to irony and criticism, with an undercurrent of reference to the conflict in Northern Ireland which was exacerbated by views of history that had changed only a little during the course of years.¹⁸

In a similar vein, criticism is directed against the subsequent mythologising of 1798 itself, illustrated on the example of the oral histories of the Mayo rebellion, which, according to the novel, mercifully effaced the bloodiest memories, arbitrarily chose to celebrate particular characters over others, or even elevated villains in the place of heroes. Such is the message of the following lines from the recollections of Malcolm Elliott's wife Judith, who is English, but a fervent Irish patriot all the same:

And yet within two years, wonderful to relate, the rising had began to fade from Mayo memory, or rather to recede into that past, compounded of legend and fact, which lies as an almost palpable presence upon the heavy Irish landscape. [...] Songs were sung [...] the most in Irish but a few in

¹⁷ Nünning 282.

¹⁸ Contemporary references of the novel are discussed in Tom Paulin, "The Fire Monster," *Encounter* 54.1 (January, 1980): 57-64 and Robert Tracy, "Who Fears to Speak of '98, '63, '64, '65, '66, '67, '68, '69, '70?: 'The Year of the French' and the Nineteen Sixties," *Irish University Review* 28.1 (Spring /Summer 1998): 1-10. Apart from the Northern Irish link, Tracy also suggests a connection to the student protests at the Berkeley campus in the 1960s.

English, and these celebrated chiefly young Ferdy O'Donnell, a Mayo youth, or Malachi Duggan, described to me by Malcolm as a most fearful ruffian but transformed by folk imagination into a Robin Hood. No song of those that I heard enshrined the memory of Malcolm Elliott, their gallant leader. (575)

Much to Flanagan's credit, however, his criticism does not stop here and the book does not, in a simplistic manner, contrast the faulty folk or community memory to the 'only true' version of history sanctioned by professional historiography. Flanagan's novels abound in fictional historians who are usually very much aware of the limitations of their craft and of the inevitable fictional or mythological element even in their, scrupulously fact-conscious rendition of history.¹⁹ The ideas expressed through Flanagan's historians are thus akin to the theories of Hayden White with the important difference that at least in some of his writings, White seems to celebrate – or at least legitimise – this fictional license of the historian and the use of history for political purposes,²⁰ while Flanagan is much more critical.

There are two such self-conscious historians – metahistorians by definition – in *The Year of the French* (both have been mentioned already): the Protestant minister Arthur Vincent Broome, the author of *An Impartial Narrative*, and the historical character of George Moore, who wrote an unfinished book on the Girondist party of the French Revolution. Both of them enter the novel with fairly far-reaching ambitions in the historiographical field, which are, however, frustrated in the end. Broome starts his narrative in the following way:

Some years ago, when I first took up the pastoral care of the wild and a dismal region from which I write, I was prompted to begin a journal in which would be set forth, as I encountered them, the habits, customs, and manners of the several social classes, with the thought that it might someday furnish the substance of a book with some such title as *Life in the West of Ireland*. (16)

¹⁹ An example outside of the presently analysed work would be the fictional historian Patrick Prentiss from *The Tenants of Time*, another historical novel by Flanagan, which concentrates on the Fenians and the Land War.

²⁰ See especially Hayden White, "The Politics of Historical Interpretation," *The Content of the Form* (London: Johns Hopkins University Press 1990) 58-82.

Although he promptly narrows his focus on the events of the rebellion itself, he nevertheless continues with a lengthy and ambitious exposition, which sets a detailed stage for the upcoming events. In his disillusioned recollections in the book's epilogue, this prompts him to refer to himself ironically as the would-be "Gibbon of Mayo," calling to mind the famous eighteenth-century English historian of ancient Rome. However, "doubt seeps in" (617) even in the discussion of this illustrious figure, whose diligent methods in examining the causes of the fall of the Roman Empire have often served as an example to more modern historians. After expounding upon the magnificent canvas of Gibbon, which reaches "from Hellespont to the pillars of Hercules" and where "each cause and reason is locked securely into place," Broome follows with a profound metahistorical passage, worth quoting in full:

Perhaps it had not been like that at all. Perhaps all had been chaos, chance, ill-luck, perhaps even Providence, perhaps the ancients were indeed punished for their sins, as was once believed. Perhaps Gibbon is but a master magician, a sorcerer of language, a Simon Magus of stately paragraphs. Perhaps it is not Rome that we have seen, but Gibbon's imagination bestowed capriciously upon the past rather than upon mountaintop or sunset or ruined abbey or other romantic flummery. And the past remains therefore unknowable, shrouded in shadow, an appalling sprawl of buildings, dead men, battles, unconnected, mute, half recorded. Perhaps we learn nothing from history, and the historian teaches us only that we are ignorant. (617)

The image of the historian as a "sorcerer of language" has a direct connection to the theory of Hayden White, who describes exactly the same kind of imposition of rhetoric on the mute facts of the past, an inevitable 'violence of interpretation.' Whereas White, however, sees inherent value in rhetorical strategies of illustrious historians such as Gibbon, and argues that they are able to secure the immortality of their works despite the fact that their factual basis may have been proved faulty, no such possibility is allowed for by Flanagan.²¹

The emphasis on fragments and ruins brings *The Year of the French* to the proximity of another prominent theorist, Michel Foucault, who in his introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* emphasises precisely the principle of discontinuity and argues

²¹ Hayden White, "Interpretation in History," *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 58.

for a historical method which would fully acknowledge the fragmentary nature of its raw material. Such a method should abandon the notion of “total history,” organised around some governing principle (as in Gibbon’s analysis of the reasons of the fall of Rome), in favour of “general history” which would, without any pretensions at completeness, show only legitimate relations between various facts.²² In Foucault’s theory, eloquent documents are transformed into opaque monuments – fragments and ruins – and history “aspires to the condition of archaeology.”²³

At the end of his epilogue, Broome comes to the same conclusion, which is, however, far from detached theory, but firmly connected to the development of his character as was described before, and his sadness at the inability to penetrate the world of the Mayo peasants: “We know parts of a world only, parts of a history, shards, bits of broken pottery.”²⁴

The other historian from the pages of *The Year of the French*, George Moore, comes to similar conclusions, but from a different personal angle. Moore was a real person, to whom Flanagan was attracted as, in his own words, he “was fascinated by the idea of a man thinking about the French Revolution in the wilds of Mayo when suddenly it is dropped upon his doorstep” and because in the surviving fragment of his historical work Moore “speculates, in a strikingly modern way, upon the ways in which histories can be written.”²⁵ Similarly to Broome, Moore is also initially presented in the novel as an ambitious historian, especially devoted to the time-honoured maxim that a historian should always be an aloof commentator, personally detached from the events he or she describes as well as their political consequences.

His intention to write a book on the Girondist party is introduced in the following words: “For a year now, he had been laboring upon an experiment, an attempt to treat recent history with that meditative neutrality which other writers bestowed upon the past.”²⁶ When, as a residing Mayo landlord (one of the few Catholics to achieve such status), he involuntarily becomes involved in the turbulent events of the 1798 rebellion, he takes great effort to live up to his maxim – at the same time, he refuses to assist the

²² Michel Foucault, *Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London: Routledge, 2001) 9.

²³ Foucault 7.

²⁴ Flanagan, *The Year of the French* 635.

²⁵ Flanagan, “History as Fiction, Fiction as History,” *There You Are* 430.

²⁶ Flanagan, *The Year of the French* 43.

local loyalists in the suppression of a Whiteboy outbreak, and severely dissuades his young and idealistic brother John from his participation in the United Irish movement. In George Moore's uneven struggle not to become involved, his chief weapon is irony, which, according to Hayden White, is one of the four master tropes underlying all of history writing, and the principal mode in which most of modern history after Ranke has been written.²⁷

For a long time, he also retains the belief that history stands high above archaeology in its ability to trace relationships between facts. After pondering upon a monastery ruin and the nameless faces of figures carved up on a tombstone, he concludes that similarly to the ordinary peasants who perished during the rebellion, "they too have slipped below history" and continues: "History was not objects, mere shells of the past, hieroglyphic whorls. It was perceived relationship, patterns formed by passion and power." (438) In the course of the events, however, it becomes clear that this is a highly constructed viewpoint, which simply cannot hold as Moore becomes more and more entangled in the nets of history in the making. His entanglement is chiefly caused by the fact that his beloved brother John is, as one of the prominent United Irishmen in the county, appointed by the French 'President of Connaught' and after the suppression of the rebellion faces trial and a probable death penalty in Castlebar jail. It is exactly the reminiscence of his brother which makes him conclude the above quoted meditation by a sudden turn to the personal significance of history: "In the end, history was memory. History was his father." (439)

The climax of Moore's involuntary involvement comes when he is forced, as a way of ingratiating the government in his effort to alleviate John's fate, to publish pamphlets aimed at persuading Irish Catholics to support the Union with Britain. While his support of this political measure is genuine, he bitterly regrets having compromised his detached position:

Never again would he survey the world from his balcony of cold and superior amusement, judging, appraising, condemning. His irony, in which he had taken pride as a function of his intelligence, would become a shell, each year more brittle and more thin, a mannerism, a gesture. John's reckless folly had bound him hand and foot, delivering him into a world which he had learnt to despise. (545)

²⁷ White, *Metahistory* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975) xii.

Ironically, Moore's sacrifice is in vain as John dies in prison before his brother can save him. In the end, Moore entirely loses his belief in the interpretative powers of history-writing and abandons his project of the history of the Girondists. This is described by a powerful image, which, as in the case of Broome analysed above, deconstructs the distinction between archaeology and history: "He had been left at last with a frozen puddle of history, muddy water frozen in the depression of a woodland path, dead leaves and broken twigs dim beneath its filthy surface." (604)

It may seem from these failures that the only thing that we learn from Flanagan's historians is the ultimate impossibility of writing history, at least in the traditional sense. Yet the novel presents a tentative option of escaping from this cul-de-sac, both on its thematic and formal level – the possibility of presenting history not as an organised narrative, but as a series of verbal images, evocative and often interconnected, but, in accordance with Foucault's view expressed in *The Archeology of Knowledge*, never structured in a totalising whole.

The importance of the concept of image for the book as a whole is emphasised by its presence in the opening passage, which introduces the Gaelic poet Owen McCarthy, the principal character of the novel, for whom the search for images lies at the core of his craft:

[McCarthy] carried with him an inch or two of whiskey, tight-corked in flask of green glass, and the image which had badgered him for a week. Moonlight falling on a hard, flat surface, scythe or sword or stone or spade. It was not an image from which a poem would unwind itself, but it could be hung as a glittering, appropriate ornament upon a poem already shaped. Problems of the craft. (1)

The passage is of interest not only due to its introduction of the idea of image, but even more so because of the outlining of its limits – the image can never function as a governing concept, from which a whole poem, or a historical interpretation, "would unwind itself," but rather a less ambitious, but not less perfect, "ornament." When the image described above transforms, in McCarthy's mind, in a totalising symbol of the

whole rebellion, it leads to tragedy and bitter disillusion. As McCarthy tells his friend and fellow poet Sean MacKenna during the night before his execution:

Do you remember that poem that kept worrying me? The moon and the bright curve of metal. For a time, when the madness came on me in Killala, I thought I had the answer to it, when I saw the curve of some fellow's pike. But that was a part of the madness itself, like the drums and the muskets and the banner of green silk. The image lay there upon the dirt floor of my mind, and nothing would give life to it. (611)

Metaphoric images which can somehow capture a certain aspect of a historical event are not only thematised in the novel, but become part of its very structure, serving to illustrate many subtle points that the book makes about the rebellion. One example out of many might be the passage in which George Moore, who is walking on the shore of a lake, deplures his brother's romantic nature and his involvement in the hopeless effort of the United Irishmen. The passage ends with the following description of a natural scene: "Some distance away, a wild swan floated with her cygnets, elegant and calm. Her ugly feet could flail and trample, fouling the shore." (207) This image, when connected to what preceded it, easily acquires metaphoric significance, succinctly summarising George Moore's sceptical view of revolutionary ideals, which may look beautiful on the surface, but become a cause of much ugliness when put into actual practice.

