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**THE PAST AS A LEITMOTIF IN STEWART PARKER'S
DRAMATIC WORK FOR THE STAGE/MINULOST JAKO
HLAVNÍ TÉMA V DRAMATICKÉM DÍLE STEWARTA
PARKERA**

DIPLOMOVÁ PRÁCE

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Prohlašuji, že jsem tuto diplomovou práci vypracovala samostatně, že jsem řádně citovala všechny použité prameny a literaturu a že práce nebyla využita v rámci jiného vysokoškolského studia či k získání jiného nebo stejného titulu.

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I declare that the following MA thesis is my own work for which I used only the sources and literature mentioned, and that this thesis has not been used in the course of other university studies or in order to acquire the same or another type of diploma.

Prague, August 23, 2011

Souhlasím se zapůjčením diplomové práce ke studijním účelům.

I have no objections to the MA thesis being borrowed and used for study purposes.

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Introduction

The dramatic work of Stewart Parker (1941 - 1988) constitutes an extraordinary voice in modern Irish literature. The value of his work lies not only in his specific style but also in the fact that Stewart Parker touched upon politically sensitive topics of Northern Irish history and pointed out some of the often marginalized facts. Parker's work represents a unique mirror of the state of the Northern Irish society in the twentieth century. In his plays, Parker reflected upon the events that form the core of Northern Ireland politics known as the Troubles. In this respect, he surpasses one of the main objectives of drama – to entertain – and elevates it to a higher form with moral and ethical dimensions.

In the work of recent historians, a concept emphasizing the individual role of a historian in reconstruction of history has been formulated. American historian and theoretician Hayden White states in his *Metahistory* that writing a history is in fact a similar process to that of writing a fiction. According to White, a historian chooses historical events and puts them in order with regards to the way he or she wants to present history. Such a process might be perceived as far from being objective. Objectivity or 'the truth' should be the main approach of a historian as formulated, for example, by a French philosopher Pierre Bayle (1647 - 1706) in *Historical Dictionary*: "[...] I observe that truth being the soul of history, it is an essential thing for a historical composition to be free from lies; so that though it should have all other perfections, it will not be history, but a mere fable or romance, if it want truth."¹ Nevertheless, Hayden White not only treats history as a result of a subjective process of reconstruction of the past but also draws an analogy between historiography and literature, mainly from the structural point of view and by using tropological terms. White identifies four main different modes of emplotment in writing history - according to the way

¹ Hayden White, *Metahistory* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1985) 49.

of structuring the story: Romance, Tragedy, Comedy and Satire and four main tropes: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony. These terms are then applied with regards to the method of constructing history as discussed above. When examining White's view on writing history, a question arises: what is the difference between the history writing process of a historian and of a writer of historical fiction or drama? Hayden White argues that "it is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by "finding," "identifying," or "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his. This conception of the historian's task, however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations"² In this view, the main difference is, then, the extent of 'invention' applied in the process of writing.

To deal with history and its connection to national identity seems to be a typical feature of Irish literature in general. Joep Leerssen argues that "the insistent return of a historical consciousness to a past that is familiar and yet uncomfortable, haunting and drearily returning in predictable patterns, matches the notion of Irish history as a recurrent nightmare of oppression, resistance, defeat and renewed oppression."³ Such views were set in motion in Ireland as early as in the nineteenth century; however, the fact that the process remains unfinished is suggested also by the work of other Irish writers, such as Frank McGuinness or Brian Friel. Leerssen argues that one way of coming to terms with the past lies in "a form of self-historicisation, of constructing a personal historical narrative."⁴ In my view, Stewart Parker supports this statement with his dramatic work.

² White 6-7.

³ Joep Leerssen, "Monument and trauma: varieties of remembrance," *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) 220.

⁴ Leerssen, "Monument and trauma: varieties of remembrance," 221.

Stewart Parker uses legitimate historical events as a core around which he revolves his plot. He works with facts and dates to create an ‘alternative reality’ – a notion he identifies as one of his main objectives, as he formulated in his ‘John Malone lecture’: “I am not a member of the party – any party – but there are political and social values which I wish to explore and promote in my work. Likewise, official versions of reality which strike me as malevolent or deceitful are constantly being promulgated by people in power; I want my work to offer alternative versions.”⁵ In all his plays, Parker deals with the past in some way. Be it a personal past of a character, the effects of memory or the (mis)representation of history. Nevertheless, Parker does not offer a ‘black-and-white’ approach towards the interpretation of the past. On the contrary, he shows several different perspectives. In my view, this rather relativist approach can be regarded as a typical feature of Parker’s work and resonates, on some level, with White’s approach towards constructing history.

As part of the strategy to reflect upon the events or problems present in Northern Ireland in the ‘70s and the ‘80s, Parker repeatedly returned to some of the problematic aspects of what culminated in the recent history as the Troubles. Therefore, his plays can be in many instances regarded as history plays – and he himself often labels them as such - especially the ‘Triptych’⁶ as he himself called it: *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies* and *Pentecost*, for they each depict in a specific way the events or persons from Northern Irish history. However, although the term ‘history play’ might suggest that the issues discussed are of a narrow character, that is, merely describe or retell a historical event, the contrary is true. According to Eamonn Jordan, “history plays [...] allow a writer to deal with issues of power, identity and the national consciousness, and to establish a way of mapping change in the relationship

⁵ Stewart Parker, “John Malone Memorial Lecture“, eds. Gerald Dawe, Maria Johnston, Clare Wallace, *Stewart Parker: Dramatis Personae and Other Writings* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008) 24.

⁶ Stewart Parker, Foreword to *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) xiii.

between past and present.”⁷ Therefore, to use Jordan’s statement, Stewart Parker uses history, the past, as an instrument to reflect upon some other issues as well. As discussed earlier, Parker regarded the ‘official’ versions of reality as ‘malevolent and deceitful’ and wanted to offer their ‘alternative versions’⁸. Such a desire - to provide another version of reality - is, according to Joep Leerssen, an omnipresent phenomenon in every society: ”[...] the obituaries of the past, the praise and blame allotted to public men, the ‘official stories’ which explain and interpret events are a matter for competition.”⁹

Joep Leerssen examines in “Monument and Trauma: varieties of remembrance” the creation of monuments in Northern Irish history and their significance for the society and collective memory. He points out the significance of remembrancing¹⁰ and historical recognition and identifies two main strategies in displaying the ‘official’ history of the Irish nation: the Protestant and the Catholic.¹¹ Stewart Parker’s position when reflecting on the conflict between these two sides is an ambiguous one, for he does not prioritize any side or community. On the contrary, Parker often points out what both sides share: the absurdity of some of their attempts and the brutality they apply to make their point. Thus, Stewart Parker, in my view, represents a unique humane voice in the Northern Irish society. Furthermore, when Leerssen formulates the main tendencies of making history in Ireland, he identifies two modes of collective remembrancing: the ‘society remembrancing’ and the ‘community remembrancing’. The ‘society remembrancing’ is defined as “the state-sanctioned public commemoration, which is highly mediatized, invokes a conservative ideal of social harmony

⁷ Eamonn Jordan, *Dissident Dramaturgies: Contemporary Irish Theatre* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2010) 27.

⁸ Gerald Dawe, Maria Johnston, Clare Wallace, ed., *Stewart Parker, Dramatis Personae & Other Writings* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2008) 24.

⁹ Joep Leerssen, “Monument and trauma: varieties of remembrance,” 211.

¹⁰ Leerssen uses the term ‘remembrancing’ in connection with public memory and the way the society stresses the importance on official recognition of events by building monuments. See Joep Leerssen, “Monument and trauma: varieties of remembrance,” *History and Memory in Modern Ireland*, ed. Ian McBride (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

¹¹ Leerssen , “Monument and trauma: varieties of remembrance,” 214.

where elite culture rests on the broad assent of a collective nationwide constituency, and which canonizes the acts and personalities of individuals into an ‘official’ version of history.”¹² Whereas the ‘community remembrancing’ is “sub-elite and demotic, carried largely by local or small-scale communities rather than by the elites of nations-at-large, perpetuated by oral or folkloristic face-to-face means rather than mediatized in print or monuments.”¹³ According to this concept, Stewart Parker represents the ‘community remembrancing’ approach when dealing with the past in his plays. He does not attack the official version of history; he challenges its truthfulness by using irony and then offers alternative views that are in contrast with the official version. However, what seems to fascinate Parker is not a historical development of a nation but rather an individual history of an individual character enacted on a historical background which can then perhaps be extended to an allegorical image of the national history in a broader sense. The motto of his work might in this respect be ‘coming to terms with past’ – keeping in mind that past here is a variable. To Parker, the past was not a static result, a culmination of events or a finished process: “[...] past is not a dead letter. The past is explosive cargo in everybody’s dresser. Your grandfather is the past.”¹⁴

The main objective of my thesis is to examine different uses of the past in Stewart Parker’s work for the stage. My own analysis is intended to provide a new perspective on the nature and function of the past in *Spokesong*, *Catchpenny Twist*, *Nightshade*, *Pratt’s Fall*, *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies* and *Pentecost*. Due to the range of this thesis, I will not deal with Parker’s television and radio plays with an exception of his television play *Lost Belongings*; this play will be briefly discussed in connection with *Catchpenny Twist*, for these

¹² Leerssen , “Monument and trauma: varieties of remembrance,” 215.

¹³ Leerssen, “Monument and trauma: varieties of remembrance,” 215.

¹⁴ Stewart Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 2.

two plays share some common features. As far as all the above mentioned plays are concerned, I will consider narrative techniques, characterization and different dynamics of each play in order to express the main tendencies of Parker's approach towards the past. Since most of Parker's plays often feature ghosts, either on a symbolic level or as full-valued characters, and ghosts can be regarded as a kind of a representation of the past, I will examine their role. For, in my opinion, ghosts serve as a powerful vehicle through which a catharsis is achieved, either on a personal level of the characters or on a more universal level.

For the sake of clarity, I have decided to divide my thesis into seven chapters, each dedicated to one play. The structure of individual chapters is similar, that is, after a short introduction of the play, the main concern is to present the use of the collective past and the characters' personal past. Where relevant, the role of ghosts is discussed. In the structures of individual chapters occur some differences, for each play employs a slightly different technique and thus influences the approach towards its analysis.

1. Spokesong: or The Common Wheel

“*Spokesong* is the beginning of the story”¹, wrote Lynne Parker, a theatre director and niece of Stewart Parker, in ‘Introduction’ to Parker’s *Plays: 1*. The play was first performed in 1975 at the Dublin Theatre Festival and soon became an international success, despite the fact that the main themes are rather ‘Irish’, that is, the play deals with Northern Irish history and the specific political situation of Northern Ireland, and thus, in my opinion, requires some knowledge of the discussed issues to be *fully* understood and appreciated. Lynne Parker pointed out that *Spokesong* anticipated some aspects and motifs Stewart Parker explored and developed in his later plays. Two of them were “wrestling with the past” and “an acknowledgment of what he called ‘ancestral wraiths’”². In this chapter, I will deal with the representation of the past shaped around the Troubles, the use of the history of the bicycle and the individual pasts of the characters. A special focus will be given to the ghost characters and their role.

The story of *Spokesong* is set in Belfast during the early 1970s and the eighty years preceding them. There are five main characters and one with a special role presented in the play. Three of the characters – Frank, Daisy and Julian – share the Belfast reality of the 1970s, while the other two, Kitty and Francis, Frank’s grandparents, represent the (hi)story of their time which spans from the 1890s to the time after the Second World War. The sixth character, the Trick Cyclist, differs from the others. Parker considered him as an embodiment of ‘the spirit of Belfast’³. He assumes different identities and plays a specific role in the play. The plot revolves around Frank attempting to save his small Victorian bicycle shop, which is

¹ Stewart Parker, Introduction to *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) ix.

² Parker, *Plays: 1*, x.

³ Marilyn Richtarik, “‘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, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2000) 262.

placed in the middle of a massive motorway intersection planned to be built as a part of The Urban Area Redevelopment Plan⁴. The whole play is complemented by ‘ghost’ scenes; scenes in which Francis and Kitty play the main role and document their times with the use of a bicycle parallel.

As it has already been established, *Spokesong* is, most of all, a play about the Troubles⁵. In my opinion, the way in which Parker reflects upon these events corresponds with his term ‘alternative reality’ described in the ‘Introduction’. He presents us with an unofficial version of this modern aspect of Northern Irish history. The word ‘unofficial’ refers here to the way the ordinary people, such as Parker himself, viewed and experienced Belfast in the 1970s and whose perception has often been ignored by the authorities.

In order to understand the actual reality of the 1970s, I shall borrow a reduced overview by Mary Trotter:

Civil rights demonstrations by Northern Irish Catholics led to violent exchanges between demonstrators and police. By 1969, British troops had entered Northern Ireland as peacekeepers, but soon found themselves in the eyes of many in the position of an occupying army. The situation quickly exploded into accelerated activity by Republican and Unionist organizations, like the Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Defense Association. In Belfast 1971, for example, the city saw 73 pubs destroyed with 4 clubs and 185 shops put out of business⁶.

As is apparent from this brief extract, the situation was rather intense in the early 1970s. However, while there was a ‘war’ in the streets, the life continued in some manner as well as suggested in the play. *Spokesong* is set five years prior to its first production, therefore, it is useful to realize that the reality Parker describes in his play is very much his own. The constant fear of life mingled with an everyday reality is the play’s strong feature. The atmosphere of the Troubles is conveyed through the characters in two ways; firstly, their

⁴ Parker, *Plays: 1*, 25. Further references to the play in this edition appear in parentheses in this chapter.

⁵ Mary Trotter, *Modern Irish Theatre* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) 148.

⁶ Trotter 145.

opinions on the matter represent different approaches towards the Troubles and, secondly, they comment on what happens around them, thus providing a mirror of the reality, or, as Parker formulated, an 'alternative reality'. I shall explore the characters of Frank, Daisy and Julian individually with focus on how the 'alternative reality' is represented through them.

Daisy, an elementary teacher, documents the reality of the Troubles on several occasions. When Frank asks her what she learned in school that day – an allusion to the famous Pete Seeger song “What Did You Learn In School Today” which he performed during the US Civil Rights rallies - she responds: “Plenty – such as how to booby-trap a car” (13). The irony lies perhaps in the fact that she learns this after asking about children’s interests; the children provide her with a detailed analysis followed by an orderly discussion on that matter (17). Another example is presented few scenes later, when Daisy says she saw a suspect car, with people around watching as “if it was a film premiere [...] longing for it to blow sky-high” (33). She complains about the pointless effort to teach the children some history while they are ‘fresh from stoning soldiers and setting fire to shops’ (33). Daisy concludes with: “They’ve already got more history than they can cope with out in the streets” (33). However, Frank’s response to her is: “That’s not history, that’s depraved folklore . . . bogeyman stories” (33). These extracts show Stewart Parker’s distinction between the history learnt in school and the history experienced in everyday life; however, he does not seem to want to treat the everyday reality as a history of the same significance and value as, for example, the history of the Wars of the Roses (15). As he suggests, the main concern here is not the history but the truth. The discussion between Daisy and Frank continues to be concluded with what seems to be the author’s own view uttered through Frank: “I see [history] in all the things that ordinary people do with their time” (33). The truth is not seen ‘in battles’ or lives of the ‘heroes’ but in the lives of normal people who try to live despite the difficulties and the rather dangerous Belfast reality.

