

HISTORY AS A TRAGICOMIC NIGHTMARE IN JULIA O'FAOLAIN'S *NO COUNTRY FOR YOUNG MEN*¹

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History pupils were reminded that it was an Irishwoman's frail morals which led to the English first coming here in 1169. Women bore inherited guilt. The chaplain prayed that all should be cleansed in the blood of the Lamb.

'The "people" are clay. You can do what you like in their name but, as Aristotle said of men and women, the formative idea comes from the male and the clay is female; passive, mere potentiality. The clay here is the people who have no self and no aspiration towards determining anything at all until we infuse it into them. We are their virile soul,' said Owen. 'We are they.' (O'Faolain 1987:34 and 314)

In the second chapter of *Ulysses*, Stephen announces that "History [...] is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce 1986:28). In fact, most characters in Joyce's novel suffer from a spiritual paralysis and seem to be haunted by the burden of their own pasts: in Stephen's case, it is his guilt for not having fulfilled his dying mother's last wish; as regards Bloom, his alienation originates in his failure as a husband, citizen and businessman; and, as for Molly, memories of her dead son Ruddy and of her unsatisfying life occupy a large part of her final monologue. However, this is not an isolated example in Irish literature, since the motif of (Irish) history as a nightmarish experience has become all too recurrent. The reconstruction, revision and reassessment of the past –including myths and legends– has been foregrounded in contemporary works such as: Seamus Heaney's *North* (1972), Brian Friel's *Translations* (1980) and *Making History* (1988), William Trevor's *Fools of Fortune* (1983), John McGahern's *Amongst Women* (1991), Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* (1996), Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes* (1997) and Roddy Doyle's *A Star Called Henry* (1999), among an insurmountable list.² To this, one would have to add Julia O'Faolain's most celebrated *No Country for Young Men* (1980),³ whose richness and complexity lie in the two interweaved plots that deal with the Troubles of the 1920s and 70s, respectively. The novel,

nonetheless, challenges the authority of history as documented truth and exposes the mechanisms involved in the creation of alternative myths which, in turn, will supplant factual history –here a mere construct.

At a time when women's roles were relegated to the domestic sphere –although home was considered a “male territory” (O’Faolain 1987:20)–, when their lives were devoted to back up men, especially in times of war, and when, as the opening quotes of this article illustrate, women were no more than invisible agents, O’Faolain places the fate of two generations of women in a prominent position in her novel. Short-listed in Britain for the Booker Prize, *No Country for Young Men* has been approached from the most diverse perspectives, including an ingenious comparison with *Finnegans Wake*,⁴ although critics in general have tended to overlook the masterly blending of tragedy and comedy that underlies the narrative and that constitutes the main focus of this discussion. My contention is that the overlapping of dreadful events and humorous scenes, the creation of confusion through the use of comic dialogues and the portrayal of ridiculous caricatures endow this recollection of troubled times with a wider dimension, in which characters are trapped in a historical nightmare that is bound to repeat itself cyclically.⁵

No Country for Young Men centres on the production of a propaganda film about the American intervention in the fight for Irish freedom during the revolutionary 1920s. With the cliché title of *Four Green Fields*, echoing W. B. Yeats' nationalist play *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902),⁶ the film will nostalgically recreate the life of the Irish-American hero Sparky Driscoll, a fund-raiser who was apparently killed by Orangemen in an ambush in the North of Ireland. A second American, James Duffy, is sent to Ireland in the late 70s to convey this research and interview people acquainted with the Troubles. The link between these two historical dates is provided by an elderly nun, Judith, who played a more than relevant role in the story of Sparky and was, consequently, silenced through internment in a convent and electroshock treatment. Her struggle to give sense to the fragmented memories of a traumatic past fifty-five years later will be O’Faolain's pretext to connect two triangular love affairs that take place in the two plots, “reveal[ing] a paradigm of control and entrapment of women throughout Irish history” (Moore 1991:9). The first one in the 20s involves Judith's sister Kathleen, the nationalist Owen O’Malley and the American Sparky, and is afterwards re-enacted in the 70s with Judith's grand niece, Grainne, her husband Michael and the American James. The two stories end dramatically with the unheroic deaths of the outsiders, although the real truth about Sparky's murder is only revealed in the last pages, when history has been erased so as to fit into the Republican nationalist myth of the blood sacrifice for (Mother) Ireland.