This central role of metaphor in a book full of irony may be viewed in the light of Hayden White's use of Gianbattista Vico's concept that the progression of the four master tropes in time is circular, proceeding from metaphor through metonymy, synecdoche and irony back (this time directly) to metaphor. The presentation of history in *The Year of the French* can be thus seen as characteristic of the last step of this progression. It is lying on the interface of irony, which, according to White, characterises most of contemporary historiography, and the much more direct trope of metaphor, which was prominent in earlier periods.²⁸ Whereas the irony undermines pre-established narratives of the rebellion, metaphor saves the novel from utter disillusion.

Notwithstanding its acknowledged limits, the power of metaphoric images presents the only ray of hope in a book which can be otherwise seen as entirely pessimistic and

²⁸ See, for example, White, *Metahistory* 38.

bleak as regards the outcome of the rebellion, the possibility of unity between different groups of Ireland's population, the fate of Gaelic culture, or even the possibility of presenting history as such. James Cahalan compares the bleak pessimism of *The Year of the French* to the relative optimism of Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque* by contrasting the last sentences of the two books: the triumphal "Tá an Táin déanta" [The Táin is completed] in *L'Attaque*, following a vivid description of the rebel victory at Castlebar, and the disillusioned last words of Flanagan's novel: "The linen which I brought back with me from Killala is badly bleached, and I will think carefully before I have further dealings with Johnston of Sligo," (638) coming from the diary of the above-mentioned schoolmaster Sean MacKenna.²⁹ This might be partially valid in relation to the attitude of both books towards the rebellion they portray (Ó Tuairisc, although critical of war, does not question the legitimacy of the rising as such), but not entirely as regards the possibility of an artistic rendition of history. While the final sentence of *L'Attaque* also clearly expresses triumph over the completion of the novel itself, Flanagan's final statement on the possibility of history writing (or at least fictional treatment of history) has to be retrieved from a few lines back. The relevant passage from the same diary is surprisingly optimistic, especially in contrast to the fate to all the historians in the book, asserting hope and meaning in spite of everything. The passage is also of interest as it connects in an imaginative way the metahistorical theme to that of the *aisling*, suggesting for the latter motif a wider range of meanings than the straightforwardly political:

[...] I told myself that the battle already lay with the Norman keep upon the far shore of the sea which separates past from present. But that is not true, there is no such sea, it is but a trick of speech. All are bound together under God, mountain, and bog, the shattered fortress and the grassy pasturelands of death, the drover's eagle that took wing upon the eve of battle, memory, history, and fable. A trick of speech and of the blackness of night, when we are separated from one another and from the visible world. It is in the brightness of the morning air, as the poets tell us, that hope and memory walk towards us across meadows, radiant as a girl in her first beauty. (637)

²⁹ Cahalan 199.

It is possible to conclude that Flanagan's *The Year of the French* is a profoundly metahistorical book, which thematises on many levels the inherent problems connected to the writing of histories of any kind. It is one of the principal merits of the novel that it refuses to give easy answers to difficult questions, such as the relationship between history and myth, but strives to present them in all their complexity. Despite the necessary hope expressed in the passage above (without which the possibility of writing such a novel would be void), the underlying philosophy of history remains that of scepticism, informed by the awareness of the fragmentary nature of the historical material. The concerted use of metaphoric images, which offers a tentative escape from this dilemma, can offer only disconnected glimpses at the dark sea of history. At the same time, however, Flanagan does not look at history from some detached, neutral viewpoint, as the character of George Moore vainly attempted to do, but is painfully aware of the personal significance of both the historical events themselves and their subsequent interpretations. The result of Flanagan's metahistorical inquiry is therefore not empty historical relativism, of which Hayden White was, though not entirely justly, accused of. Rather, it is a deeply ethical stance reminiscent of Paul Ricoeur,³⁰ clearly directed not only at the past itself, but also at related problems in the present, such as the conflict in Northern Ireland. The resulting combination of the metahistorical and the personal transcends the dependence of the novel on the 'revisionist' trend in Irish historiography and makes *The Year of the French* one of the most interesting and moving novels ever written about the 1798 rebellion.

³⁰ As it was discussed in Chapter One, the ethical problems connected with the historian's "detachment" face to face traumatic events in the past are discussed on in Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et Récit. L'intrigue et le récit historique* (Paris: Éditions de Seuil, 1983) 339.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“The Half-Built, Half-Derelict House”: Stewart Parker’s

Northern Star

The last of the outstanding literary treatments of 1798 to be discussed in this study is the history play *Northern Star* (first staged in 1984) by the Belfast playwright Stewart Parker.¹ Along with Gary Mitchell’s play *Tearing the Loom*, discussed in Chapter Four, it belongs to the most present-oriented literary works about the rebellion written in the twentieth century, using, to a degree “the format of the history play in order to dramatise modern political issues in Northern Ireland,” as Eva Urban has argued.² In contrast to Mitchell’s play, however, it incorporates many historical personages and events in its structure and engages profoundly with the interpretation of 1798 as a crucial issue for the solution of the Northern Irish conflict. In addition, it shares a very prominent metahistorical theme with the novel *The Year of the French*, again illustrating the high importance of questions related to the theory of history for the contemporary situation in Northern Ireland and for the solution of historical conflicts in general.

Similarly to other Northern Irish writers treated in this thesis, it is easy to see the reasons why Stewart Parker became attracted to the 1798 rebellion – it was a logical choice because in the tumultuous decade of the 1790s lay many historical causes of the present societal divide, as well as a lasting inspiration for the future embodied in the first articulate attempt to overcome it. For Stewart Parker and other writers with socialist

¹ Stewart Parker (1941-1988) was arguably one of Ireland’s greatest and most innovative playwrights. Stemming from a Protestant working class family, he studied drama at Queens University, Belfast, where he became a member of a group of young poets which included Seamus Heaney and Derek Mahon. In the years 1964-69 he taught in Hamilton College and at Cornell University, and came under the influence of the radical atmosphere prevalent in the USA at that time. After returning to Northern Ireland, he worked as a professional playwright and journalist, writing a column on pop music for the *Irish Times*, as well as numerous plays for the theatre, radio and television. His stage plays include *Spokesong* (1975), *Catchpenny Twist* (1977), *Nightshade* (1980), *Pratt’s Fall* (1983), *Northern Star* (1984), *Heavenly Bodies* (1986) and *Pentecost* (1987). Among his most memorable television plays we can count *I’m a Dreamer*, *Montreal* (1979) or *Joyce in June* (1982). His work, in general, is marked by experimentalism, references to popular culture as well as a concerted effort to contribute to the solving of the Northern Irish conflict. For biographical information, see Patrick Maume, “Parker, (James) Stewart,” *Dictionary of Irish Biography*, Vol 7, eds. James McGuire and James Quinn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 1066-68.

² Eva Urban, *Community Politics and the Peace Process in Contemporary Northern Irish Drama* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011) 92.

leanings such as Sam Hanna Bell, it had moreover the attraction as the incipient period of Northern Irish Protestant radicalism, the legacy of which they shared.

Similarly to John Hewitt's earlier play *The McCrackens* that has remained unstaged and Mac an Bheatha's Irish language novel *Cnoc na hUamha*, Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* concentrates on the Belfast United Irish leader Henry Joy McCracken, the action taking place during the last night before his final captivity and execution. It is set in a "half-built, half-derelict" cottage, which powerfully resonates with the landscape of Northern Ireland at the time of the writing of the play. Moreover, this image may be understood as a symbol of Belfast or Northern Ireland in general, or even more broadly, of the unfinished business of the construction of an inclusive Irish national identity, which was, after all, one of the principal aims of the United Irishmen. Already at this level, therefore, Parker symbolically connects the 1790s with his own 1980s. In the following lines, the interpretation of 1798 contained in the play will be examined, with special attention to its interesting formal features and the underlying metahistorical message.

Dramatic Allusion as a Structural Device

Similarly to Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*, *Northern Star* also uses the method of allusion, in this case not mythical but dramatic, in order to structure the historical material. As Parker has passed to us his opinions about literature in the form of several of his essays, it may prove useful before proceeding to the analysis of the play's formal features to compare the theoretical backgrounds of both of these writers. Both authors are quite outspoken about their basic assumption concerning the high relevance of the writer's role in society and his or her possibility to bring about important changes, but already at this basic level one can trace important differences. While Ó Tuairisc applies metaphysical terms, such as the interweaving of form and matter, or body and soul, and the only contemporary event which he chose to treat in this work was the nuclear explosion in faraway Hiroshima,³ Stewart Parker, as a member of a deeply divided and injured society in Northern Ireland, was much more topical even in his theory, and despite the fact that

³ See Eoghan Ó Tuairic, "Aifreann na Marbh," *Lux Aeterna agus Dánta Eile* (Dublin: Cois Life 2000).

he also incidentally chose a Japanese setting for one of his plays,⁴ almost all of this work bore immediate relevance to the political situation in his unhappy province.

A close parallel to Ó Tuairisc's artistic creed expressed in "Religio Poetae" is Parker's lecture which incidentally bears also a Latin title, "Dramatis Personae" (1986).⁵ Similarly to Ó Tuairisc, Parker recognizes a basic duality at the core of literature and drama in particular, but in his case the duality is more straightforwardly linked to the performative power of the play, its ability to teach the audience and to contribute to a necessary change in society. For this reason, the dichotomies given by Parker are all connected to the resulting transformation of the audience: "Everyman and sleight of hand," art and show business, and above all, instruction and entertainment.⁶ The resolution of this duality, in Parker's view, can be found in the central metaphor of play, which, being a basic human instinct, can be both educational and entertaining at the same time. Moreover, as Elmer Andrews has argued, play is simultaneously "an open-ended process of transformation whereby pre-existing codes of perception and experience are deconstructed" and "a constructive, magical activity whereby alternative worlds are called into being with tongues of fire," which accounts for its ability to become a catalyst of positive change.⁷

Parker's plays therefore aim to contribute to the resolution of the Northern Irish conflict, but in keeping with the theory above, the intention is not to reflect the conflict directly, by realistic means, which would merely repeat the hardly revealing fact that in the province "Catholics and Protestants hate each other,"⁸ nor to make straightforward instructive statements of how peace and unity can be achieved, which would be bad, dogmatic art, and moreover only preaching to the converted. Parker's principal objective

⁴ It is the radio play *Kamikaze Ground Staff Reunion Dinner*, first broadcast by BBC in 1981. In this hilarious play, the notion of "kamikaze" serves as a clear metaphor for the suicidal fanaticism of many participants in the Northern Irish conflict. It was published in *Best Radio Plays of 1980* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981).

⁵ Stewart Parker, "Dramatis Personae," *Dramatis Personae and Other Writings*, ed. Gerald Dawe, Maria Johnston, Clare Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008) 9-27. The title is most probably an allusion to W.B. Yeats's eponymous autobiographical collection (1935).

⁶ Parker, *Dramatis Personae* 10.

⁷ Elmer Andrews, "The Will to Freedom: Politics and Play in the Theatre of Stewart Parker," *Irish Writers and Politics*, eds. Okifumi Komesu and Masaru Sekine (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1989) 243. 'Magic' and "tongues of fire" are specific references to Parker's plays. While "magic" is connected to *Nightshade* (1980), whose protagonist is a magician, the image of "tongues of fire," taken from the biblical narrative about the descent of the Holy Spirit clearly refers to *Pentecost* (1987).

⁸ Stewart Parker, *Dramatis Personae* 25.

was instead “actually embodying that unity, practising that inclusiveness, in an artistic image,”⁹ by specifically dramatic means. In the lecture “*Dramatis Personae*” Parker states:

A play which reinforces complacent assumptions, which confirms lazy preconceptions, which fails to combine emotional honesty with coherent analysis, which goes in short for the easy answer, is in my view actually harmful.