The character of Julian describes the city as ‘distressingly intact’. He seems to be involved in activities of an illegal character and thus represents the radical side of the conflict. Julian’s views are also affected by his own complicated past - he was adopted by Frank’s parents and after their untimely death raised by Francis and Kitty. The relationship with Frank is complicated and, therefore, the strongest attachment is to the city of Belfast. Julian returns after five years and seems to be actively involved in the political activities. Nevertheless, he is motivated by his own past, or rather by the hatred of his past. The black, sarcastic humor is an omnipresent feature of the play but mostly when Julian comes to the scene, as in Act Two, where Julian refers to the bombing of a pet shop: “For one magic moment . . . it was raining real cats and dogs” (42).

Thus, the reality of the bombings and attacks in Belfast is presented rather indirectly in the play and often in an ironical manner or with a touch of sarcasm. Eamonn Jordan argues that “[...] playwrights in their dramatizations of the ‘Troubles’ use history and myth as a way of veering away from the obligations to be factually accurate and the direct, often overwhelming imperatives of authenticity.”⁷ In *Spokesong*, Parker employs rather historical facts, such as the allusion to the Redevelopment Plan, than myths, but he does so in an entertaining manner which establishes the play unique among other plays dealing with the Troubles. Fellow playwright Brian Friel argues in ‘Making a Reply to the Criticisms of *Translations* by J. H. Andrews’ that “writing a historical play may bestow certain advantages but it also imposes particular responsibilities. The apparent advantages are the established historical facts or at least the received historical ideas in which the work is rooted and which give it its apparent familiarity and accessibility. The concomitant responsibility is to acknowledge those facts or ideas but not to defer to them. Drama is first a fiction, with the

⁷ Jordan 102.

authority of fiction. You don't go to *Macbeth* for history"⁸. As Friel's *Translations* deal with the Troubles indirectly, for the play's main concern is the language and cultural problems tied with translating Irish names into English (which serves as a metaphor for the Troubles), so does Parker depict the atmosphere of the Troubles rather indirectly; he uses irony as a main instrument and avoids a mere stating of facts.

When compared to Julian, Frank seems to be almost ignorant of what is happening around him. Daisy accuses him of being detached from reality - with his concern for bicycles and strange manner of speech. He represents a pacifistic, *Don Quixote*-like approach. In his analysis of Parker's plays, Anthony Roche applies the term 'archetypal dreamer'⁹ when he describes the characters of *Catchpenny Twist*. Furthermore, in other Parker's plays, there always seems to be someone who is an incurable romantic, idealist, striving for an unrealizable dream. Similarly, Frank's activities are often put in contrast with those of Julian's who despises Frank for attending to something he sees pointless: "Frank is off somewhere, applying cosmetics to a corpse" (28). The corpse, as suggested by Trotter, represents Belfast and it might perhaps be perceived as part of Parker's criticism; while there are people dying in the streets, the city planners are concerned with new roads. As Mary Trotter sums up: "Parker's play simultaneously celebrates and grieves for the troubled city of Belfast."¹⁰ Stewart Parker explains in 'Signposts': "The Troubles have made people aware of how their lives are run, and governing institutions no longer have such an easy time imposing their will on communities. This year, a grandiose scheme for an elevated motorway ringing

⁸ John P. Harrington, ed., *Modern Irish Drama* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2009) 546.

⁹ Anthony Roche, *Contemporary Irish drama* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 161.

¹⁰ Trotter 148.

the city center was defeated. I'm proud to say I participated in this victory, and you can hear a bit about it in the play, folks.”¹¹

In *Spokesong* Stewart Parker used an unprecedented tool in the portrayal of the Troubles and the past – a bicycle. As Parker himself pointed out, to use the history of the bicycle is “the most unlikely way in the world to get into the subject of Northern Ireland”.¹² Parker uses this instrument in several ways. Firstly, the bicycle serves as a connection between the past and the present. Frank inherited the bicycle shop from his grandfather and thus continues in the tradition of the business. There are several parallels that can be drawn between Francis and Frank, such as the impracticality of their characters, the romantic idealism which they approach the world around them with, the nature of the relationship towards the women they love. However, their love for the bicycle seems to be the most dominant one. Most of the scenes take place in the bicycle shop, including the ‘ghost’ scenes with Frank’s grandfather. Furthermore, Frank wishes to realize the ‘bicycle solution’, and the metaphor of a union with Daisy is, again, a bicycle – this time a tandem.

Secondly, the history of the bicycle accompanies the whole play from the 1890s until the 1970s and the bicycle often serves as a witness of historical events, such as the Matabele campaign in Africa in 1890s, the Boer Wars or the First World War in Flanders. In Act Two, Parker creates a powerful image using the bicycle metaphor: “I remember once seeing – in 1917 – a case of forty brand new bicycles – unriden. They’d only been delivered that week. The town was being evacuated. They were lying out in the open, in the rain and the mud, slowly turning into a mass of rusted metal. I found myself crying . . .” (65). Through Francis, Parker makes an analogy between bicycles and people describing a historical event – a parallel suggested earlier by Frank in Act One: “Bicycles are human, kid,” (9) - moreover, he

¹¹ Parker, *Dramatis Personae* 88.

¹² Quoted in Ondřej Pilný, *Irony & Identity in Modern Irish Drama* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2006) 144.

uses an indirect method of a portrayal of history and thus avoids too sentimental or naturalistic tendency to display atrocities of war.

The metaphor of the bicycle as a weapon, even if always suggested with a hint of humor, is present also in the scenes reflecting upon the First World War in Flanders where Francis enlisted. The bicycle, except for the scenes in which Francis attempts to express its potential as a weapon, serves as a symbol of peace and humanism. Moreover, when Francis learns how to handle the bicycle in Flanders, he gets hopelessly entangled in it, and thus turns the military drill into a grotesque. Frank also makes a parallel of Jesus Christ riding a bicycle. Indeed, the bicycle, as pointed out by Frank several times, is funny, and brings a certain amount of lightness to otherwise bleak and depressing reality. As Anthony Roche formulated: “Stewart Parker’s unique sense of play enabled him to treat of that most deadly and potentially deadening of subjects, the crisis in Northern Ireland, with an unrivalled lightness of touch.”¹³ The car, on the other hand, is a metaphor of a weapon; it is often used as a bomb and it is the main subject of the Redevelopment Plan.

The use of the bicycle and the history of the bicycle are closely connected to trickery and circus motifs in the play.¹⁴ Such instruments allow Parker to add irony and a non-serious aspect to his views on the Troubles or the First World War. It creates an absurd and funny atmosphere of a vaudeville theatre which is, as formulated by Lynne Parker “a really smart move; other writers documenting the Troubles in the North tend to fall into a mixture of relentless dialectic and dogged naturalism, which can so easily breed the obvious and the sentimental.”¹⁵ The grotesque aspects are strengthened even more by the use of music in the play. Apart from ‘Daisy Bell’ and ‘Spinning Song’, Parker wrote the lyrics to the music

¹³ Roche 160.

¹⁴ Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” *The Dreaming body: contemporary Irish theatre*, eds. Melissa Sihra and Paul Murphy (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 2009) 45.

¹⁵ Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” 45.

composed by Jimmy Kennedy. The songs are performed mostly by the Trick Cyclist, who is a kind of a clown, while he rides a monocycle - another circus element. The music plays an important role in all Parker's plays in general, however, due to the range of my thesis I cannot deal with this theme in detail.

Apart from the representation of the past through the characters and the use of the history of the bicycle, the characters' personal history forms an aspect that cannot be excluded when analyzing Parker's approach towards the past. Some aspects of the characters' pasts have been mentioned, however, it is interesting to realize how the individual characters approach the concept of memory and remembering. For example, Frank's character is practically obsessed with remembering. It is him who summons the dead grandparents and who has, in some way, one foot in the past and the other in the present. He realizes the past is an inseparable part of him, yet he runs the Community Association and attends the Public Inquiry meetings regarding the Redevelopment plans not only to save his shop, since 'a single shop's neither here nor there' (6), but to 'talk values' (6). He is after a utopian vision, 'a bicycle solution' (32), as he calls it, according to which everyone would have access to free vehicles around the city center and, thus, save the city not only from the pollution but from the constant violence.

Julian represents a different approach towards memory. His character rather bitterly comments on Frank's memories of their grandparents, accusing Frank of their romanticizing. However, Frank says: "It's not a question of remembering. They are me. A big part of me. You too" (60). Julian formulates a different, unflattering view of their grandparents but Frank responds: "Have you not learned anything at all? You are your own past, kid. You're the sum total of its parts. Hate it and you hate yourself. No matter how calamitous it may have been, either you master it or you die" (60). Julian is unable to come to terms with his personal past and therefore is incapable of viewing life or the future of Belfast in an optimistic way. Frank's

comment thus well reflects Stewart Parker's philosophy and approach to the past: everything is connected. Be it the past of our grandparents, our own past or the reality of our own, nothing stands on its own but can exist only in connection to other aspects.

While Frank uses memory in order to 'move forward', Francis uses it rather to forget in order to move forward: "It's healthier not to remember those things – best to blot them from your mind. Concentrate on life's forward march" (65). He retells his war stories and bicycle stories many times, such as his meeting with Dunlop or his victory in the race on his first bicycle, until they become facts, however, he 'cheats' and omits some aspects in order to create a more pleasant reality. What Francis knew long before, Frank realizes towards the end of Act Two: "What I want to know is ... [...] the past, [...] the air's full of it [...], it's everywhere but you can't locate it ... [...], how can something that's fundamental . . . be irrecoverable . . . and uncontrollable . . . answer me that . . . [...] . . . how are you supposed to live?" (72) As Parker said in an interview in 1976: "The thing that obsesses me is the link between the past and the present. How do you cope with the present when the past is still unfinished."¹⁶

As stated in the 'Introduction', Parker regarded ghosts as an omnipresent force, not only as a reminder of the past but as an active aspect of the present life. *Spokesong* features two ghosts, Francis and Kitty. In my opinion, the ghosts have an essential role in the play for they not only serve as a medium to document their time and suggest that the origins of today's problems have their roots in the past but their main significance lies in their potential of laying them to rest. Frank symbolically 'puts them to rest' (70) when he enters the shop in a drunken state and performs an exorcism on them – an act that can be perceived as a symbolical way of moving towards the future. Stewart Parker stressed the importance of coming to terms with the past several times; however, he also suggests that the history repeats

¹⁶ Quoted in Marylinn Richtarik, "'Ireland, the Continuous Past': Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 261.

itself. The relationship between Francis and Kitty can be compared to that of Frank's and Daisy's. Francis and Frank, as well as Daisy and Kitty share some characteristics; moreover, the nature of their relationship is similar. Both Kitty and Daisy at first refuse to marry; they are both unwilling to bring children into this world. However, both of them eventually change their mind which offers an optimistic view of the future. When Daisy decides to stay with Frank the circle – the wheel – is closed. The play ends with a grotesque scene: Frank and Daisy ride the tandem bicycle in circles on the cramped stage while the Trick Cyclist and Julian sing 'Daisy Bell'. A seemingly happy ending is presented to the viewers, however, the cheerful atmosphere is rather spoilt by a realization that the Troubles are not likely to end any time soon, the house will most probably be demolished in accordance with the Redevelopment Plan, and the picture is completed by Julian robbing the till. Thus, the tone of the ending is rather ironic.

2. Catchpenny Twist

Catchpenny Twist, with a subtitle ‘a charade in two acts’ was first performed at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, two years after the first production of *Spokesong*. The two plays share many similarities, such as the main theme and some formal aspects. Both of them deal with the Troubles and are strongly linked to Belfast and its citizens of 1970s and in both music and irony is a key element. However, *Catchpenny Twist* is set in present and lacks the ghost scenes which are otherwise typical for Parker’s plays. In this respect, the play could rather be related to *Lost Belongings*, a TV six-episode series Parker wrote for Thames Television which was released during April and May in 1987. Unlike *Spokesong*, *Heavenly Bodies* or *Northern Star*, *Catchpenny Twist* is not a history play since it does not deal directly with historical themes. It does not use the irony as a narrative strategy and thus reminds rather of *Pentecost* which was written in the style of ‘heightened realism’¹. Nevertheless, the past is one of the main aspects explored in the play. In this chapter, I will focus on the representation of the Troubles, since, as already mentioned, it is Parker’s representation of an unofficial view on reality, and the way the notion of the past is approached. I will attempt to make a connection with the above mentioned TV play, *Lost Belongings*, for, in my opinion, the two plays share some common features.²

Catchpenny Twist tells a story of three friends from Belfast in their thirties who after being fired from their teaching jobs hope to succeed in the show business and in the Eurovision Song Contest while making a living by writing ballads for opposed sides of radical paramilitaries. As Anthony Roche formulates: “The two male leads are archetypal Parker

¹ Stewart Parker, Foreword to *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) xiv.

² Most of my observations on *Lost Belongings* are based on having watched the series in the National Archive of the British Film Institute on March 3, 2011.

dreamers, a pair of would-be song-writers.”³ Parker depicts Belfast in 1970s with its ‘Catholics against Protestants turmoil’ and shows concern for the world outside the island perceives the Troubles. Each of the three characters deals with his/her own issues, however, in the manner of Stewart Parker, all aspects are connected and their lives are affected by the political situation at home even though they are forced to leave it on account of two death threats. The idea of past haunting the inhabitants of Northern Ireland is mentioned and explored several times throughout the play in a similar manner as in *Lost Belongings*. In the TV series, the plot revolves around Deirdre Connell and her archetypal fate. Each episode is dedicated to a different character and his or her story, all within the Belfast of 1980s’ frame, with the exception of ‘Buck Alec’ episode that is set in London. While *Catchpenny Twist* follows a simple plot line, *Lost Belongings* is more complex, not only due to the structure but also due to the range of themes it explores, from religion, domestic violence, and violence in public to interpersonal relationships, motifs of maturing and finding a place to belong to etc.

In *Catchpenny Twist*, Martyn, Roy and Monagh do not represent different approaches towards the issues of the country, as presented in *Spokesong* where Frank and Julian stood opposite each other in their opinions. On the contrary, the three characters try to ‘stay neutral’ which eventually, and ironically, leads towards a disastrous end. They do not care about the history of their country; they merely want to achieve some happiness and success in their musical careers and personal lives. When Roy and Martyn contemplate about their future plans, Martyn suggests a change of style in their music, ‘something ethnic, the heritage of the past’⁴. Such a touch, as discussed earlier in the play, has a potential of gaining a bigger success. However, Roy answers: “Cecilia Street Primary School. Rock ‘n’ roll. Football. The pictures. That’s my roots.” (157) Martyn specifies what he meant by naming ‘the old culture,

³ Roche 161.