And yet if ever a time and place cried out for the solace and rigour and passionate rejoinder of great drama, it is here and now. There is a whole culture to be achieved. The politicians, visionless almost to a man, are withdrawing into their sectarian stockades. It falls to the artists to construct a working model of wholeness by means of which this society can begin to hold up its head in the world.¹⁰

It is exactly in this rejection of a straightforward, realistic rendering of the historical situation in fiction or drama, which amounts, according to the theory of Mark Berninger,¹¹ only to following conventions, or “confirming lazy preconceptions,” that we can find the greatest similarity between Parker and Ó Tuairisc. The resulting opinion shared by both writers was that for a literary work to be aesthetically and politically successful, it must be indeed rooted in everyday reality, but original methods must be applied to give this reality a more general significance. This, at least, is clear from the following extract from Parker’s essay “*State of Play*,” in which he discusses the relationship between local and wider issues in drama:

When the game is well played the audience will be transported – but it has to be a transport of the head along with the heart. [...] Let us have plays which confront the central issues of Western society, rather than those peculiar only to Crossmaglen or Connemara or Rathfarnham. These sets of issues are not, needless to say, mutually exclusive. In this respect the precedent set by Yeats and Joyce is invaluable. They have taught us how to deal with Ireland as a manageable microcosm of the whole Western culture. The world has responded in kind.¹²

⁹ Parker, “*Signposts*,” *Dramatis Personae* 104.

¹⁰ Parker, *Dramatis Personae* 25-26.

¹¹ See Berninger’s discussion of conventional drama in *Neue Formen des Geschichtsdramas in Grossbritannien und Irland seit 1970* (Trier: WVT Trier, 2006) 53-68.

¹² Parker, “*State of Play*,” *Dramatis Personae* 96.

It can be argued that Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* achieves this goal precisely by its experimental structure and formal features, which are, as Marilyn Richter has rightly pointed out, "integral to its meaning."¹³ In this structure, the events of Henry Joy McCracken's last night are interspersed with the re-enactment of the protagonist's reminiscences on seven different phases of the development of the United Irish movement and the actual rebellion. Each of these scenes is written in the style of a different Irish playwright, and the whole is loosely structured along the concept of the Seven Ages of Man, famous from the well-known monologue of Jacques in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. In connection to the numerous allusions incorporated in the play it may be argued that *Northern Star* follows in general terms a similar method to that of Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*. It uses reference to other literary works to structure the historical material and give it wider significance, while maintaining ironic distance.

More specifically, the complex structure has several functions in the play. The first and most general one is that of metahistorical commentary. The division of the action along two basic time levels, which may be broadly described as the level of action and the level of reflection, fulfils Mark Berninger's definition of metahistorical drama, and strikes an interesting parallel with a number of other modern Irish and British historical plays and novels, for example, Brian Friel's *Making History* or Liam Mac Cól's *Fontenoy*.¹⁴ Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French* also displays these features, as its first person narrators report the events in retrospect, trying to find meaning in them. This structure highlights the fact that history is no given progression that can be simply presented "wie es eigentlich gewesen ist" [as it actually was], to use Leopold von Ranke's famous statement, but that it is created anew every time we reflect upon the past and tell stories about it, as already discussed in Chapter One.

In connection to the series of the seven flashbacks, Elmer Andrews makes an insightful statement that by accommodating the history of the 1798 rebellion to "the familiar typology and predestined pattern of the Seven Ages of Man," Stewart Parker shows that "there is nothing in the Irish past which cannot be accommodated in terms of

¹³ Marilyn Richter, "'Ireland, the Continuous Past': Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," *A Century of Irish Drama: Widening the Stage*, eds. Stephen Watt, Eileen Morgan and Shakir Mustafa (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000) 267.

¹⁴ For a discussion of this subgenre, see Berninger 160-211.

the typical,” which “cannot be translated back or held within orthodox structures and stereotypes.”¹⁵ If we take into account Hayden White’s theory of history, however, Andrews’s statement assumes a much more general validity than just referring to the Irish past – if we accept White’s view that the narration of history is determined as much by the facts as by the tropological structures embedded deeply in Western culture, *any* past must be presented in terms of the typical if we want to be able to speak about it at all, and hence the risk of replicating orthodox structures and stereotypes is inescapable. On the other hand, Parker’s use of the concept of the Seven Ages of Man connected with the styles of the individual authors can be hardly described as typical, but rather as a highly inventive way of presenting history with no real parallels either in historiography or in literature.

The very structure of *Northern Star* thus touches upon the fundamental issue raised by the play, relevant both for Parker’s native province and the Western civilisation, the question of free will. At this level it is connected to our formal choices in constructing history: are we limited to pre-established conventions, as in White’s theory, or is there a possibility of an original rendition of history in structural terms? The play does not give any ready answer. While the reference to the stereotype of the Seven Ages seems to point to the former option, the innovative features of the play offer a tentative ‘escape into freedom.’

The crucial issue of free will is further explored by the central metaphor of theatricality,¹⁶ expressed not only by the reference to Jacques’s monologue, but also by the pastiche of different dramatic styles, reminiscent of the Oxen of the Sun episode in *Ulysses*.¹⁷ In Berninger’s classification, this feature ranks *Northern Star*, apart from metahistorical plays, into yet another category of recent drama – the *Metadrama*. This

¹⁵ Andrews 259.

¹⁶ The role of metaphor as a central structuring device in Parker’s earlier plays is discussed in Andrew Parkin, “Metaphor as Dramatic Structure in Plays by Stewart Parker,” *Irish Writers and the Theatre*, ed. Masaru Sekine (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble Books, 1986) 135-151. Following Parkin’s argument, it is possible to say that while the central conceit in *Spokesong* might be the bicycle, in *Northern Star* it is theatre itself.

¹⁷ The work of James Joyce served to Stewart Parker as a lifelong inspiration. Straightforward evidence can be found in the essay “Me and Jim,” *Dramatis Personae* 98-102, and the TV plays *Joyce in June* and *Ruby in the Traffic*, *Iris in the Rain*, published in Stewart Parker, *Television Plays*, ed. Clare Wallace (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008) 69-175. The connections between the two authors are explored in Marilyn Richtarik, “Counterparts. James Joyce and Stewart Parker,” *Bullán* 3.2 (Winter 1997/Spring 1998): 71-86.

term broadly embraces all instances in which drama reflects its own medium. If we are to follow Vieweg-Marks's typology, applied by Berninger, we can see that *Northern Star* operates at the same time as *fiktionales Metadrama*, since the flashbacks function as multiple plays within a play, *adaptives Metadrama*, due to its stylistic allusions to the individual playwrights, and finally as *diskursives Metadrama*, owing to its frequent use of theatrical metaphors to comment upon the action, the history of the United Irishmen and indirectly also Northern Ireland in the 1980s.¹⁸

Apart from being highly entertaining, the metadramatic elements have a multiple effect in the play. Firstly, in a strategy similar to Parker's first stage play, *Spokesong*,¹⁹ which, in a rather unexpected manner, juxtaposes the history of the bicycle to the history of Belfast, *Northern Star* as well interweaves histories of various kinds – in this case the history of 1798 in the traditional sense, the history of Irish drama in English, and the history of Everyman, stereotyped in the figure of the Seven Ages. This dramatic device emphasises the fact, implied in Hayden White's theory, that what we regard as history, relevant to our collective and personal identity, rests on mere convention, and that with an alternative selection of events and emplotment, radically different histories could be construed. In this way Parker reminds the "citizens of Belfast,"²⁰ the primary intended audience of the play (as the opening words of McCracken's speech show us), that there is no need for them to be slaves of one chosen history above all the alternatives which offer themselves. This implicit emphasis on freedom thus, in a way, provides a counterpoint to the tragic finality of the last scene of McCracken's execution, which symbolically closes the 'window of opportunity' provided by the United Irishmen.

It is also useful to have a closer look at the particular assortment of dramatists Parker chose to imitate in his flashback scenes. It is a highly personal choice, establishing a dramatic canon in which he intended to place himself, a choice which is more explicitly explained in his 1981 essay "State of Play." In this meditation on the Irish dramatic tradition, he expresses his uneasiness with the early Abbey theatre with its "nationalist

¹⁸ For the discussion of the concept of *Metadrama*, see Berninger 303-312. *Fiktionales Metadrama* is defined as "drama within drama," *adaptives Metadrama* as any type of reference to earlier drama, and *diskursives Metadrama* as forms of dramatic self-consciousness, which manifest themselves on the level of language, e.g. the use of theatre-related metaphors.

¹⁹ Stewart Parker, "Spokesong," *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen, 2000).

²⁰ Parker, Stewart Parker, "Northern Star," *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen, 2000) 4. Henceforth to be quoted parenthetically in the text.

rationale,” claiming that “if you grow up an East Belfast Protestant, you scarcely acquire a clear sense of nationality, let alone nationalism. Both your Irishness and your Britishness are hedged about with ambivalence.”²¹ Despite his admiration for some of the Abbey authors he admits to his pleasure in irritating “Republican friends by claiming that my own work belongs in a venerable Anglo-Irish tradition of comedy of manners, stretching from Congreve and Farquhar through Sheridan and Goldsmith to Wilde and beyond – and that the National Theatre movement was merely a temporary aberration in that stately progression.”²² It is therefore not surprising to find many of these names in the list of dramatic styles in *Northern Star* – the first four ‘Ages’ are enacted in the styles of Sheridan, Boucicault, Wilde and Shaw, while the Abbey tradition is represented merely by Synge and O’Casey, who both incidentally gave rise to scandal due to their showing disrespect to national myths. The looming figure of William Butler Yeats, who formulated principles on which much of the distinctively Irish dramatic tradition has developed, is conspicuously missing and the last of the playwrights, Samuel Beckett, escapes any categorisation altogether (while his background was also Anglo-Irish).

It is also of interest, especially in the light of the fact that *Northern Star* is primarily a tragedy, that all of these playwrights were predominantly writers of comedies or tragicomedies, which enabled Parker to maintain critical distance from the historical events, presenting them in an ironic way.²³ This is a further reason for the absence of Yeats, whose straightforwardly nationalistic and mythologising treatment of 1798 in *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* was in direct opposition to Parker’s intentions.

The individual features of each playwright’s style also enabled Parker to make particular points in an indirect way. For example, the malapropisms (named after a character from *The Rivals* by Sheridan) in and before the first flashback scene, like Freudian slips of the tongue, reveal surprising aspects of established meanings. When McCracken, rehearsing his speech from the dock, parodies Robert Emmet’s famous statement as “let my autograph be given,” (5) it works as a criticism of the exhibitionist

²¹ Parker, “State of Play,” *Dramatis Personae* 94.

²² Parker, “State of Play,” *Dramatis Personae* 94.

²³ The prominence of the trope of irony in virtually all of Parker’s plays is discussed in Ondřej Pilný, *Irony and Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia 2006) 135-153.

aspect of the nationalist desire for martyrdom,²⁴ and when the bartender Peggy renders the famous quotation from Young as “predestination is the thief of time,” (14) she unwittingly touches upon the question of predestination vs. free will, i.e. one of the main points that the play thematises.

Also the connection of particular dramatic styles with the individual ‘Ages of Man’ creates a powerful undercurrent of commentary. Very interesting in this respect is the re-enactment of the ‘Age of Idealism’ in the style of Victorian melodrama, as it focuses on McCracken’s unsuccessful effort to reconcile Protestant and Catholic peasants in County Armagh. The effect is far from being a simple parody, since it immediately recalls the whole tradition of 1798 melodramas, flourishing in Ireland around the year of the centenary. These were invariably distinguished by extravagant plots, which took a considerable liberties with historical facts. An important feature of some these pieces, however, was an image of a possible national harmony across social classes. This was expressed by a seamless cooperation of stock characters, typically a United Irish Protestant hero and his stage-Irish servants, which invariably succeeds at overcoming the sinister plot of the scheming villain.²⁵ By the inevitable reference to this subgenre, the failure of McCracken in this flashback scene serves, in agreement with the socialist leaning of the play, as a critique of the Conservative concept of society as a hierarchically structured, organic whole.

Also telling is the rendering of the ‘Age of Heroism’ in the mock-heroic style of the *Playboy of the Western World*. The flashback scene in question portrays the famous meeting of the leading United Irishmen in McArt’s fort, an ancient ruin overlooking Belfast, where they took an oath to establish a republic in Ireland. Similarly to J.M. Synge’s masterpiece, the scene features many examples of eloquent, but highly exaggerated and essentially empty rhetoric, such as Thomas Russell’s suggestion of war on England: “She [England] will never leave this land, I’m thinking, without that we raise up in the red dawn and scatter her scarlet army before us in into the foamy tide.” (56) In

²⁴ The use of Robert Emmet’s speech on the night of his execution in 1803 is, of course, an anachronism, but one that well illustrates the continuity of this particular tradition.

²⁵ This feature is especially prominent in two melodramas by J.W. Whitbread – *Lord Edward, Or ’98* (1894) and *Wolfe Tone* (1898). See Cheryl Herr, ed., *For the Land She Loved: Irish Political Melodramas, 1890-1925* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1991) 83-259. Such an idealisation of the class system, however, is lacking in the later works by P.J. Bourke, e.g. *When Wexford Rose* (1910).

keeping with the mock-heroic mode, the whole conversation finishes in an equally elaborate, but significantly less militant exchange on the topic of drink:

Russell Is there not a dacent mouthful that a man could drink health to such fine talking and he drouthy with the climbing?

Neilson Isn't there a choice jug of poteen, cooling in the spring by the fairy stone, for them as wants a sup?

Tone Do we repair then to oil the ardour of our red mouths with a supeen, and immortalise the whin-scented air with a gallous vision of the future times! (57)

In general, the treatment of the famous meeting amounts to a certain inversion of the mythical method of *L'Attaque*, as it gives a parodic tinge to already mythologised events through allusion to an irreverent text. However, the resulting view of heroism is very similar as in Ó Tuairisc's novel, putting into doubt battle cries and bloodthirsty rhetoric.

The 1798 Rebellion as Both Inspiration and Warning

The interpretation of 1798 in *Northern Star* is equally ambivalent as in Ó Tuairisc's novel, with an added bitterness and topicality that are given by the rather present-oriented nature of the play. Nevertheless, the pessimistic element of the play never reaches the heights of Flanagan's *The Year of the French*, and considerable emphasis is laid on the inspirational value of the United Irishmen. The contrast between the novel and *Northern Star* can be illustrated by the comparison of the two literary works to the relevant historiography. While *The Year of the French* is in many respects a 'revisionist' novel, Parker's play, as Marilyn Richtarik has pointed out, has, despite its origin in 1984, many resonances with the 1990s post-revisionist interpretation of the historians around Kevin Whelan.²⁶ Similarly to them, it recognizes the crucial importance of ideology, concentrates on the Ulster dimension, and returns the central place to the Belfast United Irishmen, who have been largely forgotten in the nationalist memory in favour of Wolfe Tone and the Wexford rebels. The importance of the Northern Irish instigators of the movement is asserted in the following exchange between McCracken and Wolfe Tone during the scene which takes place at the Belfast Festival:

²⁶ Richtarik, "Ireland, the Continuous Past" 264.

Wolfe Tone My dear McCracken. I have formulated the ideology of the entire United movement – galvanised fellow Protestant radicals in the South – and taken control of the leadership of Catholic opinion. I feel it my duty to leave you and your colleagues up here some trifling work of your own to do.

McCracken Most considerate, I'm sure. Still, I daresay we may hope to be attended with some little success... having originated the entire movement which you subsequently were enlightened enough to join. (38)

Also the timespan of the play, comprising the whole of the revolutionary 1790s instead of the bloody climax only, coincides with the focus of the post-revisionists. Unlike these historians, however, Stewart Parker does not yield to the temptation to create a sanitized, “palatable” version of the “horrific past,” to paraphrase Tom Dunne’s statement,²⁷ and does not hesitate to criticize the United Irishmen for their use of violence and distinctive ways in which they contributed to the hopeless situation in Northern Ireland in the 1980s.

On the most realistic level, a critique is pointed at the alliance of the United Irishmen with the Defenders, an essentially sectarian Catholic organisation, prefiguring the contemporary link between Northern Irish republicanism and Catholic sectarianism. This is well illustrated in the enactment of the ‘Age of Compromise,’ which consists of McCracken’s negotiation with the fictional commander of the Defenders, Gorman, and his ‘Lieutenant’ McFadden. During their conversation, written in the style of Sean O’Casey, it becomes soon clear that the Defenders have their own purposes, which McCracken’s reasoning can hardly change. After McCracken has taken a rather parodic version of the Defender oath, McFadden breaks into an outburst of sectarian sentiment: “By God I can feel the blood of past ages straining at me westkit buttons, till I could step out now this very minute and tear the throats out of any sixteen Orange craw-thumpers with me bare hands, and be back in an hour for further orders!” (65)

Following McCracken’s rather scholarly explanation that the true enemy are not working-class Protestants of the Orange Society, but the “English landed and mercantile interests,” McFadden suddenly changes tone in a manner that can be only regarded as

²⁷ Tom Dunne, “Wexford’s Comóradh ’98: Politics, Heritage and History,” *History Ireland*, 6.2 (Summer 1998): 51.

utterly insincere: “Speaking purely out of me own acquaintance, I’m not afraid to tell whoever’s asking, that your Orangeman is as stout a patriot as the next wan and a sight more honest than plenty of pious Papists I could name.” (65)

This fatal compromise on the part of McCracken can be seen as symbolic for the sectarian turn of the rising. For those acquainted with the history of 1798, also the mention of Scullabogue in the play serves as an ominous reminder, similarly to the way it functions in Tom Dunne’s writings, although it occurs only once and without McCracken actually believing the fact (45).

On a deeper theoretical level, *Northern Star* seems to combine epistemological relativism of Hayden White with the ethical dimension associated with Ricoeur. While the post-revisionists can be criticised for basing their attempt to construct an inclusive national identity on forgetfulness, on choosing to gloss over atrocities committed by one side of the 1798 conflict (which can be easily legitimised by an unmodified relativism in the manner of White), the view of Irish identity emerging in *Northern Star* is rather based on the shared trauma of dispossession, which brings it close to Ricoeur’s theories about the history of victims and Leerssen’s model of reconciliation which have been discussed in Chapter One. This is most clearly expressed in McCracken’s speech at the beginning of Act I: “What did it mean to be Irish? It meant to be dispossessed, to live on ground that isn’t ours, Protestant, Catholic, Dissenter, the whole motley crew of us, planted together in this soil to which we’ve no proper title [...]” (7)

Nevertheless, this attempt to unite the different creeds failed and *Northern Star* is permeated by a bitter awareness of this fact, most forcefully expressed in McCracken’s outburst anticipating the last and most hopeless of the flashbacks, the ‘Age of Shame’ written in the style of Beckett and Behan:

McCracken [...] so all we’ve done, you see, is to reinforce the locks, cram the cells fuller than ever of mangled bodies crawling round in their own shite and lunacy, and the cycle just goes on, playing out the same demented comedy of terrors from generation to generation [...] till the day the world itself is burst asunder, and that’s the handsome birthright that we’re handing on at the end of all. (68)

However, Parker does not find it sufficient to state the historical reasons of this failure, such as the alliance with the Defenders, but searches for causes also on the deeper psychological and spiritual level. The use of the theatrical metaphor “comedy of terrors” in the passage above is far from being a mere entertaining pun – it is very much part of the overall metadramatic texture of the play, which explores the crucial question whether people are free actors in the roles they assume in their lives or end up ‘being played’ by them,²⁸ the latter being indicated by the notion of dramatic convention that the term “comedy of terrors” implies by its reference to comedy of humours or manners. The tragic error (to extend the theatrical metaphor) of McCracken and his kind was that they too readily accepted the latter possibility and, in a true Calvinist manner, followed their ‘predestined’ ways,²⁹ even if they led into an increase of violence, doubtful alliances, and ultimately civil war. This attitude of the United Irishmen is shown for instance in the dialogue between McCracken and his lover Mary Bodle in Act II:

Mary Why did you allow yourself to resort to the gun?

McCracken It was moral force. And then it was physical force. Nobody just suddenly decided that. It was the inescapable logic of events.

Mary There’s always the choice to say no.

McCracken Saying no is a final exit. You act out your small part in a huge drama, Mary, but it is not of your own creation. You’re acting all along in the dark, no matter how clear it seems at the time. You only have one choice. Either retire from the stage altogether. Or play out all your allotted roles until the curtain falls.

Mary Aye, that’s right. On a stage full of corpses. (54)

As in other Parker’s plays, the only hope of breaking the vicious circle lies in the acceptance of the possibility of free choice, the willingness to break away from established patterns of behaviour even against overwhelming odds, as it is the case, if we

²⁸ This seems to be a much more important issue in the play than the socialist idea of the upper classes controlling the working class as puppets in a modern version of the ancient Roman maxim *divide and impera*, discussed in the context of *Northern Star* by Eva Urban and parodied by Tim Loane in *To Be Sure*. See Urban 96, 170 and Tim Loane, *Comedy of Terrors: ‘Caught Red Handed’ and ‘To Be Sure’* (Belfast: Lagan Press, 2008) 196. The term “comedy of terrors” is used by Pilný as a reference to Parker’s dramatic oeuvre in the title of the relevant chapter. See Pilný 135.

²⁹ The criticism of the Presbyterian doctrine of predestination in *Northern Star* was also noted in Richard Rankin Russell, “Playing and Singing toward Devolution: Stewart Parker’s Ethical Aesthetics in *Kingdom Come* and *Northern Star*,” *Irish University Review* 22 (July 2007): 382.

take the example of Parker's earlier play *Spokesong*, in Frank's decision to continue running his bike shop in the middle of the development zone and thus offer his fellow citizens an alternative to their black and white world.

Similarly, the idealism of the United Irishmen is given a thorough analysis, this time in a more ambivalent, less straightforwardly critical way. In the conversations between McCracken and Mary, who is also the mother of his child, the devotion to ideals is put into a hardly reconcilable opposition to ordinary, domestic life. This contrast is eloquently expressed in the following accusation by Mary: "It's living that you fear. That's the sore spot on your soul. Living the way I do, most people do. Humdrum, ordinary, soon enough forgotten. That's why you're more in love with that rope than you are with me and the child..."(53) While this criticism well befits the tradition of overblown nationalism and its obsession with death and martyrdom, which the United Irishmen helped to establish, McCracken's idealism has also its redeeming features. When faced with the dilemma of death and emigration, his choice of the former is not informed primarily by an eighteenth-century analogy of Pearsean desire of blood sacrifice, but rather by a profound sense of belonging to Belfast,³⁰ a trait which he shares with a number of Parker's other positive characters who are often contrasted with more or less cynical emigrants.³¹

The same ambivalence can be seen in the treatment of the 'Cathleen Ni Houlihan' trope, which, similarly to Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*, has a prominent place in the play. As it was the case with the treatment of heroism, the resulting message has much in common with the discussion of the same trope in *L'Attaque*, but it comes across in a far less contemplative and much more bitter way. In contrast to Ó Tuairisc's novel, the Woman of Ireland figure does not appear in dreams and poetic echoes, but actually enters the stage at the end of Act I as the character of the Phantom Bride, who first saves McCracken from the English soldiers, only to perform a "predatory leap" at him a short while afterwards when he re-enacts his taking of the oath of the United Irishmen. Presumably, she rescues him for herself only, and her act of clamping "her bare legs

³⁰ In the conversation mentioned above, McCracken defends himself with the following words: "I belong here. Everything I've done has been an affirmation of belonging here. How can I leave now?" (53)

³¹ A case in point would be the character of Peter from the play *Pentecost*, who comes for a visit to Belfast from his place of emigration in England and, at least initially, patronises the other characters. See Parker, "Pentecost," *Plays: 2* 196-205 et *passim*.

round his waist and her arms round his neck” (50) led Ondřej Pilný to call her, quite fittingly, “a vampiric, voracious version of Cathleen Ni Houlihan.”³² While Ó Tuairisc presented the allegorical female in her original Gaelic context of the sovereignty myth and *aisling* poetry, the vampiric transformation of the Phantom Bride in *Northern Star* connects the symbolic figure in a rather bold and imaginative way to a distinctly Irish Protestant genre of vampire Gothic, thus uniting the two literary traditions. Needless to say, the resulting picture is rather sinister, drawing immediately into mind the bloody outcome of the United Irish effort to join the two communities in a common struggle.