⁴ Parker, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) 157. Further references to the play in this edition appear in parentheses in this chapter.

the tradition'. However, Roy continues: "That's got nothing to do with me. It's got nothing to do with you either." (157) Stewart Parker's seeming attempt to propose that history and the past do not have an essential role in the life of an ordinary man from Belfast is proven wrong by the ending in which Roy, Martyn and Monagh are victims of a bomb attack precisely because of the history and the roots. In other words, Parker seems to stress the importance of acknowledgment of the past, as he formulated in an author's note to the Samuel French edition of *Catchpenny Twist*: "[...] when the Irish say "the past," they're gesturing back at least three hundred years to Cromwell and King Billy, and often beyond. . . . Grow up in Northern Ireland today, and your every step is dogged by whichever of the two camps you were born into. You can surrender to it, react against it, run away from it . . . you can't ignore it. The past is alive and well and killing people in Belfast."⁵

In *Catchpenny Twist*, rather than in *Spokesong*, the past haunts the three characters who try to run away from it, at first to Dublin and then to Europe only to meet up with it in the last scene at the airport when they open the package with the bomb. As presented in the play, it is more unusual to 'stay out' than to be involved in the politics. Every move, every gesture, is perceived as a political statement, for example, Roy and Martyn write songs for Roy's Protestant cousin only to pay their bills. However, as Marie informs Martyn, an article appears in the newspapers suggesting that Roy and Martyn have both been supplying entertainment to Protestant clubs as a means of gaining information about them, and, moreover, that they did it on behalf of British Army. They were apparently supposed to be working also for the IRA (117). It seems rather strange that Roy and Martyn are unaware of the consequences of their actions since they literally grew up in the conflict. However, their naivety and carelessness, perhaps a sign of a certain disinterest in the politics caused by a general tiredness of it, result in receiving two bullets in the post as a threat.

⁵ Marilynn Richtarik, "'Ireland, the Continuous Past': Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 256.

Marie Kyle is a representative of an opposite attitude towards the conflict. She apparently matured from ‘a mouse’ (104) into a radicalized Republican activist. It is generally in the dialogues involving Marie that the two sides of the conflict are put in contrast. When Stewart Parker commented on his grandfather’s political involvement he stated that “playing for the Glens and getting the Hun on the run were just two aspects of community: going to church, marching on the Twelfth, and joining the Ulster Volunteer Force were three others.”⁶ In this respect, to ‘be involved’ is a part of the community heritage and not necessarily a manifest of a political statement. Stewart Parker reflects his experience of growing up in a culturally and politically divided country. While Marie acts on a historical account: “I know where I stand. On eight hundred years of history, eight hundred years of repression, exploitation and attempted genocide. . .,” (132) the character of Roy says, ‘he lives in the twentieth century’ (132). Roy’s confession that he ‘picked up few phrases of Gaelic language from a tourist brochure in a Chinese restaurant in Cork,’ (157) suggests the detachment from ‘ancestral wraiths’, however, Roy expresses a strong desire to live the same way as the rest of the world, where competing in the Eurovision Song Contest is not perceived as a political statement but as a ‘harmless entertainment’ (132).

The Eurovision Song Contest, an annual international musical event, is in its use similar to the use of the Redevelopment Urban Plan in *Spokesong*. Stewart Parker does not employ these ‘real’ events as a mere attempt to make the play more ‘authentic’. In my view, it can be seen, in a way, as a statement, an approach towards something affecting the public life, a symbol of an unreachable goal, for it happens in Europe, with an international attention, and it represents something the outside world seems to be occupied with but Northern Ireland has no space for - as long as it has to deal with its own troubles. However, as Lynne Parker formulated, the songs and the references to the 1970s realities that play a crucial role in

⁶ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 39.

Spokesong are “less strategic and more obviously attached simply to the narrative”⁷ in *Catchpenny Twist*. In other words, they are an undividable part of the plot but have no special role as to a deeper message.

In *Catchpenny Twist*, Stewart Parker is concerned more than in any other play about how the world views the Troubles and the way it is represented in the media, which would be regarded as the ‘official’ representation, according to Leerssen’s definition. When the conflict is commented upon on TV, it is reduced to a mere informing about ‘some bombings’ without a detailed explanation. As a result, people outside Northern Ireland, such as Mrs. Barker, Mrs. Smiley and Mr. Spalding, tend to have a simplistic idea of what the situation is about. Stewart Parker wrote on this account: “[...] but you’d never know it from what you see on television. Which is normally some Neanderthal “public representative” mouthing the same old blind stubborn dogmas. [...] In fact, eight years’ continual bombardment of the British public with information about Northern Ireland seems to have communicated very little of substance. [...] People I talk to in London are still extraordinarily hazy and confused and fed up about it all. They confuse Belfast with Dublin. They confuse the IRA and the UDA.”⁸

One feature that is shared by the way the media represent the Troubles and the way the characters perceive them is their unsurprising omnipresence. *Lost Belongings* is abundant with small hints regarding the sound of the bombing, usually followed by a rather bored ‘it is ok, it was ‘just’ a bomb’ type of comment. Similarly, in *Catchpenny Twist*, Parker ironically twists the notion of ‘martyrdom’. In Act One, Marie informs Roy and Martyn of a loss of a volunteer called Quigley and asks them to write a ballad for his family. Martyn reduces the reaction towards this rather unsettling news to an attempt to find a word that would rhyme with ‘Quigley’. His way of accepting this kind of information might not be simply a type of a

⁷ Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” 49.

⁸ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 87-8.

denial but a portrayal of the fact that people in Belfast got used to such events. As Parker put it: “[...] people have come to live with it, as they do with virtually anything.”⁹ Furthermore, the comical aspect of such a treatment of a serious matter is similar to that of in *Spokesong* where irony and humor play an inseparable role in the depiction of the Troubles.

What is touched upon in *Catchpenny Twist* is developed in more detail in *Lost Belongings*. Parker went further back to history, in accordance with his views on Irish history being deeply rooted in the consciousness of the people from Northern Ireland, and used an archetypal myth of Deirdre, one of Irish national symbols, and wrote a play of a modern Deirdre. In the play, she is exploited by her own family, forced to abandon her home, tries to come to terms with her past and eventually, after having been imprisoned by her uncle and then left by the others, wanders pregnant through the Belfast streets covered in her own blood only to end up lying on the stairs of a church. Parker could not have invented a more symptomatic parallel between Belfast/Northern Ireland and the fate of Deirdre Connell, after all many authors before him created a parallel between Deirdre and Ireland. In Eamonn Jordan’s view, “[...] myth legitimizes history in many ways, whether it is that of injustice or victimhood, or as predestination or rights bestowed by the past. Myths can be a compensatory resource in the face of the carnage of history. The relationship between myth, power and ideology is just as vital.”¹⁰ Moreover, Parker regarded the story of Deirdre as more than fitting for the modern viewer: “Although a modern audience would be unaware of the source, I’m convinced that stories as timeless as this one contain a universal resonance, which lends them infinitely more value than a merely anecdotal narrative.”¹¹

⁹ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 87.

¹⁰ Jordan 32.

¹¹ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 111.

Lost Belongings contain many stories of smaller or greater depth and character, however, what connects them all is the sense of the theme of ‘lost souls of the dispossessed’. In the episode called ‘The American Friend’, the main character, Simon, an American archeologist studying Irish past, says at one point that he always feels at home in a place where nobody properly belongs. The sense of a lost belonging, a typical feature of Parker’s characters, is explored also in the story of Buck Alec, a musician who was forced to elope to London due to his active, though accidental, involvement in the conflict. Buck is one of those who try to run away from the past, however, as Parker pointed out, he cannot ignore it, for it eventually finds him even in his rich house among ‘high society’ friends who are ignorant of the Troubles. For Buck Alec, as for the main characters in *Catchpenny Twist*, music is a way to escape from the grim reality. However, neither of the characters is allowed to be ‘excused’ from it completely.

The concept of the past in *Catchpenny Twist* corresponds with Parker’s complex view on Northern Irish history: it is regarded as an inherent part of each inhabitant with little or no tolerance towards those who wish to ‘stay out’. Roy and Martyn both wish to achieve something in the show business and want to be able to perform music without the omnipresent threat of interpretation of their actions as political statements. As Parker put it: “Seven centuries of bloody history can’t and won’t be resolved overnight. It needs all the understanding, all the fortitude, all the imagination that the combined people of these islands can bring to bear on it.”¹² Parker suggests in *Catchpenny Twist* that what Roy and Martyn strive for is impossible. Thus, the past can be perceived as a form of a ghost haunting the characters whether they acknowledge its existence or not.

¹² Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 88.

3. Nightshade

Nightshade was first performed at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, on 9 October 1980. In this play, Stewart Parker explores death and magic. *Nightshade* differs from all of Parker's other plays in many aspects. Firstly, it is not set in the past but in an 'immediate future', secondly, its main theme is not preoccupied with the depiction of the Troubles or a representation of the 'unofficial reality' and, finally, the play does not deal with a historical theme. However, some elements which might be perceived as typical for Parker are introduced. For one, there is the music; although it does not play a central or a crucial role as in *Catchpenny Twist* or *Spokesong*, it adds a significant touch to the play. Furthermore, the play features two ghosts. They are not so obviously 'visible' as in, for example, *Spokesong*, however, they play similar role and thus can be, in my view, identified as such. One of them is Agnes, the firstly missing and later dead wife of the main character Quinn. The memory of her haunts Quinn and their daughter Delia and, therefore, I would treat her absent character as a ghost. The second ghost is embodied in the dead Dempster, a family doctor.

The past is not dealt with in the same way as in, for example, *Catchpenny Twist*, that is, it is not connected to the perception of history or linked to political events of Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, the past in *Nightshade* has its place in the form of a personal past of the characters. Most of the characters in the play have to come to terms with their past in order to proceed in their lives which is one of the main points of Parker's philosophy. In this chapter, I will focus on the concept of the past expressed by the personal pasts of the main characters, Quinn's and Delia's; I will focus on the way it is explored and dealt with. I will also give a special attention to the two ghosts and their role in the play.

Nightshade is a play “about an exploration of the myth and reality of dying”¹ wrote Lynne Parker. The plot centers on a family business of undertakers. The main character, John Quinn, runs the business and in his spare time performs magic tricks, sometimes with his daughter Delia. The plot is carried forward by the means of the motif of a loss. Quinn’s wife, Agnes, has disappeared under rather strange circumstances, that is, one day she left for the florist’s and never came back. That her disappearance was not an accident is revealed later in the play by little hints, for the persons who know more of the mystery, Quinn and Delia’s uncle, remain silent – either because they want to protect Delia or due to their own inability to face the uncomfortable truth.

At the beginning of the play, Quinn is presented as a decent man in his forties - though of a rather peculiar behavior and habits. It has been a year and a half since his wife had disappeared and ever since he does not speak much of the matter, especially not with Delia, and when asked about it, he provides a vague explanation: “Amnesia. Most likely. She could be anywhere. A different name . . . sleepwalking, in a way. Some day, some little thing, could jolt her wide awake. Who knows?”² At first, he manages to ‘get by’ by insisting on this invented version of the truth. He tries to stay composed just as his more educated clients do when confronted with a death of a relative. In my view, Quinn’s calm attitude is actually not motivated by an attempt not to lose his face in front of the others, for the people around him know the simple truth – that Agnes ‘was the escapologist’ (168), as formulated by Kane, one of Quinn’s employees. He does it rather for his own sake. By flirting with Miss Gault, the headmistress of a school Delia attends, he is acknowledging that his wife is not coming back home, yet he still produces the ambiguous phrases regarding her absence. This symptomatic behavior prevents him, but also Delia, from coming to terms with Agnes’s flight. According

¹ Lynne Parker “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” 47.

² Parker, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) 181. Further references to the play in this edition appear in parentheses in this chapter.

to Lynne Parker, “As an undertaker he is no stranger to the concept of loss; but what we watch throughout the play is his increasing dysfunction in the face of his own potential bereavement.”³

Quinn’s ‘increasing dysfunction’ is underlined by a parallel with the deterioration of his business. His assistants prepare a strike; the coffins with dead bodies start piling up on the stage and thus strengthen the growing atmosphere of tension. The inevitable conflict bursts on more front lines; the strike reaches its peak and Delia accidentally learns the truth about her mother’s death. Quinn manifests continuous anxious attempts to avoid the taboo by ignoring Delia’s questions about her or by stating that Agnes was of ‘a delicate disposition’, however, that she loved them and did not want to leave them – a merciful lie he tells himself. When Delia overhears the truth about Agnes’s death, when, ironically, lying in a coffin, the carefully maintained version of the truth is shattered to pieces. Thus, the notion of keeping memory is very important in *Nightshade*. Just as Quinn conserves bodies, he also ‘conserves’ the memory of Agnes firstly by insisting on his version of the truth about her disappearance as discussed above and, secondly, in Act Two, by suggesting to Miss Gault that she should wear some of Agnes’ clothes which culminates in the scene with her shouting at Quinn: “I’m not her, you know! You can’t make me into her by dressing me up in her frocks” (210).

At the beginning of this chapter, a role of Agnes as a ghost has been suggested. Although Agnes does not appear physically on stage and she is not yet known to be dead in Act One, she ‘haunts’ the characters and thus can be, in my view, perceived as a ghost character. Eamonn Jordan states about recent Irish theatre:

Irish theatrical stage spaces are often not only singular but also multiple, with off-stage space vital in establishing the existence of huge pressures elsewhere – in particular, repressive, oppressive, other worldly, even surreal forces. There is often a sense of someone looking on, an individual or an

³ Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker“, 47.

ideology or counter-ideology, which can be intimidating or voyeuristic on the one hand and seductive, repressive and dominating on the other. Vanished characters or the absent feminine can exert a powerful influence on such scenarios. More substantially, the presence off stage points to another consciousness, another alienating reality or aspirational reality or fifth province.⁴

In this respect, Agnes is the 'absent feminine'. Parker does not depart from his notion of laying the ghost to rest. She is put to rest by Delia who comes to terms with her past after completing the quest of finding answers regarding Agnes's disappearance. However, Quinn does not come to the same realization and thus remains to be haunted by the memory of her.

As the strike proceeds, the body of doctor Dempster is delivered and Quinn assumes his role of a body preserver. Before her death, Dempster left specific instructions regarding her burial; she wanted a simple coffin with no ceremony. The scene in question resembles a dialogue; however, Quinn actually talks to himself while dead Dempster comments on his actions and words from the position of the all-knowing. During the preparation of the doctor's body, Quinn reveals the nature of his relationship with Agnes finally admitting his grief which results in his breakdown. From that moment on, when he finally gives in and accepts the loss, he really starts 'losing it', as his assistants observe. It is only Quinn, as it is only Frank in *Spokesong*, who is able to see 'ghosts' and acts as a medium. However, Dempster is not a ghost that would be in need of exorcism and does not serve as an instrument through which a catharsis is achieved.