Also the development of the Phantom Bride’s character can be interpreted symbolically. She is presented at the beginning of the play as a local ghost, a phantom of a woman engaged to the builder of the cottage, O’Keefe, who was presumably killed by his neighbours for “freethinking.” The transformation of this ghost into an embodiment of the national ideal may indicate, on a symbolic level, the abandonment of constructive thought, represented by O’Keefe and prominent at the early stages of the United Irish movement, in favour of an overblown national rhetoric which has little regard to the practical conditions of the people. There is also an awareness in *Northern Star* of the issue of gender inequality connected to the use (or rather misuse) of women for the role of symbols, national or other. This is most eloquently expressed in Mary-Anne McCracken’s commentary after she tells the story about town whores dressed as the Goddess of Liberty and the Goddess of Reason: “So when the big issues are going to be decided, you see, we get cast in the same old roles again. Mothers, wives and mistresses. Goddesses, whores and sisters. Trophies and symbols. The Shan Van Vocht and Roisin Dubh.” (34)

It is therefore not surprising that in the contest between McCracken’s lover Mary Bodle and the Woman of Ireland, strikingly similar to the Sadhbh/Sadhbhín dichotomy in *L’Attaque*, the sympathies (although not the victory) stay once more on the side of the live woman. Exactly as in Ó Tuairisc’s novel, where Sadhbhín is expecting a baby, the image of fertility is used to underline this contrast – while Mary Bodle gave her lover a healthy child, the result of the involvement of the United Irishmen with Mother Ireland (in this case in the role of midwives) was best described by McCracken himself: “We

³² Pilný 145.

botched the birth, Mary. The womb may never come right again. Christ knows what hideous offspring it may bring forth from this day on.” (9) Moreover, the male protagonist’s choice ends in death in both works.

The issue of symbolism is further addressed during the scene of the Belfast Harp Festival, staged as the Age of Cleverness in the style of Oscar Wilde, full of paradoxes, which captures well the tension between signifier and signified in the particular case of the harp symbol. It is one of the few scenes which employs a minor historical inaccuracy in order to make a wider point – while in reality McCracken was one of the three principal organisers of the festival and Edward Bunting, aged nineteen at the time, was employed to take down the airs,³³ in the play they change importance, with Bunting being presented as the moving spirit behind the event and McCracken (along with Wolfe Tone) as an outside commentator. This enabled Parker to keep McCracken’s character deeply in the waters of politics and ‘pure’ Enlightenment reason and let him show disrespect to the more cultural aspects of his movement, which the real McCracken would most probably have endorsed with much more enthusiasm. As it is, for the McCracken and Wolfe Tone of *Northern Star*, the Harp Festival is important only for its role in “forging a national consciousness” (35) and its symbolic value in highlighting the United Irish emblem of the harp. For the harpists themselves they have only utter disregard, describing their music as “pins and needles falling into a basin” (35) and making derogatory comments about their beggarly clothes (36).³⁴ Even Bunting in his defence manages only to show a caricature of the detached antiquarian attitude: “The preservation of the ancient music of Ireland is a noble and edifying task. It is profoundly irresponsible of you to expect enjoyment from it.” (37)

Here the criticism is clearly aimed against exaggerated focus of the United Irishmen on reason and politics as the only means which can change the situation, as well as their indulgence in empty symbolism. While it is shown in the play that McCracken’s “iron-clad logic” has, due to its inevitable violent consequences, quickly become “a historical

³³ See Breandán Breathnach, *Ceol agus Rince na hÉireann* (Dublin: An Gúm 1989) 195.

³⁴ In contrast to McCracken’s contempt, Wolfe Tone’s disregard for the ‘revivalist’ aspects of the movement is well attested. See Marianne Elliott, *Wolfe Tone, Prophet of Irish Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989) 173.

straitjacket,” to borrow the formulations from R.R. Russell’s insightful article,³⁵ an attempt to join the two communities on a more emotional, cultural level could have brought more success. Music, “the only art above politics,” (38) as even Wolfe Tone concedes, might have been suitable to the task, had not its inherent value been overridden by political concerns of nationalism, which, similarly to the woman figure discussed above, succeeded in making an empty symbol out of it.

Not surprisingly, a similar programme was followed by Parker himself, given his lifelong commitment to music and his conviction that plays must be not only instructive, but also entertaining and emotional. Without suggesting that music alone can solve a political crisis, it can be argued that the cultural traditions of both communities, musical or literary, have a powerful uniting potential, if stripped of their ideological uses. For Stewart Parker (as he showed in his *Irish Times* article “Buntus Belfast,” where he describes what happened when, as a person with Protestant background, he tried to learn the Irish language in the troubled city), the process of reunification of Ireland, the search for “the corporate soul” of the Protestants and Catholics was not based on the devotion to empty symbols, but on a deep interest in the culture of the ‘other.’³⁶

A Solution for the Future?

Despite all this, *Northern Star* does not suggest that the key to the situation lies altogether outside the realm of reason and politics, and in keeping with the author’s persuasion, tentatively proposes an ideological perspective, presented as useful for both the interpretation of 1798 and the solution of 1980s Troubles. Similarly to other literary works about 1798, such as Sam Hanna Bell’s *Man Flourishing* and to a degree, also Birmingham’s *The Northern Iron*, the perspective is socialist in kind, placing the remedy of material inequality among people at the centre of its focus. In the socialist interpretation of 1798, attention is drawn, in accordance with Marxist theory, to the fact that both nationalist and loyalist narratives can be easily used by the more wealthy classes to distract their less well-off fellow citizens from pursuing their more immediate material

³⁵ Russell 20.

³⁶ Parker, “Buntus Belfast,” *Dramatis Personae* 33.

aims,³⁷ a fact that Stewart Parker found of great contemporary relevance, as it is shown for example in his earlier radio play *The Iceberg* (1975).³⁸

In *Northern Star* (exactly as in *The Northern Iron*), this interpretation is personified in the historical figure of James Hope, highly suitable for this role due to his working-class origins, well-known proto-socialist opinions, as well as for his promising surname. It is also significant that he, as one of the few leading United Irishmen, eluded both the common fates of capture and emigration and managed to survive until the end of his days in Ireland while never publicly renouncing his principles.³⁹

His importance in the play is highlighted by the fact that at least in the 1984 production he remained, along with McCracken and Mary Bodle, one of the only three characters to be played by an actor who did not double in other roles.⁴⁰ Moreover, in Act II he appears as a “future ghost,” which is in keeping with the historical fact that he was alive at the time when the play was set, but has also a symbolic function, presenting a counterpoint to the more traditional ‘past ghost’ of the Phantom Bride. In keeping with the original proclamation of the United Irishmen, the ‘ghost’ of James Hope is therefore trying to find a way from the entangled past towards a future solution. His lines in the play are to a large extent authentic: in the first flashback scene, his slogans for the Volunteer banners are quoted and for his later conversations with McCracken, material has been used from his recollections that were first published in Madden’s *Life and Times of the United Irishmen* and later edited by John Newsinger.⁴¹

³⁷ According to Eva Urban, this class-based interpretation is a consistent thread to be found in most of contemporary and recent Northern Irish drama: “Many of the plays dramatize the Marxist analysis of the artificial fostering, by the ruling class, of divisions between sections of the working-class [...]” Urban 269.

³⁸ Unpublished play, first broadcast on BBC in 1975. It is discussed in Andrew Parkin, “Metaphor as Dramatic Structure” 135-139.

³⁹ John Newsinger, “Introduction,” *United Irishman: The Autobiography of James Hope*, ed. John Newsinger (London: Merlin Press, 2001) 36-37.

⁴⁰ Parker, “Northern Star” 2.

⁴¹ For the slogans “The Irish Bastille: let us unite to destroy it” and “Our Gallic brother was born July 14, 1789. Alas! we are still in embryo (18-19)” see Newsinger 53. The credo of “moral force (19)” is elaborated in Newsinger 51. Hope’s answer to McCracken’s question about whether he is not afraid of being hung, “I ken it’s a great honour, but I cannae say I’m dying about it (55),” has its parallel in Hope’s authentic line, “It would ill become one, who has pledged his life to his country, to shrink from death in any shape, [...] but, I confess, I have no desire for that distinction,” Newsinger 55. Numerous other examples can be found.

In one of the few passages of the play which seem to be entirely devoid of irony, as Elmer Andrews correctly argues, McCracken and Hope manage to name the material base of the problem and the possible key to it:⁴²

McCracken [...] A field, with two men fighting over it. Cain and Abel. The bitterest fight in the history of man on this earth. [...]

Hope It's not beyond resolution. If every man was awarded the equal fruits of his labour – from the land that he works. (59)

However, this is offered as a purely utopian answer to what is presented as a perennial problem of mankind, without any proof or demonstration of the truthfulness of the claim. As Elmer Andrews argues:

“The moral force of the labouring class will prevail,” Hope confidently declares: but there is neither empirical evidence nor dramatic justification for the view that it *will* prevail, for the belief that history is imbued with purpose and that the happiness of mankind is ultimately guaranteed, for the assertion that the oppressed are any more courageous or noble than the oppressor. These points serve to remind us that what we are dealing with is another dogma of faith, and it is not organic to this play because it is not converted into overwhelming dramatic necessity on its own terms.⁴³

For these reasons, *Northern Star*, despite its brilliant analysis of 1798 and its legacy, presents no hope from the past which would reach towards the future. The only play by Parker that offers a resolution of an optimistic kind is *Pentecost* – as noted by most commentators – but there the hope does not have an ideological basis, but stems from a profound spiritual (although not religious) transformation of the individual and the community by way of biblical analogy.

The resulting message of *Northern Star* concerning the relationship between the past and the present may be best viewed through the prism of the symbolism of ghosts. The importance of this motif has been already hinted at above in the discussion of the “future

⁴² Andrews 259.

⁴³ Andrews 261.

ghost of James Hope” and the “Phantom Bride,” while its crucial position in Parker’s oeuvre as a whole was analysed in detail by Ondřej Pilný.⁴⁴ As it was mentioned in Chapter Three of the present study, the ‘spectral presence’ brings *Northern Star* into the proximity of James Andrew’s *The Nabob*, as in both works the ghosts symbolise the influence of the past on the present, which often takes dangerous forms. While in Andrew’s set of tales the ghosts are laid to rest in an utterly fanciful and unrealistic way, Parker’s play presents a much more complex picture.

Arguably, there are many more ghosts in *Northern Star* than only the two specific instances mentioned above. Firstly, all the characters appearing in the flashback scenes can be interpreted as ghosts since they, as Pilný has noted, represent the “past selves” of McCracken and his “fellow insurgents.”⁴⁵ Secondly, also the United Irishmen as such can be seen as spectres in the sense outlined above as they retain the ability to influence the present in Northern Ireland in both a positive and negative sense. The concluding scene, which prefigures McCracken’s execution without being given a chance to address his fellow citizens (82), thus acquires wider meaning. On one level it signifies the failure of the United Irishmen in their effort to unite the creeds and the subsequent rise of militant unionism.⁴⁶ On another level, however, it symbolises the passing of the United Irishmen as ghosts into the nightmarish mixture of history and present, characteristic of Northern Ireland of the ‘Troubles.’ In this environment they have served as inspiration for acts of terrorism without having any more say in the process than McCracken was given before his death.

The play *Northern Star*, rather than offering a solution for the future, may be therefore seen as an exercise in putting the ghosts of the United Irishmen to rest. The way to achieve this, however, is neither following them blindly nor driving them out of memory, but a profound understanding of their ambiguous legacy. As Parker himself argued in relation to (Northern) Ireland’s turbulent past:

⁴⁴ See Pilný 141-142.

⁴⁵ Pilný 144.

⁴⁶ This is underscored, as noted by Marilyn Richterik, by the beating of the lambeg drum, a typical instrument of Orange parades, in the final scene. See Richterik, “Ireland, the Continuous Past” 268. According to the actual historical evidence, McCracken’s last speech was drowned by the sound of the trampling of horses. See Akiko Satake, “The Seven Ages of Harry Joy McCracken: Stewart Parker’s *Northern Star* as a History Play of the United Irishmen in 1798.” *Theatre Stuff: Critical Essays on Contemporary Irish Theatre*, ed. Eamonn Jordan (Dublin: Carysfort Press, 2000) 177.

Nearly every day now in the North, the plea goes out to “forget the past.” Such advice is both impractical and pernicious. On the one hand, you can’t forget a nightmare while you are still dreaming it. On the other, *it is survival through comprehension that is healthy, not survival through amnesia.*⁴⁷

Northern Star therefore teaches us that in order to break free from the shackles of the past, which is a condition *sine qua non* for any future positive development in Northern Ireland, what is required is not to forget about it, but to analyse it critically without omitting unpalatable details, looking for warning and inspiration alike. Only in that case there is a chance that the vicious circle of ‘predestination’ will be broken, room made for human free will, and a possibility of better future asserted. Precisely due to its many-levelled and deep-reaching engagement with 1798, Stewart Parker’s *Northern Star* can thus be taken as an example of a literary work which may contribute to the healing of historical traumas, so that the “half-built, half-derelict cottage in the continuous past,”⁽³⁾ which is the symbolic setting of the play, might yet become a comfortable abode for all.

⁴⁷ Stewart Parker, “An Ulster Volunteer,” *Dramatis Personae* 38.

CONCLUSIONS

Interpretation of 1798 in Twentieth-Century Fiction and Drama

The general question that the present study aims to address concerns the possibilities of literary works to contribute to our understanding and interpretation of the past. In the theoretical discussion in Chapter One it was argued (in reference to Hayden White as well as Paul Ricoeur) that literature and historiography are similar in structure as they inevitably contain a mixture of fact and fiction. Consequently, both historiographical works and literary reflections of the past contribute to the ‘invention’ of history, taken broadly as a narrative construct out of the traces of the past. Regardless of whether we discuss literature or historiography, it is theoretically impossible to judge between conflicting interpretations of history according to purely epistemological criteria (that is, unless possibly some crude mistake occurs on the basic factual level, which clearly contradicts the historical evidence).¹ This was amply shown in the discussion of the historiographical reflections of the 1798 rebellion, which rarely contain any overt factual inaccuracies, but nevertheless display irreconcilable differences on the level of selection of material and the overall presentation of the historical event. Similarly, the value of the various views expressed in the novels and plays in question can be hardly judged by simple reference to historical ‘fact.’

According to Paul Ricoeur, historiography has also an important ethical dimension which should guarantee that the historian will strive not to gloss over or omit important facts in his/her interpretation and to pay due attention when the history of victims is concerned.² Due to the unclear border between historiography and fiction, these criteria can be arguably applied also in connection to historical novels and plays. Nevertheless, the analyses of historiographical and literary works undertaken in this study testify to the

¹ As it was shown in Chapter One, it is highly difficult to define what exactly such a “crude mistake” consists of. Historical facts are not real objects, but discursive entities, and historical documents, against which they should be verified, give us no direct access into the past. This gives the historian ample space to shape the narrative according to his/her aesthetic or political preferences without recourse to blatantly false statements, such as, “nobody was killed at Scullabogue.” See especially page 19 (footnote 21), and page 22 of this study.

² Omitting important historical facts is also, of course, regarded as a crude mistake according to the rules of the historical discipline, but can be hardly regarded the same kind of mistake as discussed above. The principal reason for this is that the relative importance of facts is not given primarily by epistemological criteria, but mainly by ethical and pragmatic reasons.

fact that the theoretical basis of Ricoeur's historical ethics should be modified so that it can be used in complex cases such as that of the 1798 rebellion. As it was mentioned, Ricoeur's concept of ethics can be seen as essentially conservative, since it is defined solely by our relationship to the past through the notion of debt. However, the discussion of the reflections of 1798 shows that this is not sufficient. As the rebellion, especially from the 1970s onwards, has been increasingly seen through the prism of the conflict in Northern Ireland, it is clear that ethical responsibility to the present and the future is at least equally important. It may be plausibly argued that it is often the case that the present is not influenced by the past as such, but by its interpretation, and an awareness of this fact permeates many novels and plays, as well as historiographical works treated in this study.

Despite the structural similarities between historiography and literature, and the ethical dimension applicable to both, it is clear that at least in actual practice, historical novels and plays tend to interpret history in different ways. The primary pragmatic reason for this is that while historiographical works are bound by the currently valid rules of the discipline and can be easily rejected on their basis, works of literature dealing with history are significantly less limited. On the basis of the evidence provided in this study it can be argued that the possibilities of historical novels and plays in interpreting history include many of those enjoyed by historiography, as well as certain others not generally found in historiographical works.

In contrast to the earlier view, represented, for example, by Georg Lukács, the findings of this study show that historical novels and plays should be by no means seen as dependent on historiography. Rather, in accordance with the views of Ansgar Nünning and Mark Berninger, they should be regarded as an independent factor in the public discussion concerning the meaning of particular historical events.³ In the context of this study, this can be illustrated by the relationship between literary reflections of 1798 and the individual historiographical interpretations. While a number of immediate connections can be traced, these correspondences cannot be possibly projected onto a simple timeline in the sense that a given historiographical interpretation would influence

³ See Chapter One, pages 16-17 of the present thesis.

the following literary treatments until it was superseded by another historiographical interpretation which would, in turn, inform more recent novels and plays.

Rather, the relationship between literary treatments of the rebellion and the historiographical works should be best seen as a dialogue.⁴ In the course of this dialogue, historical novels and plays naturally drew from historiography, but at the same time frequently complemented or challenged it in various ways. Often it was the case that they drew attention to particular events or episodes of the rebellion, portrayed these events from unexpected angles, highlighted aspects of 1798 which tended to slip into oblivion at a given period, or strove to set limits to established historiographical interpretations. Their authors tended to rely on historians to establish the facts of the matter, but sometimes drew from sources such as poetry or folklore, which might have been only rarely used by contemporaneous historiography. Given the status of 1798 as a crucial identity-forming event, the novels and plays in question frequently used the rebellion as a vehicle for expressing views about the Irish national identity. Moreover, as it has been stated above, they often made various connections between the past and particular events in the present, usually in relation to the conflict in Northern Ireland.

The possibilities that have been just stated are, of course, open to historiography as well, but literature, being not a scholarly discipline, can arguably put them into practice with a greater degree of flexibility. To these one should add the options given by the greater fictional license of an author of a historical novel or play, which enable him/her, for example, to portray the events from the viewpoint of those participants who have left no historical record. Moreover, literature has a wider range of formal means of presenting history, including the use of lyrical language and symbols, and distinct structural choices such as the use of literary or mythical allusion. The overview below will discuss the contribution of the literary works treated in this thesis to the interpretation of 1798 first on the basic level on content. In the process, it will focus on the links to particular historiographical interpretations, as well as on political implications of the novels and

⁴ This dialogue did not take place, of course, only between historiography on one side and literature on the other. While the discussion inside historiography was amply illustrated in Chapter Two, it should be noted that dialogue could take place also between individual literary works. A good example might be the relationship between MacManus's *Men Withering* and Sam Hanna Bell's *A Man Flourishing*, expressed in the respective titles.

plays in question. This discussion will be followed, in turn, by a summary of relevant formal elements used to portray the rebellion in selected literary reflections of 1798.

Interpretation on the Level of Content

Out of the four early twentieth-century works analysed in Chapter Three, it is arguably W.B. Yeats's and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902) which brings the least original insight. Essentially, it replicates the physical force, 'Fenian' view of the rebellion, expressing it on a more general, symbolic level. In a similar way, William Buckley's *Croppies Lie Down* (1903), despite its redeeming features on the symbolic level, seems to be very much dependent on the Catholic interpretation of Patrick F. Kavanagh, prevalent at the time when the work was published. Especially problematic from the ethical point of view is the historical distortion which appears in the novel in connection to the massacre at Scullabogue.

On the other hand, George Birmingham's *The Northern Iron* (1907), while entirely conventional in literary terms, may be regarded as a distinct new voice in the discussion about the rebellion. Anticipating in many respects the post-revisionist interpretation of 1798, it focuses on the United Irishmen, especially those of Ulster Presbyterian background, and in an explicit contrast to Kavanagh preaches an inclusive national identity. For these reasons it may be seen as a fictional corrective to the way in which the 1798 rebellion tended to be interpreted at the time of the novel's publication. The ethical thrust of this correction is connected to the past as it draws attention to participants in the rising whose contribution was being neglected. At the same time, it is related to the author's present, since the emphasis on an inclusive national identity could, unlike the Catholic triumphalism of Kavanagh, contribute to the solving of the difficult situation in Northern Ireland.

While *The Northern Iron* does not criticise the rebels in any significant degree and remains mildly nationalist, Andrew James's 'set of tales' *The Nabob* (1911) approaches the topic essentially from the opposite, Ulster loyalist viewpoint. James's view differs significantly from the earlier loyalist interpretation represented by Richard Musgrave's history (1801), as well as other loyalist novels about 1798 published before 1916 in that it does not in any way downplay the government atrocities which precipitated the outbreak

of the rising. This severe criticism of both sides of the conflict has parallels in some later 'revisionist' treatments of 1798, such as Pakenham's *The Year of Liberty* (1969). Of interest is also the fact that in the first set of tales the rebellion is presented through the eyes of common Northern Irish Presbyterians, especially those who 'converted' to loyalism in the aftermath of the event. This rare perspective has been largely underrepresented in both historiography and literature, with the exception of Ian McBride's articles of the 1990s. In keeping with the loyalist tone of *The Nabob*, the events of 1798 are used to underpin the separate identity of Ulster Presbyterians, which is shown by stressing their difference from the Catholics as well as the use of Ulster Scots. A definite shortcoming, however, is that the message of the set of tales for the author's present is unsatisfactory, as the solutions offered are rather from the realm of fantasy and out of touch with reality.

MacManus's *Men Withering* (1939) is the first major literary reflection of 1798 to present the event from the viewpoint of ordinary Irish-speaking peasants. Significantly, this is well before the reaction of Gaelic culture to the rebellion became the subject of historiography, the only exception being Richard Hayes's compilation of oral history *The Last Invasion of Ireland, When Connacht Rose* (1937).⁵ The effort to present the rebellion from the Gaelic perspective may be seen, in Ricoeur's past-oriented ethical framework, as a worthy endeavour to preserve the stories of the "vanquished and lost." However, this might be seen as problematic from a more present-oriented point of view due to the emphasis on Gaelic culture inherent in the state ideology of early independent Ireland. This weakness is underscored by the fact that the novel is linked in many aspects to the one-sided interpretation of Kavanagh and implicitly advocates a view of Irish national identity which sees Catholics of Gaelic descent as the only true Irishmen. On the other hand, the portrayal of the rebellion in the novel lacks romanticising elements typical of nationalistic treatments of 1798 and rather focuses on the bleak situation of the dying protagonist and his culture, which chimes well with Ricoeur's view.

⁵ After Hayes, the subject was treated first in the 1990s by Tom Dunne in "Subaltern Voices? Poetry in Irish, Popular Insurgency and the 1798 Rebellion," *Eighteenth Century Life* 22.3 (1998): 31-44 and taken up by Guy Beiner in *Remembering the Year of the French: Irish Folk History and Social Memory* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007).

A similar endeavour to present the rebellion through the eyes of the Irish-speaking population is present in Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque* (1962). Arguably, the novel is more successful in this respect than *Men Withering* due to the masterful use of the Irish language and an explicit reference to poems and folklore which could have influenced the peasant mentality in 1798. This tradition, however, is not taken at face value, but presented as ambiguous and problematic, inadequate to the situation. While the inclusive message of the United Irishmen is seen generally in a positive light in the novel, stress is laid on the inevitable dehumanising effects of war as such. Of interest is also the fact that the protagonist, Máirtín Caomhánach, is never sure about his reasons for joining the rising, and that his fellow soldiers are motivated by a whole range of divergent objectives, including emotional ones. This presents a welcome counterpoint to the majority of historiographical reflections of 1798, which, due to the rules of the discipline, focus on rational motivations. The result in Ó Tuairisc's novel is a highly balanced interpretation of the rebellion, anticipating the post-revisionist view in its rather positive picture of the United Irishmen, but also close to the 'revisionists' in its questioning of ideologies and its stress on inevitable atrocities on both sides of the conflict.