By the end of the play, Quinn becomes an old forgetful broken man who talks to himself. In the last scene, he collapses when he thinks he sees a silhouette of Agnes, when it is Delia, in fact. He admits Agnes is haunting him: "Dear God, Agnes love, will you ever give my head peace!" (245) Curiously, he is not frightened but rather exhausted by the constant reminder of her. In a way, he still maintains an image of Agnes, moreover, he is unable to leave it. For him, accepting the truth does not bring catharsis, for he does not actually come to

⁴ Jordan 44.

terms with anything. He merely grieves and lingers in the past without any attempt to move ahead.

Delia, on the other hand, overcomes at the end what is impossible for Quinn. She is “a brittle, perceptive child whose proximity to the family business has lent grim clarity to her morbid obsessions”⁵ and has her own means of dealing with her mother’s absence and death. She confronts Dempster who stresses that Agnes “came of a fine stock. Four generations of bishops and high-court judges, that’s how strong her mind was . . .” (169) The notion of personal heritage is, again, implicated; however, in contrast with *Spokesong*, it is merely touched upon.

Delia preoccupies herself with old stories and metaphysical contemplation about death and life: “Because we are the tribe which has lost the knowledge of how to die. [...] And the black void of our ignorance spreads wider still. For a person begins to die at the moment of birth. So dying is an action that we perform throughout our lives. And so – at the heart’s core – we are the tribe which has lost the knowledge of how to live.” (232) The tribe here might be interpreted in many ways. Firstly, it might represent the family from which each individual takes certain heritage. Delia comes from a mixed marriage, her father, as his name suggests, is Catholic, while her mother is a descendant of a respectable Protestant family. Secondly, it might refer to Northern Irish community – whether Catholic or Protestant or both - if we regard the culturally divided society as a whole. Thirdly, on a more universal level, the tribe can be interpreted as humankind in general since the play does not deal in detail with the Catholics versus Protestants division and focuses rather on more universal themes such as death. However, even though Delia realizes and accepts the inevitability of death, at the age of 17, she chooses not to defy it. “I’ve come to terms with my mother’s death. More or less. I only wish my father could. [...] I’m a big girl now.” (233-4) John Quinn and Delia both go

⁵ Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” 47.

through a process of transformation, each of a different kind. While Quinn is unable to maintain the composed attitude and rather descends to a broken stage, Delia matures from an uncertain child into a self-conscious young woman. The motif of acknowledgement of the past plays an important role and, in my opinion, carries the main message in the play. Delia leaves the town to find some answers regarding her mother but comes back with something more than the truth: the process of searching the past is a process of maturing. She goes after the past but finds herself able to set towards the future. Nevertheless, for Quinn, the constant returning to past events does not bring the same result. In this respect, the past has a double function; Stewart Parker thus avoids a simplistic view on this matter.

All in all, preserving memories and the motif of the past haunting people form the most important themes in *Nightshade*. The play's composition is aimed towards 'the inner space' rather than 'the outer' one; that is, the play explores metaphysical but intimate questions and not the reality outside the undertaker's business; it deals more with the general human condition and not with the Northern Irish society or its symptoms and thus differ in this respect from other Parker's plays.

4. Pratt's Fall

Pratt's Fall was first performed at the Tron Theatre, Glasgow, on 26 January 1983. It is one of the least analyzed Parker's plays. The play contemplates about questions of a rather philosophical character such as the power of belief or the ambiguous perception of history. Another motif that appears in various forms in the play could be summed up into one sentence: 'nothing is as it seems'. Stewart Parker previously employed the concept of illusion and its effects in his *Nightshade*, nevertheless, it is even more integrated within *Pratt's Fall* - from the formal aspects, such as the setting of the play, to the character Mahoney who turns out to be the greatest illusionist, or rather fraud, in the play.

Pratt's Fall, among other themes, employs images from Greek and Irish mythology. As Eamonn Jordan formulated: "One of the significant tendencies in contemporary dramaturgy is the endeavor by writers to appropriate a range of myths, primarily, but not exclusively, from either the Irish or Greek traditions. How so many texts of all kinds are sustained by myth or recycle the patterns of myth is remarkable from a dramaturgical point of view in the Irish tradition."¹ In this chapter, I will deal with the theme of the past and historical myths and the way Stewart Parker deals with them. I will touch upon the use of myths and historical events and anecdotes and will give a special focus to the main character, Mahoney, for he represents, in my opinion, the core of the play's philosophy; moreover, he appears as a ghost in the last scene of the play which is a typical feature of Parker's plays.

The play is structured into two parts. It is set in the present and thus parts from a history type of play. The stage instructions are very specific and detailed. Special focus is given to a play with an illusion: "The all-purpose setting should be quite stylish and uncluttered, but largely in simulated surfaces – wood-effect wallpaper, polystyrene plaster,

¹ Jordan 156.

imitation leather.”² The place is filled with reproduction-antique objects, imitations of the engravings etc., thus the words ‘imitation’ and ‘simulation’ best represent the intended impression. The room is dominated by a large antique globe supported on the shoulders of a kneeling figure of Atlas which is actually, if slid back, a cocktail cabinet. Parker writes in the stage instructions that “this object is another fraud.” (249) Such images anticipate one of the plays’ dominant themes – false impression, deception. Moreover, another two main aspects playing a key role in the play are included in the settings: Greek mythology and Irish history. The figure of Atlas not only refers to an Ancient myth but also to a location near North Africa where, according to Greek mythology, the garden of Hesperides lays in whose name Parker titled Act One. The first scene opens with an orchestral suite composed for the uilleann pipes, ‘The Brendan Voyage’ by Shaun Davey³. If regarded seriously, the music evokes the connection of the play with Irish mythology and history; however, it serves also as an ironic hint since the grandiose musical opening is complemented with the fake nature of the scene thus turning the whole image into Celtic kitsch. Saint Brendan, one of the Twelve Apostles of Ireland, represents a crucial element in the play, as I examine later in this chapter. All formal elements, that is, the setting and the music help to complete the play’s design. Time is also given a special focus; the stage directions indicate there is a large reproduction-antique clock-face showing ten to twelve (249). During the play, the hand of the clock slowly approaches to twelve and the play finishes with the clock striking twelve. Thus, the whole plot virtually happens in ‘ten minutes’.

² Parker, *Plays: 1* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) 249. Further references to the play in this edition appear in parentheses in this chapter.

³ Released in 1980, the suite depicts Tim Severin (1940), a British historian and writer known for retracing the legendary journeys of historical figures, and his reconstruction of Saint Brendan’s crossing to America accomplished in 1976-77. For further details see Timothy Severin, *The Brendan voyage* (London: Arrow Books, 1984).

The plot of the play consists of more layers. Firstly, the structure of the play is constituted by a metanarrative of one of the characters, Godfrey Dudley, ‘a somewhat ponderous academic from the north of England’ (251) who prepares for his wedding throughout the play. He reflects upon the last three years and mentions an affair in which a certain map took part. Throughout the play, in Act One as well as Act Two, Godfrey is a character that rather stands out and either introduces the events or comments upon them. At the end of the play, he is also the last character left on stage, closing the play right before he goes to his wedding.

Secondly, the play is about a map that causes an international scandal and changes the lives of the characters. Godfrey is a director of extramural studies who teaches Geography where he meets George Mahoney, a Scottish bearded man, who supposedly delivers yachts for a living. He claims to have found by accident an old map along with an old Irish poem hidden in a book ‘*Navigatio Sancti Brendani*’ – ‘The Voyage Of St Brendan’ – if proved authentic, the map would suggest that America was actually ‘discovered’ by the Irish. Thus, Godfrey introduces Mahoney to Victoria Pratt, a stereotypical image of an academic assertive English woman. She is Godfrey’s colleague from Oxford and an expert in the field of historical cartography who now runs a big Map Department. Victoria promises to examine the map which launches a series of dramatic events in course of the search of the map’s authenticity resulting in an international scandal when Victoria comes forward with a claim that the map is in fact real. After writing a book about her discovery that makes her a sensation of the year, Victoria realizes the map is a fraud and after handing in her resignation ends up working for a map-publishing firm. Mahoney is convicted for his forgery and goes to prison; however, he is celebrated as a folk hero.

Thirdly, the play revolves around four main characters and their relationships. Mahoney and Victoria become a couple during the quest for map’s authenticity and their

relationship evolves, and also ceases, along with the quest's development. Therefore, their relationship can be perceived as a mirror of the map affair. On the other hand, Godfrey prepares throughout the play for a wedding with Victoria's sister, Serena. The characters' pasts do not play such an essential role as in other Parker's plays, apart from Mahoney's, however, the characters do undergo a transformation and have to change some of their views in order to reach a resolution. Mahoney as a character suddenly appears in the lives of Godfrey, Victoria and Serena who all know each other for a long time. Serena does not share Godfrey's affection for Mahoney and she ultimately stands behind his exposure. As mentioned above, Mahoney embodies one of the illusions in the play; he manages to fool the others not only with his map forgery but also with his false identity. He creates a first rank forgery: he claims to be on a 'spiritual adventure, a real dangerous gambit in uncharted waters. A calculated transgression of the moral law.'" (325) Mahoney gives Victoria several hints suggesting the map's a fraud. However, Victoria is "too busy believing" (326). When Mahoney sees Victoria for the last time, she expresses the motives of his actions: "You've got what you wanted. Amusement value, academic pratfalls, showing up the vanity of experts, whose horizons were so much less visionary than your own." (331) Nevertheless, Mahoney is also a character of a poetic quality. His language differs from the others', he often speaks in parables and his utterances are marked with an often ironical portrayal of historical anecdotes and myths as discussed further on in this chapter. In this respect, his character is reminiscent of James Joyce's heroes, such as Stephen Dedalus; a perhaps unsurprising notion since James Joyce was Stewart Parker's "passion"⁴.

Stewart Parker seems to employ myths and historical facts in a similar way as he employed the history of the bicycle in *Spokesong*. On one hand, he structures the plot around the St Brendan legend. On the other hand, he mentions the history of mapping and sketches

⁴ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 1.

the historical development of the notion of the world from Ancient Greek until the present time which he connects with the main concern of the play – the issue of belief and the illusion (of knowledge, appearances, etc.) Parker’s medium through which most of his opinions are formulated is the character of Mahoney, the ‘shiftless bloody layabout’ (267) or rather a ‘spiritual vagrant’ as he describes the monks who sailed the Ocean.

Stewart Parker incorporates the legend of St Brendan within the play. St Brendan (c. 484 – c. 577) was one of the early Irish monastic saints who received his fame from his travels. In the Middle Ages, stories of his supposed travel over the Ocean spread all over western Europe. As a result, he became known as Brendan the Navigator. The tales regarding St Brendan’s and his fellow monks’ travels over the Ocean and to a paradise-like Promised Land of the Saints were distributed as manuscripts as early as from the tenth century and are known as ‘*Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*’. They are regarded a religious counterpart to the Irish travel-stories known as *immrama*.⁵ As mentioned above, Mahoney works as a navigator himself, thus strengthens the obvious analogy with the historical figure of St Brendan, moreover, he acquired the map in question in a Cistercian monastery build on original foundations of St Brendan’s monastery where Mahoney lived as a monk for two years. Thus, Parker, in a way, incarnates St Brendan in the Mahoney character. On several occasions, Mahoney articulates his beliefs and views as if St Brendan was actually speaking, for example, when Godfrey says that it has been proved physically feasible to sail from Ireland to Canada in an imitation of a medieval Irish boat, Mahoney points out that ‘physically feasible’ does not bear the same meaning as ‘spiritually feasible’:

Think of it fourteen hundred years ago. Those monks were living on the final precipice. The West coast of Ireland, the absolute edge of the known world. Every day lifting their eyes across a great grey heaving desert of a sea, stretching to the very rim of the earth itself. An unknown cosmic

⁵ John E. Williams and Patrick K. Ford, *The Irish Literary Tradition* (Cardiff: University of Wales, 1997) 120.

turbulence. Imagine what it meant to cast yourself into that. No map, no compass, in a shell of stretched cowhide. The boat you can maybe reconstruct . . . but not the state of being. Not the unconditional surrender to God's will. Not the wild surge of faith. Or the rapture of it, the blind leap into the dark. That class of a voyage is no longer in the sea's gift. (270)

Thus, the historical analogy and the legend are used as an articulation of thoughts regarding more philosophical questions such as the power of belief.

The figure of St Brendan 'appears' yet in another character - a mentally retarded monk, Brendan, living in the Cistercian monastery. Brendan immediately recognizes 'his' book and points Victoria to Meenogahane, a location where the book used to be deposited. Victoria later denounces the monks to which Mahoney responds by contemplating the meaning of the map: ". . . a manifestation of God, even? An icon? A relic? An object of veneration?" (282-3) Such view on a map Mahoney knows to be fake indicates what the map represents to him. Victoria is obsessed by and interested only in facts: "That's just further mindless blarney. A map is a spatial diagram. It is not an icon. It is a functional tool for people wanting to get from A to B." (283) However, as Mahoney suggests, the monks venerate the map because "the land promised to the saints already exists for them" (283).

In my view, the map and the legend of St Brendan thus express a way of regarding the concept of belief. Parker suggests that as long as one believes, the object of belief is of no importance, that is, in this case, whether the map is authentic or not, for the belief itself elevates and cleanses. Victoria eventually believes in the map, however, she fails to recognize that the belief is enough, according to Mahoney, and, given that she is preoccupied with the notion of righteousness, she needs to expose the map as a factual token for which she is punished in the end. She not only falls in her career, but literally falls at the end when the truth is revealed as she collapses on stage. Parker's obvious word play with the title of the play, *Pratt's Fall*, is completed with Victoria *Pratt's fall* – both academic and physical – which makes the whole affair a *pratfall*, a comedown. Though Victoria loses her belief, in

Mahoney and in the map, she reaches an understanding: “I do realize you were in the right, of course. Beliefs govern the world, not facts. Facts are as neutral as bullets, and as plentiful.” (332)

Ironically, Mahoney becomes a ‘folk hero of the month’, though he does spend few months in prison for his crime. In my view, this ending is not a mere ‘last humorous touch’; Stewart Parker highlights Victoria’s words that ‘the world is governed by beliefs’. Moreover, the fact that Mahoney becomes a hero on account of committing a crime refers to a dramatic work of another Irish playwright: J. M. Synge and his *Playboy of the Western World* where the main hero, Christy Mahon, is celebrated by the town people for a crime of patricide. The play caused an immense sensation and controversy, the so called ‘Riots’⁶. All in all, as Christy Mahon leaves the town in the end, so does Mahoney disappear from the lives of the other characters leaving them to deal with the changed image of reality. However, unlike Christy Mahon, Mahoney does not leave enlightened and morally elevated.

To return to one of the main objectives of this chapter, I would like to highlight Parker’s use of historical myth and anecdotes. Mahoney is always ready to provide with a historical anecdote or a parable to offer a mirror to other characters’ opinions, thus forcing them to embrace more points of view than merely one – perhaps with an exception of the character of Serena. Eamonn Jordan states that “on a personal level, narratives are in some ways a form of self-talk which are induced by not only self-taught mental responses or neural pathways, but are also shaped by how one’s environment contributes to one’s narrative, how it manipulates one’s narrative, and how it coerces through larger narratives.”⁷ In this respect, Parker combines narratives from Greek and Irish mythology through the character of Mahoney. For example, in Act Two, Mahoney produces a historical anecdote regarding an

⁶ Harrington 68.

⁷ Jordan 186.

Ancient Greek scholar and father of geography, Eratosthenes. Using his method of measuring the world and explaining how he ‘guessed’ the earth’s circumference, Mahoney points out that history has often been a ‘comedy of errors’ (320). He mentions the work of another Greek scholar, Posidonius, who unsuccessfully attempted to correct Erasthotenes’s mistake, however, failed to do so and on his account for sixteen hundred years the world was believed to be a quarter smaller than it really was. In this respect, Mahoney ironically comments on the fact that people have a long history of living in a great illusion, moreover, that the world is governed by many illusions treated as authoritative facts. The idea that the world can be scientifically explored and thus explained is twisted into an image of a history as an absurd farce: “That’s why Columbus went to his grave still convinced that he’d reached Asia the back way. All on account of a wee Greek get from 90 BC.” (320)

Apart from Ancient Greek history, Parker uses images from Greek mythology. Act One is subtitled ‘Hesperides’. In the myth, the nymphs guard apples of immortality in a garden that lies in the west, near the Atlas Mountains. Parker thus connects the image of paradise from St Brendan’s legend with the paradise from Greek mythology. Moreover, the Hesperides play role in the myth of Heracles who has to fulfill several duties; one of them is acquiring apples from the Garden. Thus, Heracles is on a mission, just as Mahoney is on a ‘spiritual’ mission and as the monks of St Brendan’s time were when they sailed the Ocean searching for the ‘The Isle of the Blessed’.

As mentioned earlier, Parker uses the history of map-making in a similar way as he used the history of the bicycle in *Spokesong*. However, he does not go into such a great detail. The recurring notion, which is expressed by several examples of how the mapping changed during the course of history, is the illusion of the knowledge of the world. The best example of Parker’s mockery of the academic world, that represents the world governed by facts, is the international conference held in order to introduce ‘Miss Pratt’s wild hypotheses’ (312). In the

scene, the academics from different countries compete over the question of whose country it is that is responsible for the 'discovery' of America. The scene of the heated debate of the scholars is interrupted by Godfrey's ironic comments. Through Godfrey, Parker expresses an opinion that America was not actually 'discovered' by either the Vikings or Columbus: "In that sense, Columbus was in the same boat as the Vikings and the Irish, none of them was aware of the existence of a large independent continent. An actual new world was surmised first by Vespucci, and established first by Vasco Núñez de Balboa." (313) Parker points out the absurdity of the fact that history is debated and decided about by few leading scholars, who "are expected to be more rational than the rest of mankind", however, who are depicted as a group of angry academics 'bickering' over wormholes.

Further on, Parker uses the history of the map to express a view on the role of the St Brendan's map. As indicated above, the map in *Pratt's Fall* is not regarded as a mere spatial diagram but as a symbol, an icon. In this respect, Parker develops the symbolic level of the map:

Mahoney: "[...] You'd say that when it was finished, after World War Two, the map of the world was essentially completed?"

Victoria: What of it?

Mahoney: [...] finally, in our own time, the picture of the world is fully painted at long last. Now, how did this momentous occasion pass by unremarked? [...] Maybe it fills them [the mapmakers] with an instinctive dread. [...] The prospect of a world that's fully known. No more hidden valleys, no more dark interiors. Just what's here, what's on the map. The end of adventure. The death of all the planet's potentialities. (287)

In his other plays, Stewart Parker explores the importance of history and its acceptance. Coming to terms with one's past is often mentioned in his lectures and writings. However, in *Pratt's Fall*, he considers history and the past from a different, more philosophical perspective. In other words, he considers the general meaning and function of history and puts

it to contrast with the concept of belief. Parker mocks the idea of people, represented by the academics, relying on the knowledge and living in the illusion that the world exists in the way they imagine it; that people live under the impression they have the authority to state what is true and what is not. In the academic world, represented not only by Victoria but especially by her colleagues, the world can be explained and labeled. However, Parker shows they are unable to reach an agreement among themselves and merely use their authority to influence common people's perception of the world. For example, when Mahoney comes to Victoria with a somewhat outrageous suggestion that America might have been discovered by the Irish she, as well as the others, not only regards it as impossible but also as ridiculous. As Geraldine Moane puts it: "two of the most common legacies of colonialism in the Irish context are a weak sense of identity and a strong sense of inferiority."⁸ Thus, here, Parker also takes in play the 'Irish' theme of injustice under the British rule connected to colonialism, as represented by the conflict between Mahoney and Victoria. Mahoney claims to be half Irish and, therefore, could be perceived as representing the whole Ireland, while Victoria would embody England, having the same name as one of the strongest symbols of England, Queen Victoria. At one point, Victoria sarcastically comments on the Irish monks' skills to read maps and their general intelligence, Mahoney gives her a long speech in which Parker sums up the rather stereotypical but nevertheless omnipresent Irish symptomatic hatred of the British: "Your own people are not exactly famous for their powers of discovery round here. You'd think after all these years they would have managed to discover Ireland at least, but then the English genius was always more for expropriation, wasn't it, you could always rely on the continentals to actually find the countries, whereupon you could move in to dispossess them, that's the way you badget the map of the world with red while you kept yourselves

⁸ Geraldine Moane, "Colonialism and the Celtic Tiger: Legacies of History and the Quest for Vision", eds. Peadar Kirby, Luke Gibbons and Michaela Cronin, *Reinventing Ireland: Culture, Society, and the Global Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 2002) 117.

sweet and wholesome at home, you exorcised the idea of hell from the English shires by exporting it to the rest of us. [...] So what price then your complacency, your self-righteousness, your sanctimony, your contempt for any other world than your own dwindling patch of barrenness?" (283) Victoria's response is, in my view, another Parker's ironic hint regarding the Irish stereotypes: "I suppose everybody with an Irish granny learns a speech like that by heart?" (284)

In *Pratt's Fall*, Parker suggests what he employs in his other works: the idea that people are driven by their past, that the past influences one's approach towards the present and that the past, at least in Ireland, is hereditary. However, unlike in *Spokesong* or the 'Three Plays for Ireland', he does not go deep into the history but rather touches the surface of the issue. The use of the past in *Pratt's Fall* is represented mainly by the St Brendan legend; nevertheless, it is employed rather as an instrument for the plot. Other instances of usage of the past that I discussed above are not adopted in order to explain the present; they are rather used as a tool for expressing Parker's view on belief and other themes of the play. Eamonn Jordan argues that "by ironizing cultural and political assumptions, by aping inappropriate behavior, by tinkering with prejudice or by highlighting the inadequacy of certain perceptions, play can distort binary oppositions and undermine stereotypical expectations."⁹ Therefore, the recurring theme of the 'illusion' that the world can be mapped and usurped according to one's will elevates the play to a more philosophical level.

⁹ Jordan 42.

5. Northern Star

Northern Star is the first play from the “Three Plays for Ireland” which were conceived and written between 1983 and 1987 and published in one volume in 1989. In the ‘Foreword’, Stewart Parker refers to them as a Triptych, for he sees them as “three self-contained groups of figures, from the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries respectively, hinged together in a continuing comedy of terrors.”¹ Since all three are history plays and deal with the past, it is useful to view them in connection with one another; however, the plays use different mimetic strategies and engage different themes when dealing with the past. *Northern Star* is one of the most complex of Parker’s plays due to its structure of pastiche, its work with the language and style, the range of political and moral themes explored and the connection of the past with the present, not to mention the engagement of irony and the use of humor that elevate the play above a mere depiction of one view on history.

The play was first performed in 1984 at the Lyric Players Theatre, Belfast, and received many different productions since then. Mary Trotter states that “from the mid-1970s, an explosion of new forms of staging and writing began to appear, many of which sought to re-evaluate the historical narratives that affirm particular beliefs about Irish culture and identity.”² With regard to this statement, and in connection with Parker’s own dramatic aim as formulated in *Dramatis Personae* and paraphrased in the ‘Introduction’ of this paper, the ‘Three Plays of Ireland’ indeed seek to re-evaluate some historical narratives and thus can be viewed as a fictional alternative of a reality to the official one. In this chapter, I will attempt to analyze the use of the past in *Northern Star*, the way Parker approaches history and the way

¹ Parker, *Plays: 2*, xiii.

² Trotter 148.

he works with historical facts and to what effect he re-evaluates the past events. Special attention will be given to the role of ghosts, for they play a key role in the play's dynamics.

In *Northern Star*, Stewart Parker explores the events of the 1798 rebellion, along with the circumstances around the formation of the United Irishmen, a society established in order to promote the idea of a united Ireland, that is, the union of both Protestants and Catholics under one ideology against the authoritative British rule. According to Richtarik, Parker's challenge in *Northern Star* "had been to find a way to make a rebellion that took place nearly 200 years previous seem relevant to modern audiences."³ In the work of recent historians, a different interpretation of the 1798 rebellion has been formulated. In order to realize the significance of Parker's attempt to re-evaluate the view on Irish history in full depth, it is necessary to realize in what way it had been perceived and presented before. As Radvan Markus aptly summarizes:

According to the changing political landscape, the prevailing interpretation moved in the nineteenth century from the Loyalist position, which saw the rebellion as a Catholic conspiracy, through the nationalist interpretation of the Young Ireland movement and the Fenians, which stressed the United Irish legacy and the physical force tradition, towards the highly influential Catholic interpretation of Father Patrick Kavanagh in the 1880s, who tried to reclaim the rebellion for the Catholic church by downplaying the role of the secular United Irishmen and stressing the role of local Wexford priest leaders who, when faced with government provocation, bravely fought for "faith and fatherland". From the 1960s onwards, the so-called revisionist historians managed to dissolve many popular myths concerning the event, although sometimes coming dangerously close to the reductive loyalist interpretation of the early nineteenth century.⁴

In her work, Marylinn Richtarik discusses the value of the '90s generation of historians, namely Kevin Whelan, who recognize the positive influence of the United Irishmen: "The United Irishmen inspired, among others, the Young Irelanders (cultural

³ Richtarik, "Ireland, the Continuous Past": Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 269.

⁴ Radvan Markus, "The half-built, half-derelict house": Interpretation of the 1798 Rebellion in Stewart Parker's *Northern Star*" eds. Kateřina Jenčová, Michaela Marková, Radvan Markus, Hana Pavelková, *The Politics of Irish Writing* (Prague: Centre for Irish Studies, Charles University, 2010) 160.

nationalists of the 1840s led by Thomas Davis), the Fenians (physical-force nationalists of the mid-nineteenth century), the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (organizers of the 1916 Easter Rising), the IRA, and the Provisionals. In the elegant formulation of historian Kevin Whelan, the 1798 rebellion “never passed into history, because it never passed out of politics.”⁵ Thus, the main difference in the approach towards the 1798 rebellion is seen in the recognition of the fact that it was actually a Protestant-led event – a fact deliberately omitted by some authorities. As the main character Henry McCracken says as a response to his lover’s remark that people can’t forget the past, especially not in Ireland: “People do forget, though. They forget the facts that don’t suit them. [...] It isn’t true to say they forget nothing. It’s far worse than that, they misremember everything.”⁶ Stewart Parker began his research concerning the United Irishmen in the late 1960s⁷ and thus was not acquainted with the ‘90s interpretations of history; however, the more interesting it is to realize that he anticipated some aspects of the ‘90s interpretations of the Rebellion. After this rather factual, but in my opinion necessary, introduction, I will now examine the way Parker views and uses the past in *Northern Star*.

Stewart Parker structures the plot around a historical character of Henry Joy McCracken, a “minor figure in the ’98 Rising in Ireland”⁸. The play depicts McCracken’s last night of freedom before his capture and execution. It is set in a “semi-ruin cottage, half-built and half-derelict” (2-3) outside Belfast. The cottage’s state is often interpreted as a symbol of Belfast, or Ireland in general, or as a symbol of an unfinished project launched by the United

⁵ Quoted in Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 264.

⁶ Stewart Parker, *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) 68. Further references to the play in this edition appear in parenthesis in this chapter.

⁷ Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 264.

⁸ Parker, *Plays: 2*, xiv.

Irishmen⁹. As Marylinn Richtarik argues, “it is the unfinished business of Irish republicanism that engrosses Parker.”¹⁰

During the one night, McCracken relives the development of the United Irish movement in seven scenes. The seven scenes are drawn from the concept of the Seven Ages of Man formulated by Shakespeare in the monologue of Jacques in *As You Like It*. Within the seven scenes structure, Parker applies the framework of a pastiche – each scene is written in a distinctive style of different Irish playwrights: Sheridan, Farquhar, Boucicault, Wilde, Shaw, Synge, O’Casey, Behan, and Beckett. In my view, the technique of pastiche is a way of portraying the past, if in an indirect manner. By the deliberate choice of playwrights representing different times, Stewart Parker highlights the continuity of history, however, at the same time depicts the changes in perception of the world and by literary means presents different approaches towards the same event. As Richtarik points out, “[...] this multiplicity of voices underlines Parker’s pluralistic vision of Irish identity while simultaneously commenting on the fact that the past and present in Ireland continue to shape each other.”¹¹ Parker’s brilliant imitation of the above mentioned playwrights does not only serve as a great means of humor and irony, but, more importantly, “reminds us all the time that the events of 1798 are still being, literally, played out. An extraordinary tension is created by the way the styles of writing and performance move forward in time from the eighteenth century to the twentieth. In terms of content, we are looking back on Henry Joy’s tragic dilemmas. In terms of style, they are rushing forward to meet us.”¹²

The play moves from the Age of Innocence, portrayed in the style of Sheridan and Farquhar, through the Age of Cleverness in the style of Wilde, and shifts in the same manner

⁹ Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 269.

¹⁰ Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 264.

¹¹ Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 267.

¹² Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” 50.

towards scenes that have a direct reference to the events from Parker's time. The Shaw pastiche enacted by the British officer and McCracken remind strongly of the mind games between an 'MI5 interrogator and a suspect'¹³. And, as Lynne Parker suggests: "The homage to Behan set in Kilmainham gaol, where the movement has reached the point of self-immolation, contains a visual reference to the 1981 hunger strike."¹⁴ Thus, Stewart Parker not only refers to historical images but also to the contemporary ones that are connected directly with the Troubles. Therefore, he relates the present issues with what he regards as the original cause and thus closes the historical cycle.

Parker himself wrote on the account of using pastiche:

The technique of pastiche allowed me to march the play throughout the decades towards the present day and say to the audience, forget about historical veracity, forget about realism, I'm going to tell you a story about the origins of Republicanism and I'm going to offer you a point of view on what's gone wrong with it and why it's become corrupt and why it's now serving the opposite ends to what it set out to serve, and I'm going to demonstrate this like a ventriloquist, using a variety of voices.¹⁵

Although Parker here suggests to 'forget about historical veracity', he manages to portray the events in an 'objective' manner, if such thing is even possible in regards to the arguments of Hayden White and his view on reconstructing the history, which is documented by references to atrocities done by both the Protestants and the Catholics, as in the scene with Hamill, in which the two 'Orange Boys' threaten to kill Hamill and his wife for an alleged involvement in an attack on Protestants, which, however, resulted in killing thirty Catholics (27). Throughout the play, such a balanced depiction of bloodshed that is executed in the name of both Protestants and Catholics carries one of the essential messages of the play: that

¹³ Lynne Parker, "Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker," 49-50.