Séamus Ó Néill's play *Faill ar an bhFeart* (1967), while rather conventional in formal terms, is of definite interest, as it kept alive the 'radical' Northern Irish interpretation of 1798. In the context of the present study, this particular view was first encountered in Birmingham's *The Northern Iron* (1907) and shares many common features with the post-revisionist interpretation of the 1990s. Accordingly, due attention is devoted in the play to the ideology of the United Irishmen, the importance of the Northern Irish Presbyterians and the rather neglected social aspects of the rebellion. Of notable importance is the creative use of dialogue in the play which allows the author to incorporate several opinions at once without offering a definite conclusion.

From the 1970s onwards, the 'ethical responsibility' of most literary works focused on 1798 was directed principally to the present, as has been noted. This can be seen already on the first historical novel about 1798 written in this period, Sam Hanna Bell's *The Man Flourishing* (1973). Connecting the past and the present, it essentially argues that the eclipse of Presbyterian radicalism in the aftermath of the rebellion and the rise of loyalism were morally flawed and contributed to the re-emergence of the Northern Irish

conflict in the twentieth century. At the same time, the violence of the rebels is criticised in the diabolical figure of the ‘Doctor.’ Especially in its highlighting of the ‘Presbyterian’ and class aspects of the rebellion, Bell’s novel can also be ranked under the Northern Irish ‘radical’ interpretation.

In contrast, Thomas Flanagan’s *The Year of the French* (1979) can be regarded as the only literary work treated in this thesis to be informed by the ‘revisionist’ interpretation of 1798. This solitary status might be taken as indicative of the fact that this view of the rebellion, contrary as it was to the prevalent public opinion, has never gained much popularity. Flanagan’s novel should be partly seen as an effort to give wider currency to the revisionists’ views in order to undermine the ideological basis of republican violence in Northern Ireland. Regardless of this political direction, however, the interpretation of 1798 in *The Year of the French* can be regarded as balanced from a certain perspective: along with the criticism of the United Irishmen it contains deep enquiries into the British conduct and, in the last instance, moves to a metahistorical level and puts in question the possibility of any definite interpretation of history. Of importance is also the ‘pseudo-documentary’ structure of the novel, capable of juxtaposing various points of view without explicitly judging them.

John McArdle’s short story “It’s Handy When People Don’t Die” (1981) is highly exceptional in the context of this study, since it contains only an absolute minimum of historical detail. In a way, it can be seen as the ultimate expression of the effort to present the rebellion from the perspective of its ‘forgotten’ participants, well in keeping with Ricoeur’s ethics. The main reason is that the protagonist Art, through whom the events are mediated, is an entirely marginal member of an underrepresented group of Ireland’s population. Unlike the case of Máirtín Caomhánach from *L’Attaque*, no historical sources could be used to gain access into the mind of this character, who possibly suffers from mental disability. To reconstruct his perspective, the author had to rely entirely on the imagination, which might serve as a radical illustration of fiction venturing into realms forbidden to historiography.⁶ Interestingly, if we are to trust McArdle himself, this venture was ultimately motivated by a wish to change the situation in Northern Ireland:

⁶ While McArdle’s story refers only to a minimal number of known historical facts, it should not be dismissed as an arbitrary fantasy, as it uses the backdrop of the rebellion to analyse a human situation which is very much general, not dependent on a particular historical event.

Art's case points to the situation of many participants in the later conflict who are caught on the boundary between life and death without understanding what they are fighting for. "It's Handy When People Don't Die" thus serves as another example of the double direction inherent in the ethics of historical interpretation.

Stewart Parker's *Northern Star* (1984) represents, in a way, the most successful expression of the Northern 'radical' interpretation as it incorporates all the aspects mentioned in connection to Birmingham, Ó Néill and Bell – the focus on the North, United Irish ideology, Presbyterian religion and the class analysis of the conflict – in the framework of a highly ambitious play. Interestingly, the play was first staged several years prior to the emergence of the nearest historiographical parallel of this perspective, the post-revisionist interpretation of the 1990s. While sympathetic to the United Irishmen, *Northern Star* also criticises them for the use of violence and various mistakes in which they contributed to the hopeless situation of the 'Troubles.' The play creates strong links between the past and the present, trying to save the United Irishmen both from oblivion and from misuse by militant nationalists.

Colm Mac Confhaola's *Ceol an Phiobaire* (1997) has been so far the last of the works treating the 'Gaelic' aspect of 1798, this time concentrating on the Irish speakers who took part in the Wexford rising. Despite its broadly Catholic tone, the novel betrays the influence of the post-revisionist interpretation in the relative prominence given to the United Irishmen. At the same time it pays a great deal of attention, similarly to Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*, to the dehumanising effects of war, demonstrated in rebel atrocities, most notably the murder of the landlord Constantine Butcher. It should be added, however, that the interpretation of 1798 forms only one of the strands of the narrative and that the purpose of the novel seems to be rather sophisticated entertainment than a serious engagement with the legacy of the rebellion.

The most recent of the works treated in this study, *Tearing the Loom* by Gary Mitchell (1998), does not interpret the rebellion directly, but uses it as a projecting screen for discussing paramilitary atrocities in Northern Ireland of the 1990s – the link to historical evidence, advocated by Ricoeur for historiography only, but nevertheless present in many historical novels and plays about 1798, seems to be entirely suppressed. Rather, the play concentrates on the horrors of civil war in general terms, thematising the

breakup of families and the unmotivated, 'daemonic' aspect of violence. While the historical event of the rebellion does not undergo any deep analysis, it is of interest that the idealism of the United Irishmen, similarly as in many other literary reflections of 1798 written by Northern Irish authors, is presented as an inspiration for the solution of the present conflict.

One particular point concerning the overview of the novels and plays is connected to the relationship of many literary works discussed, especially those by Northern authors, to the post-revisionist interpretation of 1798. The fact that elements of this interpretation can be traced back to the beginning of the twentieth century (and possibly back to the Presbyterian novels of the nineteenth) and have re-emerged prominently in the analysis of works from the period 1960-1990, show that the post-revisionist view could have hardly come as entirely new in the 1990s. This might be taken as a further proof of the fact, mentioned in Chapter Two, that the historiographical interpretations of 1798 tended to move in circles, often returning to previous interpretations existing either in historiography or in this case, public memory. However, most of the literary works which anticipated this interpretation or were influenced by it did not share the one-sidedness of the post-revisionists, who were accused of glossing over atrocities on the part of the rebels. As it was mentioned in connection to Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, the attitude of many of these novels and plays can be seen as combining the epistemological relativism of Hayden White (in the sense that one is entitled to create a historical narrative which would be inspiring for the present) with Paul Ricoeur's emphasis on the responsibility towards the people of the past. The result was in many cases an exceptionally balanced interpretation.

This final point may be refashioned into a general statement to the effect that a balanced view of the 1798 rebellion of one kind or another is a feature of the majority of the novels and plays treated in this thesis. The exceptions to this trend, barring W.B. Yeats's and Lady Gregory's *Cathleen Ni Houlihan*, can be found principally among the less known and less artistically successful works in question. This puts the literary treatments into favourable comparison to historiographical reflections of 1798, where a single line of argument is usually followed. The formal advantage of literature against

historiography in this respect may well be that the author of a novel or play can easily put opposing points of view into dialogue without forcing a necessarily reductive resolution while being able to dwell on the emotional aspects of the characters and the situation.

Interpretation on the Formal Level

The distinctively literary means which the authors of the novels and plays in question applied in the treatment of 1798 are also frequently related to politics or national identity, but sometimes have the effect of giving a more general meaning to the event. The following discussion will start with a recapitulation of recurrent motifs and symbols, moving on to important structural features to be found in the material just explored.

One of the motifs repeated relatively frequently in novels and plays about 1798 (and one that is the most overtly connected to politics) is the appearance in some form of a female figure symbolising Ireland. This is, of course, hardly surprising given the prominence of this symbol in Irish culture and the perception of 1798 as a pivotal moment in the construction of Irish national identity. The development of this symbol in 1798-related novels and plays, however, is interesting. While in Yeats's and Lady Gregory's famous play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* the Woman of Ireland figure is treated straightforwardly for the purposes of nationalism, all the other works use the symbol in a much more ambiguous manner. As early as in William Buckley's *Croppies Lie Down* we are presented in the character of Irene a highly unusual Woman of Ireland figure: a daughter of a Protestant landlord who gives her hand in marriage to a government schemer, who moreover sincerely loves her and is not, as it could have been expected, a melodramatic villain. The ambivalent treatment of the symbol significantly complicates the meaning of the novel, which, on the level of content, seems to be very much in line with the 'faith and fatherland' interpretation.

In Eoghan Ó Tuairisc's *L'Attaque*, the same trope is similarly deployed in an ambivalent way, being presented as a motivating force, but at the same time as an inherently problematic convention, only partially capable of giving shape to the new situation of the rising. Ultimately, it has to be abandoned if a higher understanding of the human condition is to be reached. An even more ambivalent Woman of Ireland figure appears in Stewart Parker's play *Northern Star* in the character of the Phantom Bride,

who, although she saves the main hero McCracken from government soldiers, immediately clasps him in a “vampiric” embrace, hinting at the (self-)destructive tendencies of militant nationalism. Moreover, Parker discusses also the gender imbalance, inherent in the use of women as symbols. The motif of the allegorical female, very much due to its long history and high popularity, has thus served the authors to grasp symbolically the highly complex issue of the formation of national identity and the emergence of nationalism at the time of the 1798 rebellion.

Similarly, the motif of ghosts was used in James Andrew’s *The Nabob* and Stewart Parker’s *Northern Star* in order to illustrate the complicated relationship between the past and the present and to conceptualise the circle of violence and retribution which has characterised much of Irish history, especially in Northern Ireland. The essential question in this respect is, of course, how to put the ghosts, which represent the traumas of the past, to sleep, i.e. how to check their negative influence on the present. In *The Nabob*, despite the vivid description of the origin of these ghosts, the solution offered has proved unconvincing – in order to put the ghost of the Nabob to rest, the narrative had to escape from the realistic grounding of the first set of tales into the realm of rather conventional Gothic fiction, complemented by Walter Scott’s view of history as positive progress, rather unsubstantiated in this particular case. Moreover, the solution offered was merely on the level of family and the house and not on the level of society, where it was more bitterly needed.

The treatment of the motif in Stewart Parker’s *Northern Star*, on the other hand, presents a much more complex issue, which is given already by the existence of various kinds of ghosts in the play. In contrast to *The Nabob*, *Northern Star* does not present any ready answer concerning the way how to get rid of the nightmarish influence of the past. In fact, by re-enacting a failed attempt of the United Irishmen to break free from the traumatic colonial history of Ireland and to create a more habitable future, it well illustrates the pitfalls which necessarily endanger any effort of such kind. From a certain perspective, however, the play itself represents a successful endeavour to put the ghosts of the United Irishmen to rest by pointing out the inspiration they retain for the future while simultaneously analysing their mistakes. In the play’s message, a successful way

out of a ghost-ridden past lies neither in obeying the ghosts nor in forgetting them, but in a profound critical understanding of the same.

A further important tendency is the focus on metahistory, i.e., reflections upon the ways in which histories can be constructed and written. This feature is prominent especially in Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*, where emphasis is laid on the possibility of constructing, out of the same set of historical facts, various kinds of histories which have, in turn, different implications for the future. It acquires even more importance in Thomas Flanagan's *The Year of the French*, which essentially argues for the impossibility of writing traditional narrative histories and presents an option of displaying history in non-totalizing metaphoric images. The explicit raising of metahistorical issues connects the two works in question to an important trend in recent historical fiction and drama, as it was discussed by Ansgar Nünning and Mark Berninger.⁷

Another formal feature is the use of lyrical language, encountered in the novels *Men Withering* by MacManus and *L'Attaque* by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, as well as the short story "It's Handy When People Don't Die." As all of these works present the rebellion through the eyes of participants who have left little or no historical record, the use of a less realistic approach indicated in language may be seen as an imaginative way to gain access into the minds of these characters.