¹⁴ Lynne Parker, "Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker," 50.

¹⁵ Quoted in Richtarik, "'Ireland, the Continuous Past': Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 267.

both sides of the conflict have 'a fair share' in making the history and thus contributed to the resulting in the Troubles.

Apart from the use of pastiche, a strong connection with the past is expressed through the characters, most of whom were real historical figures directly involved in the 1798 rebellion. Some of them appear more often in the reenacted scenes, most of them only once. A certain development of the Rising can be perceived through the change of the attitude of the characters. For example, McCracken's fellow United Irishmen are portrayed in a buoyant manner in the first scene in the pub, while in the last Age, they seem to have "eaten from the tree of knowledge" (69). The last scene's escalation is strengthened by the style it is written in - Beckett's and Behan's, and, as stated above, refers to the modern history, namely the Maze hunger strikes of the '80s. As Richtarik articulates: "Parker's interpretation of the 1790s in Ireland was obviously shaped by his experience of the 1970s, and the script of *Northern Star* is replete with parallels to the contemporary Troubles."¹⁶

The character of Henry Joy McCracken has a double attitude towards the past. First of all, he is predestined by his past: "My great-grandfather McCracken was a Scottish Covenanter, persecuted, the pair of them, driven here from the shores of home, their home but not my home, because I'm Henry Joy McCracken and here to stay, a natural son of Belfast, as Irish a bastard as all the other incomers, blown into this port by the storm of history, Gaelic or Danish or Anglo-Norman, without distinction, it makes no odds, every mother's son of us children of nature on this sodden glorious patch of earth, unpossessed of deed or inheritance, without distinction." (7-8) Parker here refers through McCracken's voice to his own cultural heritage, which he outlined in his 'Foreword' to *Plays: 2*: "The ancestral wraiths at my own elbow are (amongst other things) Scots-Irish, Northern English, immigrant Huguenot . . . in

¹⁶ Richtarik, "Ireland, the Continuous Past": Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 267.

short the usual Belfast mongrel crew.”¹⁷ The notion that the past in the Irish context forms an inseparable part of the present reality, as already suggested in *Spokesong* and *Catchpenny Twist*, resonates throughout the whole play.

Secondly, Henry dwells in the past by reliving the scenes with his fellow instigators of the United Irishmen movement. Henry is aware of the fact that the history will not treat him and the Rebellion favorably for he is well aware of the deeds committed in the name of their cause. Henry’s sister believes the future generations will finish what he started and will ‘model themselves in his example’ (32), however, Henry responds: “Christ forbid, what an example! Pious phrasemaking over a butcher’s shambles, valiant defeat, maudlin self-pity. [...] A septic wound. Let them purge the poison and bury us in lime. [...] History’s a whore. She rides the winners.” (32) On one hand, Parker’s main character appears appealing due to his strong humanist ideals; he comes from a middle-class family but nevertheless has a great understanding for the working people¹⁸, and on the other hand, Parker does not put him on a pedestal since he is responsible, if indirectly, for the historical outcome of the United Irishmen initiative. The main objective of Parker’s attempt to re-evaluate the history is to send a message to his fellow Northern Protestants - “deny it though they might, they had a republican heritage.”¹⁹ Parker refers to the already mentioned fact that the authorities constantly forget that the United Irishmen were originally united with the Catholics against the British rule. Moreover, as Richtarik further argues, “[...] by placing the likes of McCracken at center stage, Parker was also signaling his dissatisfaction with the version of Irish history that had written Protestants out of the story of the nation.”²⁰

¹⁷ Parker, *Plays*: 2, xiii.

¹⁸ Richtarik, ““Ireland, the Continuous Past”: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 265.

¹⁹ Richtarik, ““Ireland, the Continuous Past”: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 265.

²⁰ Richtarik, ““Ireland, the Continuous Past”: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 265.

The last theme I wish to explore with regards to the past and its use in *Northern Star* is the role of ghosts. “All plays are ghost plays,”²¹ stated Parker in his famous ‘John Malone Memorial Lecture’. In my view, this is especially true of *Spokesong*, *Northern Star* and *Pentecost* where the ghosts have an essential role and where the main stress lies on the past and the attempt to come to terms with it. *Northern Star* inhabits one actual ghost, the Phantom Bride; however, there are some other characters and features that contribute to the view of *Northern Star* as a ghost play. The Phantom Bride is at first only discussed and then appears physically in Act One to stay as an ‘uncompleted soul’²² not only until the end of the play but beyond as if to symbolically represent the unsatisfactory outcome of the events and as a representative of all souls lost in the cause of 1798 rebellion. She was a wife-to-be of a local free-thinker, who was most probably killed by his own neighbors - a symbolic reflection on Ireland’s reality -, and she hanged herself after she had found her lover dead in their half-ruined house. Ever since she haunts the place: “She’s often seen waiting by the door out there. They say any man that looks her straight in the eye is a dead man.” (6) McCracken perceives her ‘protection’ as ‘quaint’, for he considers himself ‘a man of Reason’ (7), however, he is literally saved by her when the British officer represented by the character of Captain wants to arrest him. The Phantom Bride then acts as a ‘weapon’, not only on a symbolical level as a figure of Irish folklore but as an actual instrument of killing. Mary, McCracken’s lover, does not perceive ghosts as something unnatural for they are part of her Irish heritage: “There’s no escaping them in this townland. We’re used to the walking dead, we have more spooks than living bodies round these parts. What of it? There’s no harm in seeing ghosts.” (52) After having dispersed the soldiers, the Phantom Bride appears in her whole figure, comes through the door, stands on the threshold and observes McCracken taking an oath of loyalty to the

²¹ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 25.

²² Parker, *Plays*: 2, xiii.

United Irishmen. Symbolically, she can be viewed as a Mother Ireland figure, taking Henry away from his family to serve his country, or as a ‘spectral lover’ as formulated by Ondřej Pilný: “The first half closes with the spectre’s bare legs clamped around McCracken’s waist: he is both symbolically and sexually united with and devoured by a vampiric, voracious version of Cathleen ni Houlihan.”²³ Stewart Parker suggests in his ‘Foreword’ to the ‘Three Plays of Ireland’ that the ghosts appear to be stuck fast in the quest for vengeance and sees the meaning in laying them to rest²⁴. However, since the Phantom Bride is not redeemed, the outcome of the play is somewhat unsatisfactory - a fitting analogy to the outcome of the United Irishmen project.

Apart from the Phantom Bride, the motive of ghost appears in different representation throughout the play. For example, all the scenes McCracken re-enacts may be viewed as ghost scenes. However, none of the characters portrayed in those scenes communicates directly with McCracken - with the exception of Jimmy Hope. McCracken speaks with the future Jimmy Hope who has the knowledge of the Rising’s outcome and thus reflects upon it. Parker articulates through Jimmy a suggestion for the resolution of the conflict: “Without the Protestants of the North, there’ll never be a nation. Not without them as a part of it.” (58) Hope – as his name indicates - expresses hope for the future Ireland if certain conditions are fulfilled; however, McCracken silences him in the anticipation of the future events leading eventually, and inevitably, to the Troubles.

The main character, Henry, possesses some features of a ghost as well. He lives through the night while rehearsing his final speech, in the end drowned out symbolically by the sound of a lambeig – an instrument that has been strongly associated with radical

²³ Pilný 145.

²⁴ Parker, *Plays: 2*, xiii – xiv.

Unionism²⁵; he tries the rope around his neck as if preparing for his execution. Furthermore, Mary, who is annoyed by his actions for she suspects he would rather choose ‘a heroic’ death than an ‘unheroic’ life in exile, comments at one point: “I won’t fornicate with a ghost – with a man on a dead-cart” (22). Thus, Henry stands in the past never to step out of it which is, in Stewart Parker’s view, a symbolic heritage of all the people of Northern Ireland, whether of Catholic or Protestant roots.

By applying different strategies, Stewart Parker seeks to point out that the United Irishmen were responsible both for the ideal of republicanism but also for its tradition of violence²⁶. He attempted to re-evaluate the views on ’98 Rising and to open the discussions regarding this subject. Paul Bew comments in his *Ireland: The Politics of Enmity 1789 – 2006* on the outcome of the 1798 Rebellion and its impact on both Protestant and Catholic communities:

The harsh fact remains that Irish people did fear to speak of ’98 until sufficient time had elapsed and its terrors had faded into the past. Then the sentimentality which could be found, for example, in the 1898 commemoration could emerge. [...] The bloodshed and murder confirmed two awful lessons. For Catholics and (radical Presbyterians) that, the state and its allies [...] would, if provoked, impose a bloody terror on the countryside. For Protestants, on the other hand, it became easy to claim that Catholics could not be trusted. [...] Both sides now believed the worst of each other and not without justification.²⁷

The value of Stewart Parker’s ‘construction of history’ in *Northern Star* lies mainly in the fact that he attempts to justly cover both sides of the original cause of the Troubles and thus suggests that using the past may be a relevant means of representation of ‘an alternative reality’. His depiction of the 1798 Rebellion provides a valuable insight into the problems of

²⁵ Pilný 145.

²⁶ Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 266.

²⁷ Paul Bew, *Ireland: The Politics of enmity 1789-2006* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) 48.

interpretation of the Rebellion as such; moreover, it seeks to find common ground rather than point out the differences in the Protestant's and the Catholic's point of view.

6. Heavenly Bodies

The second play from the 'Three Plays for Ireland' was first performed at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre on 21 April 1986. It is also a history play, the narrative is based on a real historical character, similarly as in *Northern Star*, and the play concerns itself with the past and its re-evaluation. However, this play rather stands out from the 'Triptych', for it does not deal with the Troubles, nor does it reflect directly on historical events concerning the political situation of Northern Ireland; the past is reexamined on a rather personal level. However, some similar features are employed, such as ghost characters and the fact that Parker uses the depiction of the past in a certain way, for example, on the background of the plot evolving around the life and work of Dion Boucicault Parker outlines the history of melodrama and theatre in the nineteenth century. The past seems to be employed mainly in three distinctive ways in *Heavenly Bodies*. Firstly, it is treated on a personal level in the character of Boucicault, secondly, it is represented by two ghost figures – Phantom Fiddler and partly also by Johnny Patterson – although his significance lies rather in his Mephistophelean role – and, thirdly, Parker describes the history of melodrama in the nineteenth century. The first two approaches are tightly connected and will thus be treated together.

The play describes the life and work of Dion Boucicault, a major figure of the Victorian drama. In the age of nearly seventy, left alone on stage by his students, he is confronted by a ghost of Johnny Patterson, a dead Irish circus clown and a songwriter, who challenges him to re-evaluate his own work in order to decide whether he as a dramatist has a place next to great playwrights or whether his work is a mere trickery for which he will spend his afterlife in limbo or in hell with the critics. As Lynne Parker asserts: "The relationship between the two is the spine of the drama, which for all its pyrotechnics is a historical

morality play.”¹ Parker described the play’s structure as a ‘kind of collage’²; the portrayal of Boucicault’s life from his early age till ‘the end’ is presented in short scenes, in which Boucicault assumes the role of his younger self while Patterson and the drama students play the other roles, and combined with the scenes from Boucicault’s plays which are reenacted in the same manner. Lynne Parker made a link between *Heavenly Bodies* and two of Stewart Parker’s previous plays *Spokesong* and *Northern Star*. She saw *Heavenly Bodies* as a synthesis of these two plays: “Like *Spokesong*, it is a burletta, a play with music. As in *Northern Star*, there is an episodic and linear treatment of a life, framed in the context of a reckoning.”³

The play’s setting is the stage of the Madison Square Theatre in New York City on 16 December 1890. The play starts with a students’ rehearsal of Boucicault’s play *Faust and Marguerite*. Thus, what follows is also set on stage of the Theatre, which constitutes the play as metatheatrical – a play within a play. Eamonn Jordan argues that

The metatheatrical frame is a way of elevating the plays from a simplistic representational mode towards a consciousness of ritual and metaphor. Specifically, for the first and second generation of postwar playwrights, play often provides the external framework, where difference is accentuated, possibilities experienced and where identities and fears can be processed. [...] Such play, then, is about the acknowledgement of roles, about the comprehension of pretense and about the expansiveness of identities that are neither fixed nor completely groundless, but are in process.⁴

In this respect, the acknowledgement of roles is extended to a more philosophical level – to an acknowledgement of Boucicault’s role in life and theatre. Jordan further argues that “play makes room for individual and collective change. Role-playing ensures that identities are not perceived as essentially unchanging, but in process, as they absorb the impulse and

¹ Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” 51.

² Parker, *Plays*: 2, xiv.

³ Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” 51.

⁴ Jordan 42.

impact of play. The 'what if' that role-play demands takes the momentum and rhythm of the play into a different dimension. With role-playing, it is easier to distinguish between accepted, imposed, rejected, misunderstood, residual and emergent versions of identities."⁵ *Heavenly Bodies* are essentially two plays within a play, or rather a combination of the two, for one concerns the playwright's personal life and the other comprises of the enacted scenes from his plays. The character of Johnny Patterson adds a certain touch of vaudevillian theatre which along with the use of music plays a key role in the play's humor.

Parker's use of the past is outlined in the play's structure. With respect to the 'two plays within a play' frame, the first 'play' describes Boucicault's personal past. In the tone of Parker's approach towards the past we have had the chance to examine so far, Parker points out that one's origin and past determines his future life. The episodes concerning Boucicault's personal history sketch the most important moments of his life: his realization that he wants to become a playwright, the first marriage with Anne Guiot, his establishment as a playwright in London, the second marriage with Agnes Robertson and their life in the States, his third scandal marriage etc. Parker states in the 'Foreword' to the play that 'rather more than enough is known about him'⁶, however, in the depiction of his past he also works with famous speculations, for example, the ones regarding a tragic death of Anne Guiot: "Little is known about the real Anne, except that she was rich and died in disputed circumstances, but it's a pretty good guess that Boucicault took her for all she was worth, sucked her dry, so to speak."⁷ Other real historical figures appearing in the play, such as Benjamin Webster, an English actor-manager and dramatist, or Charles Matthews, an English theatre manager and a comedian actor, are portrayed in a similar manner as the characters from reenacted scenes in

⁵ Jordan 28.

⁶ Parker *Plays*: 2, xiv.

⁷ Lynne Parker, "Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker," 51.

Northern Star. Parker does not go into much detail and uses their names as a part of documentation of the times, which is in accordance with his aim to depict ‘alternative reality’.

Lynne Parker argues that “the potential hazard in a play like *Heavenly Bodies* is that having chosen a linear, episodic structure to tell the story of a life that is known (however sketchily) you lose the element of surprise. Fortunately, Boucicault’s life is even more laden with improbabilities than his work, and his work is itself based on the premise that you give the audience what it wants, but in ways they never expected.”⁸ Thus, the combination of the elements from Boucicault’s life and the scenes from his plays creates an extraordinary collage of the historical and the fictional.

Boucicault’s main concern when looking back at his life is the relationship to his fathers. Since his blood father was not a legitimate husband of Boucicault’s mother, Anne Boursiquot, he spent his life in search for his ‘official’ father’s recognition. He despised his blood father, Dr Lardner, his guardian. Samuel Smith Boursiquot, a descendant of ‘a distinguished line of Huguenot immigrants’⁹, a Dublin-based wine merchant, is represented on stage by the figure of Phantom Fiddler. The Fiddler never speaks during the performance, as his face is never shown, and silently assumes his presence on stage or is represented by the sound of his instrument off stage. As Ondřej Pilný points out, Phantom Fiddler’s appearance is rather ‘Beckettian’¹⁰ – “a stooped, homeless figure, shrouded in a shabby, outsize ulster” (95) and although he is a ghost figure he does not intervene in any way - as ghosts otherwise tend to in Parker’s plays. He merely drifts through the play without any greater incident and thus serves rather as a reminder of the heritage, a reminder of Boucicault’s unfulfilled past and a desire for recognition. He is not treated according to the logic Parker describes in his

⁸ Lynne Parker, “Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker,” 51.

⁹ Stewart Parker, *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) 94.

¹⁰ Pilný 148.

'Foreword' to the Triptych, that is, he is not laid to rest at the end. At one point, Patterson orchestrates a practical joke; he pretends to be the Phantom Fiddler and scares off Boucicault with a death mask on his face (127). As Pilný observes: "[...] the whole intervention is merely a ghastly practical joke played by the despised clown. [...] Needless to say, this hardly counts as exorcism; in fact, the sound of the old man's fiddle can still be heard after Patterson has performed his cruel jest."¹¹ Thus, the father's ghost is not set free and, therefore, neither is Boucicault. Since the play's main theme revolves around Boucicault's recognition as a dramatist, the personal past defined by the desire for father's blessing transcends to Patterson's challenge to reevaluate the playwright's life and work. Thus, some satisfaction is achieved, in a way, at the end, when Boucicault finally wins his hypothetical place in the literary heaven next to Goldsmith. However, it is ultimately Patterson who is forced to admit Boucicault's value and 'sets him free' on his way to literary heaven.

Patterson whom Boucicault never met in his life and "whose career as an honest-to-God comedian and songster, heavily reliant on his Irish identity, provides a useful parallel to Boucicault's lofty posturing,"¹² is another ghost in the play. In this character, Parker ironically rephrases a notion used in *Northern Star* and represented by the efforts of Henry McCracken. Patterson, 'had come to believe that the one hope for that troubled isle lay in a commingling of the Orange and the Green, an accommodation between the Nationalist and Unionist factions' (88) is murdered by a rioting crowd after he performs his song about the unity of 'the Orange and the Green'. During the play, Patterson constantly undermines Boucicault's patriotism. At the end of Act One, Patterson reflects upon his childhood in the times of Great Famine in Ireland. It is the only place in the play which presents another aspect of difficult times of Irish history; however, Parker does not develop it further. He rather draws

¹¹ Pilný 148-9.

¹² Lynne Parker, "Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker," 51.

the images as if to remind of past events in contrast with Boucicault's dazzling career and his questionable relationship with his native country. While in his other plays Parker used ghosts as dynamic characters whose exorcism allowed the play to reach a certain climax, the role of Patterson is different. He is not exorcised in any way; he is not laid to rest. Therefore, he can be viewed rather as an embodiment of a failed attempt of a peace proposal or, as formulated by Marylinn Richtarik, as a devil's advocate¹³.

Another example of the use of the past is the historical excursion into melodrama (44). Parker outlines the development of drama and theatre in the nineteenth century by the depiction of Boucicault's own evolution of writing by using the scenes from Boucicault's plays and by Boucicault's personal history for example in the scenes with Webster and Matthews. Boucicault was a playwright concerned mostly with the demand of the audience: "Boucicault was the greatest theatrical entrepreneur of his time and a phenomenal commercial success. As Stewart observes in a programme note for the National Theatre's 1988 production of *The Shaughraun*, Boucicault was a man who hankered after the transfiguring power of art, but whose whole career was instead comprised of the transformations of pantomime."¹⁴ Such aspirations are best characterized by his cry for an advice when he presents his first play to Mathews: "Tell me, sir, what kind of play do you most long to read?" (108) Mathews answers him with 'comedy of manners' after briefly commenting on the British public having found interest in circus instead of farce (108). In this way, Parker indirectly portrays the change in taste of the Victorian audience. However, though the manner of such depiction of a historical development of drama is highly amusing, it lacks, in my opinion, the depth of approach towards depiction of history manifested in other Parker's plays, such as in the history of bicycle depicted in *Spokesong* or a history of mapmaking in *Pratt's Fall*, for it does not

¹³ Lynne Parker, "Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker," 51.

¹⁴ Lynne Parker, "Showtime: The strategy of mischief in the plays of Stewart Parker," 50.

concern itself with conveying another message. It simply aspires to depict the history of melodrama.

The use of the past in *Heavenly Bodies* seems to have a rather theatrical purpose; a dramatic approach offering an amusing and original view on the life and work of one of the most conspicuous Victorian playwrights. As Stewart Parker expresses in *Dramatis Personae*: “[...] I have been endeavouring somehow to discover or develop a form of drama for myself which can accommodate both these poles: the poetry and the trickery, the spiritual journey and the glitterball, the message and the sight-gag, the ludic and the ludicrous.”¹⁵

Dion Boucicault, as touched upon above, came from a culturally mixed family and thus meets with Parker’s definition of a ‘mongrel’ Irishman¹⁶. Most of Parker’s characters share this notion of an ambiguous ancestry. Although *Heavenly Bodies* is not concerned with the Troubles, the idea of the burden of having a culturally diverse origin connects this play with other Parker’s plays. Boucicault’s main concern is his complicated relationship to his fathers. He strives for his ‘official’ father’s recognition and despises his real father which opens a series of identity issues. In *Heavenly Bodies*, Parker thus explores further, though in a different manner, the concept of coming to terms with one’s heritage, with one’s past.

¹⁵ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 24.

¹⁶ Parker, *Plays*: 2, xiii.

7. Pentecost

Mary Trotter states that the 1980s were marked with the emergence of some of the most dynamic, imaginative, and influential political theatre in Ireland since its first years.¹ In those years, the Field Day Theatre Company - ‘one of the most influential Irish performance companies of the last fifty years’² - was established. As Patrick Lonergan formulates: “The function of Field Day was not to produce plays that specifically addressed the conflict in Northern Ireland; in its entire repertoire, only Stewart Parker’s *Pentecost* does so directly. Rather, the company used theatrical space as a depoliticized territory in which the cultural assumptions, myths, and stereotypes that underlay the Troubles could be interrogated and demystified.”³ Stewart Parker wrote *Pentecost* for the Field Day Theatre Company in 1987. It was first performed in the same year at the Guildhall, Derry, and then travelled, according to the Company’s objectives to perform before local, small-town audiences to ‘stir up conversation within local communities about national issues’⁴, across Northern Ireland and the Republic, as well as England, and won the Harvey Award at the Dublin Theatre Festival. It has been described as one of the best Irish plays of the past twenty-five years⁵ and as ‘perhaps the most emotionally moving of the fourteen plays Field Day produced between 1980 and 1995’⁶. The play deals directly with the Troubles and in the style of heightened realism – as Parker himself defined⁷ - describes personal crisis of four young friends on the background of the Ulster Worker’s Council (UWC) Strike of 1974.

¹ Trotter 149.

² Trotter 159.

³ Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and globalization: Irish drama in the Celtic tiger era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) 35.

⁴ Trotter 159-60.

⁵ Richards 196.

⁶ Trotter 162.

⁷ Parker, *Plays: 2*, xiv.

In the play, Parker not only indirectly describes the events and atmosphere of the UWC Strike, but also explores the theme of the past in order to eventually offer what has generally been perceived as a hopeful resolution⁸. Marylenn Richtarik sees the play as a counterbalance to *Northern Star*, for both plays are set in Belfast, both deal with Northern Protestant mentality and both plays ‘encourage Northern Protestants and Catholics to start seeing what they share instead of only the characteristics that divide them.’⁹ Both plays share yet another aspect – ghosts and laying them and the past to rest. However, Richtarik argues that both plays also share an unsatisfactory ending in the shape of an unresolved conflict. In this chapter, I shall explore the way Parker uses the past and the way he deals with the motif of the past.

Marylenn Richtarik provides an overview on the political background of the UWC Strike:

During the year of 1974, militant Protestant workers managed to topple the power-sharing executive intend to replace direct rule from London with local authority divided between Protestants and Catholics. Hard-line loyalists objected both to power-sharing and to the so-called Irish dimension of the agreement. Their strike began with the closing of factories and the shutting off of the power supply and proceeded to threats to the water and sewage systems before the Unionist members of the executive resigned, thus ending the experiment in self-government.¹⁰

The plot of *Pentecost* essentially revolves around the four characters’ life traumas, their struggle in an attempt to set themselves free and observes their conflicts during the Strike. The time of the plot spans from before the Strike until shortly after. It is set in ‘a respectable working-class parlour house’¹¹ previously inhabited by Lily Matthews, a decent Protestant woman born in 1900 who had died at the age of 74. The house is inherited by her

⁸ Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 273.

⁹ Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 268-9.

¹⁰ Richtarik, “‘Ireland, the Continuous Past’: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 269.

¹¹ Stewart Parker, *Plays: 2* (London: Methuen Drama, 2000) 171. Further references to the play in this edition appear in parenthesis in this chapter.

distant relative Lenny, a thirty-three year old Catholic musician, who is separated from his wife, Marian, of the same age. Marian buys the house from him and starts living there, along with the ghost of the previous owner – Lily Mathews. However, other characters join in shortly afterwards. Marian’s friend Ruth takes refuge there - after being beaten, again, by her husband, and later comes Lenny on account of his flat having been burgled. The last person who takes shelter in the house is Peter, Lenny’s friend, who returns to Belfast after having lived in Birmingham for five years. Thus, the house becomes a kind of a shelter, both symbolically and literally, on which Anthony Roche comments: “Given the life-threatening reality of what is just on the other side of that door, the on-stage space in *Pentecost* functions as it does in so many Northern Irish plays as a kind of stay or refuge, an asylum or temporary holding-ground, one step removed from the (war) zone of historical circumstance.”¹²

The past in *Pentecost* is dealt with and applied in the narrative in several ways. First of all, the setting of the play, the house, can be regarded as a symbol of the past. In the stage directions, Parker specifies that the place is filled with objects of an antique value. The house has been maintained in the same way since 1959 and “in spite of now being shabby, musty, threadbare, it has all clearly been the object of a desperate, lifelong struggle for cleanliness, tidiness, orderliness – godliness.” (171) The house had been inhabited by a respectable Protestant family, the “stage directions make it clear that the house has absorbed the personality of its long-time occupant”¹³ and, therefore, the house can be seen as a representation of the previous occupants and their past. Moreover, the house witnessed the political turmoil related to the Troubles before the 1950s: “[...] smoke and ashes, scorched walls, water flooded everywhere . . . my beautiful house . . . [...] every wee thing we’d saved up for ruined in the one night. By a pack of Fenian savages!” (183) During the first half of the

¹² Roche 162.

¹³ Richtarik, ““Ireland, the Continuous Past”: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 270.

play, Marian carefully preserves the state in which it had been kept by Lily. She intends to give it over to the National Trust as a fine representation of a Protestant working-class house. However, she later realizes that her intentions had been driven by a 'wrong impulse'. As she grows close to Lily and learns about her trauma she comes to an understanding that the house in fact represents the pain Lily was condemned to live in and rather resolves to "fixing it up. What this house needs most is air and light." (238)

Apart from the setting of a rather cramped interior of the house which underlines the tension of the events and conflicts between the characters, the atmosphere of the play is dense due to Parker's use of allusions to the Troubles. The first mention of the conflict is at the end of Scene One, when Lenny points out the impracticality of buying the house: "[...] you can't possibly live in this gaff, it's the last house on the road left inhabited! – the very road itself is scheduled to vanish off the map, it's the middle of a redevelopment zone, not to mention the minor detail that it's slap bang in the firing line, the Prods are all up in that estate, [...] the Taigs are right in front of us." (179) The sound of distant explosions is heard off stage; however, none of the characters seem to notice it. As in *Lost Belongings*, it seems to have become a part of the everyday reality. It is mainly through the characters that the atmosphere and events of the UWC Strike are presented. As in the scene in which Marian comments on her car having been used as a part of the barricades, when the house falls in the dark due to the cutting off electricity or when Peter is offered a glass of water and comments on the shortage of it. Small hints of this character are then complemented by crude remarks such as Lenny's "this right here is Nazi Belfast now, and it's us playing the Jews." (223) Parker scatters these instances deliberately in a 'random' manner as if to avoid too heavy and pathetic depiction of the grim reality since in *Pentecost*, as argued by Pilný¹⁴, he seems to

¹⁴ Pilný 152.

have abandoned his usual ironical way of portraying depressing matters and replaced it with a naturalistic way of description of reality¹⁵. Parker does not, however, succumb to the danger of victimization of the civilian side. For example, a view on the reality from the point of view of the police is expressed - even if the police are represented by Ruth's sadistic husband. Ruth makes excuses for her husband's domestic violence: "They never know the minute, he's had three good mates killed in his own station, and a fourth one blind, it's the waiting around all day that gets to him, all the threats and the hatred and no outlet ." (188)

Apart from the depiction of the Troubles from the point of view of those who lived through it, Parker also incorporates a radio broadcast to present the British view in the voice of the Prime Minister Harold Wilson. By using the real speech, Parker not only strengthens the authenticity of the play but also provides with an official British point of view on the Troubles on account of which the characters get into a heated debate. As Richtarik pointed out, it is through the characters' interactions with each other, such as the political debate between Peter and Ruth, that Parker illustrates a range of possible responses to the pressures of the Troubles¹⁶. The play is carefully balanced in the presented opinions on the Troubles, since Lenny and Marian are Catholics while Peter and Ruth are Protestants; moreover, Parker made the characters come to terms with the cultural and political legacy of the kind of Northern Protestantism represented by Lily Matthews and the UWC Strike.¹⁷

The past of the characters constitutes an essential device through which the plot is carried out and resolved in the end of the play. The main focus is put on Marian, who is in the state of a deep crisis and seems almost ignorant of the events outside the house. She tries to come to terms with the fact that her marriage to Lenny is dead on account of their son's death.

¹⁵ Richtarik, "Ireland, the Continuous Past": Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 269.

¹⁶ Richtarik, "Ireland, the Continuous Past": Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 270.

¹⁷ Richtarik, "Ireland, the Continuous Past": Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 270.