Interesting features can be found in literary treatments of 1798 also on the level of structure. According to Hayden White, the past exists in an unorganized state before the historian's operation, while it is the structure imposed upon it by the historian that endows it with meaning. In White's view, the structure, ultimately informed by "the master tropes" takes on the level of narrative emplotment the form of romance, tragedy, comedy or satire (or a combination of these elements).⁸ Paul Ricoeur largely shares the view that the historian borrows narrative structure from fiction, but rather than using a static model of archetypal tropes, he speaks about the dynamic concept of tradition, which always includes the possibility of innovation.⁹

⁷ See Chapter One, pages 16-17 of the present thesis.

⁸ Hayden White, "Interpretation in history," *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 70. See also Chapter One, page 14.

⁹ See Chapter One, page 21.

A similar process of ‘imposing’ structure on events can be detected in literary treatments of history and arguably, Ricoeur’s model might be found more suitable for its description. The principal reason is that it enables the critic to make a distinction between conventional literary treatments of history, which borrow narrative structure from an already established genre, and innovative ones, which strive to represent the past in an original way.

Conventional ways of literary representation of 1798 were, according to Jim Shanahan, frequent in the nineteenth century, when the patterns of the anti-Jacobin novel, the national tale, the Big House novel and especially the example of the modern historical novel set by Walter Scott were more or less successfully emulated.¹⁰ This trend continued also in the twentieth century to a certain degree, but an increasing number of examples can be found of literary works which have brought structural innovation and for this reason they often come across as more rewarding in terms of the interpretation of history.

One innovative strategy that has been encountered on the pages of this study is the mixing of genres. This is a prominent feature of Andrew James’s *The Nabob* and Colm Mac Confhaola’s *Ceol an Phiobaire* – it may be argued that it helps to present the rebellion from unexpected perspectives in both cases, while at the same time without complete success as both works display significant flaws. What is possibly more rewarding is the ‘mixing of emplotments’ in Sam Hanna Bell’s *Man Flourishing*: the novel contains a highly disquieting ironic relationship between the “comic” development of the story on the material level, in which all obstacles are cleared away as if miraculously from the main character’s path, and a deeply tragic moral downfall which he has to pay as a price.

Arguably, one of the most enriching methods has been the use of mythological or literary allusions in order to give structure to the narrated story and broaden its range of meanings. Allusions are already used in William Buckley’s *Croppies Lie Down*, where the mention of Clorinda, the heroine of Tasso’s *Jerusalem Delivered*, helps to give significance to the death of the character of Irene Neville. However, the first novel in which the method of allusion is used as a structural device is MacManus’s *Men Withering*

¹⁰ Jim Shanahan, *An ‘Unburied Corpse’: The 1798 Rebellion in Fiction 1799-1898*, Diss. TCD 2006.

(1939). As it has been shown, the figure of King Lear is used throughout the novel as a point of comparison for both the protagonist, and by synecdoche, for the Gaelic people he stands for, thus contributing both to the poetic richness of the language and the general significance of the story. However, the use of allusion by MacManus is limited by the fact that the reference to Lear takes the form of a straightforward simile and thus lacks the ironic distance and interplay which we associate with the famous proponents of this method among the modernists, James Joyce and T.S. Eliot.

A different approach was chosen by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc in his novel *L'Attaque* (1962). Like MacManus, Ó Tuairisc uses (in this case mythical) allusion as a central literary strategy, but its functions differ largely from the case of *Men Withering*. Firstly, the allusion (or allusions, as Ó Tuairisc uses several mediaeval texts of mythological significance) serves more directly for structural purposes as the story imitates the symbolic journey of a mythical hero from compulsion (*an gheas*) through pursuit (*tóraíocht*) to his final goal (*leaba dearg*). Secondly, the relationship of the mythological stories to the historical events depicted in the novel is essentially ironic, which enables Ó Tuairisc to effectively put in question the traditional mythical values of personal heroism as well as the glorified image of the rebellion in nationalist interpretations, and set up a much more compassionate and humanistic 'heroic code.'

An even more complex method was chosen by Stewart Parker in his play *Northern Star*, which incorporates allusions both to the concept of the 'Seven Ages of Man,' famously expressed in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and the styles of the individual Irish dramatists used in the various flashback scenes. This elaborate structure has multiple functions in the play. It helps, in a similar way as in Ó Tuairisc, to give structure to the events, and works as metahistorical commentary, putting together the past and the present as well as various kinds of history. Moreover, it serves, along with other means, to express the central metaphor of the play, which is that of theatre, and its central question, which is that of free will. The principal relationship between the historical events and the dramatic texts which are alluded to is again ironic, helping to see aspects of the rebellion from unexpected angles.

A contrasting treatment of the problem of structure can be found in Thomas Flanagan's novel *The Year of the French*. The theoretical grounding of the novel

comprises the distrust of generalising historical interpretations, which we can associate with K.R. Popper, with the emphasis on the fragmentary nature of the historical material, reminiscent of the approach of Michel Foucault. It is therefore not surprising that the very structure of the novel also reflects these notions – in contrast to *L'Attaque* and *Northern Star*, it explicitly rejects any central structuring device, ironic or other, and rather presents the historical events in a series of fragments and from contrasting points of view. Flanagan's method thus makes the reader aware of the limitations inherently present in any governing structural principle of historical narrative.

This brief summary of the most interesting content and formal features of novels and plays dealing with 1798 brings back to mind the pertinent question of the relative value of the interpretation of history in literature in contrast to historiography. On the level of content it has been shown that although historical novels and plays can sometimes become a vehicle for some of the more extreme interpretations, which seriously distort the basic historical facts for political or ideological purposes,¹¹ the majority of the literary works treated in the present study are distinguished by an exceptionally balanced portrayal of the rebellion and the United Irishmen that is often lacking in the historiographical treatments of the same. In this manner, they arguably succeed in grasping the ambiguous nature of 1798 itself, which has offered to future generations an ample amount of both inspiration and warning.

The authors were also able to deploy motifs, such as the Woman of Ireland or the motif of ghosts, which enabled them to interpret the rebellion on a symbolic level and enter into communication with previous literary traditions. In some cases, well in keeping with the recent development of European historical novel and drama, they also added a level of metahistorical commentary, which makes the reader aware of the inevitable

¹¹ Not many such examples were analysed in this thesis, but it would be possible to mention the treatment of the Scullabogue massacre in Buckley's *Croppies Lie Down*, as well as, to a lesser degree, the portrayal of the rebellion as a modern, politically correct, strife for equality in Kathleen O'Farrell's *Fiddler of Kilbroney*. Outside the context of this thesis, for example, a strong case was made by James Cahalan against Leon Uris's novel *Trinity* (1976) for essentially legitimising IRA violence in Northern Ireland. See James M. Cahalan, *Great Hatred, Little Room* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1983) 190.

relativity of any rendering of history. Much variation can be found on the structural level as well, where the most interesting innovation is the use of mythological or literary allusion for various purposes. Many of these elements, especially in the last three works treated in this thesis, have the effect of broadening the range of meaning, creating a link between the past and the present, and giving the historical events in question a more general significance.

A tentative answer to the question raised at the beginning of this concluding section could therefore be, at least in the context of twentieth-century literary reflections of 1798, that while it probably would not be wise to study historical fiction and drama for verifying historical fact, to look into literary works for valuable interpretations of history is more than legitimate, provided that the basic facts have been established. To make a full circle back to the theoretical preliminaries of this thesis, it is of definite interest that a similar conclusion was reached in some of the more recent work of Hayden White himself.¹² It may be hoped that the present study has brought some more evidence concerning the particular ways in which literature can help us understand the past.

¹² E.g. Hayden White, "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1992) 37-53, or Hayden White, "The Practical Past." Lecture given at the University of Konstanz in summer 2010.

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ABSTRAKT

Irské povstání roku 1798 je společně s předcházející dekadou právem považováno za přelomovou událost ve vytváření irské národní identity. Proto nepřekvapí, že na poli historiografie i literatury dalo podnět k vzniku velkého množství často si odporujících interpretací. Tato studie se soustředí na historické romány a divadelní hry napsané o povstání jak v anglickém, tak i irském jazyce v průběhu dvacátého století, zvláště pak po roce 1916. Ve středu pozornosti stojí interpretace zmíněné události obsažené v těchto literárních dílech, které jsou srovnávány s různými pohledy na rok 1798 vzniklými na půdě irské historiografie. Vzhledem k tomu, že se na povstání zvláště od sedmdesátých let dvacátého století pohlíží ve světle pozdějšího konfliktu v Severním Irsku, hraje tato spojitost v analýze významnou roli.

Na teoretické úrovni čerpá disertace z poznatků Haydena Whitea, jenž, jak známo, uvedl v pochybnost hranici mezi zpracováním dějinných událostí v historiografii a literární fikci. Tento relativismus je zároveň doplněn vybranými prvky filozofie Paula Ricoeura, která klade důraz na nevyhnutelné etické otázky se zobrazením dějin spojené. V souladu se svými teoretickými východisky zkoumá studie možný přínos interpretací historie obsažených v literatuře. Z hlediska obsahu je zdůrazněna skutečnost, že překvapivě mnoho zkoumaných románů a her pohlíží na povstání velmi vyváženě, což nebývá pravidlem v leckdy polemičtějších pracích historiků. Náležitá pozornost se kromě toho věnuje formálním možnostem literatury při zobrazování historie, mezi něž patří použití symbolů, literární a mytologické odkazy a v neposlední řadě i prvky metahistorie, podrobující zkoumání samotný pojem dějin.

Po víceméně chronologickém přehledu nejdůležitějších románů a divadelních her se studie soustředí na analýzu tří literárních děl, která z různých důvodů nabízejí z hlediska interpretace povstání nejděčnější materiál: irskojazyčného románu *L'Attaque* Eoghana Ó Tuairisca (1962), románu *The Year of the French* (1979) Thomase Flanagana a hry *Northern Star* (1984) Stewarta Parkera.

ABSTRACT

The 1798 Irish rebellion together with the preceding decade is justly regarded as a watershed event in the forming of Irish national identity. Therefore it is not surprising that it has inspired numerous, and often conflicting, interpretations in both historiography and literature. This study concentrates on both English- and Irish-language historical novels and plays written about the rebellion in the course of the twentieth century, especially after the year 1916. Attention is drawn to the interpretations of the event contained in these literary works, comparing them to the various views of 1798 as they have evolved in Irish historiography. As the rebellion, especially from the 1970s onward, has been increasingly seen in the light of the later conflict in Northern Ireland, this connection has an important place in the analysis.

On the theoretical level, the thesis draws from the findings of Hayden White, who has famously questioned the border between historiographical and fictional treatments of historical events. At the same time, this relativism is complemented by selected features of the philosophy of Paul Ricoeur, who highlighted the inevitable ethical questions connected to representations of history. In accordance with the theoretical preliminaries, the study explores the relative value of interpretations of history contained in literature. On the level of content, emphasis is laid on the fact that surprisingly many of the relevant novels and plays display a highly balanced view of the rebellion, which is not the rule in the often more polemical works of historians. In addition, due focus is placed on the formal possibilities of literature in representing history, including the use of symbols, the recourse to mythical or literary allusion, as well as metahistorical features, which put under scrutiny the very concept of history.

After a largely chronological overview of the most important novels and plays in question, the study concentrates on the analysis of three literary works, which for various reasons come as the most rewarding in terms of the interpretation of the rebellion: the Irish-language novel *L'Attaque* (1962) by Eoghan Ó Tuairisc, Thomas Flanagan's novel *The Year of the French* (1979), and the play *Northern Star* (1984) by Stewart Parker.