Anthony Roche draws a fitting parallel to Lenny's and Marian's marriage: "Lenny's relationship with Marian – they cannot live together, cannot live apart – has certain features in common with Northern Ireland itself but husband and wife are both reluctant to declare their marriage a failed entity."¹⁸ Marian carries her past in her, as Lily points out, and resolves to living alone which is ultimately made impossible for her. She is fixated on the past and summons the ghost of Lily; it is due to the interaction with her that she is able to put the past behind her and finds a new energy to live. Whether Lily is a real ghost speaking to Marian or whether it is just Marian's projection is not made entirely clear in the play; for example, during the first encounter with Lily, Marian says: "There's nobody here. Nobody." (181) And, similarly, Lenny points out that she has been counting spoons, babbling in tongues in the middle of the night (226). When Marian finds a child's christening gown in Lily's belongings, their relationship grows more intimate, Lily starts to share her trauma: during her husband's absence she had a brief affair with their lodger and gave birth to a child she abandoned in front of a Baptist church. She made sure her husband never learnt the truth and had to live her life torn between the feelings of a double guilt: that she regardless of Protestant morals conceived a child as an adulteress and that she failed as a mother by abandoning her only child. After giving up her baby, Lily became a living ghost: "[...] I was all consumed by my own wickedness, on the inside, nothing left but the shell of me, for appearance's sake" (231). When Marian learns the truth, she makes a gesture of reconciliation by taking Lily's hand and placing it on her own heart. As Richtarik explains:

When Marian asks Lily's forgiveness at the end of their last scene, she finally begins to forgive herself. Marian's growing empathy for the dead Lily, accompanied by the realization that many of

¹⁸ Roche 162.

the Protestant woman's wounds were self-inflicted, issues in Marian not only a resolve to keep from becoming Lily, but a desire to free the older woman from the burden of her past.¹⁹

Though Marian seems at first unable to acknowledge her grief for her son Christopher, she strives to make the relationship with Lily work:

It's not help that I'm offering . . . It's help that I'm looking for. Is that not obvious? [...] I need you, we have got to make this work, you and me . . . [...] You think you're haunting me, don't you. But you see it's me that's haunting you. I'm not going to go away. There's no curse or hymn that can exorcise me. So you might as well just give me your blessing and make your peace with me, Lily.
(210)

The nature of mutual interconnection carries a strong symbolism in *Pentecost* and plays an essential role in the play's climax. Just as Lily cannot be 'exorcised' without Marian's help, Marian cannot move forward without Lily's blessing. Thus, it is not only Lily but also Marian who has to come to terms with the past.

The past haunts not only Marian but all the characters in *Pentecost*. Lenny tries to accept the end of his marriage; Peter is in search of his native roots and Ruth struggles to free herself from her abusive husband and tries to come to terms with the fact she can have no pregnancies on account of her previous miscarriages. Roche argues that "there is more than one buried child being exhumed. [...] At the close of the first half, the play's three women are linked across the generations, across the sectarian divide, and across life and death itself as the revelation of Lily's abandoned child leads Marian and Ruth to acknowledge their own."²⁰

The plot's catharsis is achieved by the 'exorcism' of Lily: when Lily is finally laid to rest, Marian starts to forgive herself and then finds a new impulse to live which she passes on to the other characters. In the last scene, in the manner of passages from the *Acts of The Apostles* describing the manifestation of the Holy Ghost to Christ's disciples, Marian

¹⁹ Richtarik, "'Ireland, the Continuous Past': Stewart Parker's Belfast History Plays," 273.

²⁰ Roche 166.

articulates several ghost voices. As Roche describes: “There is a ghost trio at this point, made tangible through Marian, since her talk of Christopher is also Lily speaking out on behalf of the love-child whose existence she has denied.”²¹ In the end, all the characters manage, in one way or another, to accept the past and in the light of Marian’s last speech seem to find a newly gained desire to live.

Throughout the whole play, Parker uses biblical allusions: the plot begins at Easter, the ‘live’ characters are aged thirty-three, Marian and Lenny’s dead baby was called Christopher etc.²² In the last scene, the biblical level culminates in a final revelation. The play concludes with a communion among the four characters, a secular Pentecost²³, after Marian’s last speech: “We have committed sacrilege enough on life, in this place, in these times. We don’t just owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our dead too . . . our innocent dead,” (245). Ruth responds in opening her Bible at the second chapter of the *Acts of the Apostles* and starts reading from it, Lenny and Peter improvise a version of the gospel song “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” and Ruth reaches across to open a window (245). Marilyn Richtarik sees the ending as a symbol of the new openness of the characters to each other and to the future.²⁴ With regards to the fact that *Pentecost* is the last of Parker’s plays, the message it conveys could be perceived as the most important one. In *Pentecost*, all the characters have to admit their traumas in order to reach peace. Parker, as Richtarik explains, “suggests that self-loathing, projected as hatred of other people, resides at the root of any human conflict, including the Northern crisis.”²⁵ The image of self-loathing forms the core of the play and is mostly manifested in the characters of Marian and Lily; it is essentially also their relationship

²¹ Roche 167.

²² Pilný 150.

²³ Richtarik, ““Ireland, the Continuous Past”: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 273.

²⁴ Richtarik, ““Ireland, the Continuous Past”: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 273.

²⁵ Richtarik, ““Ireland, the Continuous Past”: Stewart Parker’s Belfast History Plays,” 272.

that carries the plot towards the end. However, other characters have to overcome their feelings of guilt as well: Peter is reminded on several occasions that he no longer 'belongs' to the Northern Irish community, Ruth has to face her share of guilt in playing the role of a victim in her marriage and Lenny faces his failure in the question of his marriage to Marian.

To sum up, in *Pentecost*, Stewart Parker portrays the past events from a recent history and gives them new perspective in connection with the characters' personal pasts. In that respect, and according to his humanist world view, he creates a multilayered dramatic narrative and forms an image of his 'alternative reality' which is in contrast with the official description of history in Northern Ireland. *Pentecost* thus represents an approach towards history that Leerssen defines as 'community remembrancing', that is, Parker provides a view on the historical events that can be contrasted with their official depiction. However, in *Pentecost*, Parker incorporates a notion absent in his previous plays - the aspect of self-loathing. More importantly, he offers a view on its role in the Northern Ireland conflict. On an individual level, in *Pentecost*, the feelings of failure and guilt form the roots of the characters' self-loathing which results in their collisions. When we put it in the context of the Northern Irish conflict, Parker's view suggests that the self-loathing transcends from an individual level to the community level. Self-loathing thus plays as important role as coming to terms with the past, moreover, accepting the past is presented as the only 'cure' for it.

Conclusion

The main objective of my thesis was to examine the use of the past in Stewart Parker's dramatic work for the stage, namely in *Spokesong*, *Catchpenny Twist*, *Nightshade*, *Pratt's Fall*, *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies* and *Pentecost*. All plays in question deal with the theme of the past in some way; I identified several tendencies of the usage of the past in Parker's writing. In some plays, such as in *Spokesong*, *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies* or *Pentecost*, a history forms the central structure of the narrative as well as the main motif. Parker uses historical events as a background on which he constructs the plot of the play. With an exception of *Heavenly Bodies*, the three above mentioned plays deal with the Troubles, however, they differ in the setting, narrative and theatrical style. *Spokesong* is set in the 1970s but reaches also further into history by using the bicycle parallel. *Northern Star* centers on the historical figure of Henry McCracken and thus determines the overall historical character of the narrative describing the events of 1798 Rising. *Pentecost* describes the 1974 UWC Strike but with the character of Lily Matthews touches upon the depiction of events prior to 1974. In *Heavenly Bodies*, the plot does not deal with Northern Ireland's political history (although it is not entirely free from it either), however, the central motif is also constituted by the past since it portrays the life and work of a real historical figure, an Irish playwright Dion Boucicault; furthermore, the play outlines the development of melodrama in the nineteenth century.

Even in the plays that are not regarded as historical, such as *Nightshade*, *Catchpenny Twist*, and *Pratt's Fall*, the motif of the past constitutes a crucial role in the structure and/or the theme of the play; however, it is engaged in a different, less distinctive way. *Catchpenny Twist* describes the Troubles with the reference to Eurovision Song Contest; however, as discussed in the chapter 'Catchpenny Twist', this 'historical' notion is rather linked to the narrative and is not otherwise dealt with in more detail. The main motif of the past can be

identified in Parker's point that it is difficult to set one free of the past in the Northern Irish context. In *Pratt's Fall*, Parker uses the past by structuring the plot around the St Brendan legend and historical references regarding the evolution of map-making. In my view, the use of the map is similar to the use of the bicycle in *Spokesong*. Both elements establish the cores of the plays and allow Parker to use irony. However, the history in *Pratt's Fall* is not dealt with in the same way as in, for example, *Northern Star*, where Parker carefully researched the events of 1798 rebellion and attempted to present a different view on the events. *Nightshade* in its nature stands out from all above mentioned plays. It does not reconstruct any historical event, nor does it describe or develop a historical theme, however, the motif of the past is touched upon on a personal level via the characters.

Personal pasts of the characters form a strong feature of all Parker's plays. Stewart Parker stated that "as a playwright, my overriding concern is to keep faith with the individual lives and aspirations of all my characters, and yet do equal justice to the big public events and historical forces which have been crucial in shaping their destinies."¹ All the plays that were subjected to my analysis shared the same recurring theme: coming to terms with one's past. On one hand, Parker's characters provide a range of views on depicted reality – be it the reality taken from recent history or a reality of the eighteenth century – and, on the other hand, they always have to deal with their own past. For example, in *Pentecost*, all the characters have to admit their traumas in order to reach peace. With the image of self-loathing that is intertwined in the play and with the use of the characters' pasts, Parker refers to pressing political and ethical questions of his time and transcends the use of the past as a mere theatrical device.

¹ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 113.

A special category that is linked both to the past and the characters in Parker's plays are the ghost characters. As I argue in individual chapters of this thesis, ghosts serve not only as a means of a portrayal of the past; they are powerful devices capable of moving the plot towards the end. Ghosts in Parker's plays are either 'left to haunt forever' such as the Phantom Bride in *Northern Star* or the Phantom Fiddler in *Heavenly Bodies* or they serve as an element of a resolution such as in *Spokesong* or *Pentecost*, where Parker presented a hopeful ending by their exorcism. As Ondřej Pilný observes, it is in *Pentecost* that "the ghosts are finally laid to rest for good."² Thus, a certain conclusion of Parker's tendencies in the usage of the past with regards to the development of individual plays can be made: from a skeptical and strongly ironical stance, Parker comes to a more hopeful resolution.

In the 'Introduction', Hayden White's formulation of four different modes of emplotment has been outlined. As far as Parker's writing and its tendency in the use of the past as mentioned above is concerned, his approach towards the past can be viewed on the background of White's method of emplotment. After analyzing Parker's plays, I would certainly exclude Romance as a mode of emplotment in Parker's plays since it is defined by White as a "drama of self-identification symbolized by the hero's transcendence of the world of experience, his victory over it, and his final liberation from it"³. Parker's main point is the exact opposite to this definition: his characters generally discover that they cannot liberate from the past. Since Parker's work is strongly determined by the use of irony, Satire would appear to be the main mode of emplotment. However, some plays bear tragic or comic features due to their endings and narrative strategies. For example in *Spokesong*, Parker uses irony in depiction of the past, which would constitute the play as Satire, however, the ending, although it appears happy and merry, is paradoxical and rather tragic. *Catchpenny Twist*,

² Pilný 150.

³ White 8.

which resembles *Pentecost*, for the use of irony succumbs to the naturalistic mode of narration, is rather a Tragedy because of its altogether tragic ending. *Nightshade* suggests a happy outcome, for there is outlined at least a partial liberation from the conditions that are perceived as inescapable at the beginning, however, it does not apply to all the main characters. *Pratt's Fall* is due to its use of irony perhaps the best example of a Satire. *Northern Star* is essentially a tragedy, as identified by Pilný⁴; however, irony constitutes a strong aspect of the play. *Heavenly Bodies* manifests some features of a Satire, since Parker turns the 'happy' ending into a farce. And as far as *Pentecost* is concerned, it can be identified as a Tragedy due to its naturalistic character and the lack of irony as a narrative strategy; however, it is the only play in which Parker offers some kind of reconciliation – although a 'happy' ending might be a too strong word.

To sum up, in the view of White's method of emplotment, Parker seems to employ Satire as the main means of structuring his plays. In the tone of White's definition of a Satire that it "views hopes, possibilities, and truths ironically, in the atmosphere generated by the apprehension of the ultimate inadequacy of consciousness to live in the world happily or to comprehend it fully"⁵, Parker uses the past in structuring of his plays to express the core of his philosophy: the only way to achieve a resolution of a conflict is to exorcise ghosts and come to terms with the past.

⁴ Pilný 144.

⁵ White 10.

Abstract

The main objective of this thesis is to analyze the use of the past in Stewart Parker's dramatic work for the stage. A recent historian Hayden White formulated that the work of a historian is in fact similar to the work of a historical fiction writer – the difference lies mainly in the extent of their invention. In that respect, Parker's work can be regarded as a fictional alternative to the official depiction of history. In his plays, Stewart Parker often deals with the Troubles and Northern Irish history and politics. Apart from using real historical events around which Parker revolves the plot of his plays, he often explores the effects of personal pasts of his characters and uses it as leading dynamics in the plays. The main motto of his plays is 'coming to terms with the past'. His plays also often feature ghosts which can be regarded as a reflection of the past. In my thesis, I examine their role and Parker's use of the past in *Spokesong*, *Catchpenny Twist*, *Nightshade*, *Pratt's Fall*, *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies* and *Pentecost*.

Abstrakt

Tato práce si klade za cíl zkoumat a pojmenovat tendence zobrazování minulosti v dramatickém díle Stewarta Parkera. Podle historika Haydena Whitea hraje při rekonstrukci historie důležitou roli míra invence. Z tohoto pohledu je historikova rekonstrukce minulosti podobná práci spisovatele historických románů nebo dramát. Stewart Parker ve svém díle reflektoval politickou situaci Severního Irsku, tzv. the Troubles. V jeho hrách tvoří minulost zásadní prvek. Na jedné rovině slouží jako pozadí, na němž se odehrává drama postav, na straně druhé Parker zdůrazňuje motiv minulosti na osobní rovině jednotlivých postav. Hlavní myšlenkou, která provází celé jeho dílo, je smíření se s minulostí, jakož i koncept sebe nenávisti, v němž Parker spatřuje původce konfliktů. Stewart Parker ve svých hrách často zobrazuje duchy. Tyto postavy hrají v jeho hrách důležitou roli a mají schopnost ovládat jejich dynamiku. V souvislosti s definicí rekonstrukce historie podle Haydena Whitea lze

ocenit dílo Stewarta Parkera jako literární alternativu k politické historii konfliktů Severního Irska. Tato práce zkoumá použití a zobrazení minulosti ve hrách *Spokesong*, *Catchpenny Twist*, *Nightshade*, *Pratt's Fall*, *Northern Star*, *Heavenly Bodies* and *Pentecost*.

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