Regarding form, the novel draws on postmodernist hybrid devices. The blurring of boundaries, in style, blending comedy and tragedy, and content, through the mix-up of genres, historical events and reality and fantasy, forms an

integral part of it. The first page opens with a column of the *Gaelic American* of March 1922, published in New York to announce the death of the hero Sparky Driscoll, which misguidedly, and obviously ironically, sets the tone of the novel towards the motif of the Irish martyrs. The double temporality of the narration and the dislocated discourses that merge the stories of the characters with historical records, letters, Irish myths and endless intertextual references turn its reading into a puzzle-solving exercise. As if emasculating Judith, who has “a gap in her brain: a hole?” (O’Faolain 1987:8), the reader has to fill in the gaps of the text discriminating fiction from reality, while the novel raises continual questions ‘about the nature of history.’

For Judith, history is a nightmare from which she needs to awake. Her frightening repetitive dreams during more than fifty years about death, violence and blood, and the behaviour of her family impel her –and also the reader– to believe that “she had done some dreadful thing” (O’Faolain 1989:286). But she is torn between wishing to remember and fearing a past that brings images of a family divided by activist Republicanism and too much secrecy. Trapped in history, into two “Judiths” (9), her last nightmare will lead her to a glimpse of the truth: that she murdered Sparky because he had convinced her sister Kathleen to leave Owen and escape to America and, moreover, because he was going to report back home an ideological breach between the Irish, which basically meant that American funding to buy arms would be cut off.⁸ At precisely the moment when Judith adds this last piece to the puzzle, the violent death of James –who had already discovered it and was ready to fly back to America with Grainne– takes place, leaving Judith, a mentally unbalanced woman, as the only witness. On allowing history to repeat itself, the novel suggests that truth will be manipulated once again to accommodate a nationalist myth that erases anything that would challenge nationalist agendas. Therefore, according to Christine St. Peter, both Americans are victims “of a personal and political mistake that has to be textualized as a pro-British enemy attack if Irish politicians like Owen O’Malley in 1922 or his nephew Owen Roe O’Malley in 1979 are to protect their own parliamentary careers” (1994:163).

However, Judith is not the only character that experiences nightmares. In fact, Kathleen admits that everyone in the family suffers from them, otherwise they would turn mad. Bearing such a nationalist name, it is not surprising to find out that Kathleen took an active part during the war, hiding arms, money and gunmen in the house. Due to this involvement, she is also the only one prepared to demystify the heroicity of the cause, abandon her oppressive country and her activist fiancé Owen and move to the more liberal America with Sparky. Nevertheless, Kathleen, an icon taken from a myth, cannot rid herself of her fate, and will finally be swallowed by the ideology she represents. As an embodiment of Ireland –the Mother Ireland, Dark Rosaleen, Caitlin Ni Houlihan or Shan van Vocht figures–, she will have no choice but marry Owen and bear seven children,

one of whom will follow in his father's footsteps. As Laura B. Van Dale suggests, this can only be seen as the result of a country that is "paying a price for inherited conflicts. [...] haunted by the past, bewildered by the present, and uncertain of the future" (1991:24). In addition, not only Kathleen's hopes for a better future vanish; she is also silenced in a text that triggers her disappearance as a character. In this respect, Ann Owen Weekes affirms that "even her wedding is a blank in Judith's memory. [...] Like Gráinne, Kathleen ends her life caring for the man who destroyed her personal happiness and nurturing warriors who will preserve his destructive vision" (1986:97).

The story of Kathleen finds a parallel in that of Grainne five decades later. Divided, on the one hand, between what society expects from her as a good housekeeper, wife and mother, and her personal desires, and, on the other, between her "frigid" husband Michael (O'Faolain 1987:155)⁹ and her passionate lover James, she also suffers from nightmares: "Seeing things partly with James's and partly with Michael's eyes, she felt herself into a hybrid, a double-visioned-creature who had to keep sorting herself out" (242). Evoking the Gaelic legend of her namesake Grainne and Diarmuid, when James is murdered, fate will inevitably condemn her to re-enact the same dramatic love tale and to confine her to a reduced and unhappy life with Michael and their adolescent son Cormac, who sympathises with the IRA and "dreams of being a gunman" (236). Thus, one would have to conclude that what turns history into a nightmare is not the Troubles themselves but rather their recurrence. As if moving in circles, history keeps repeating as Michael is able to see and explain to Grainne:

Do you remember the joke about a chameleon and a tartan? Michael asked. Our grandparents were chameleons on tartans. They were idealistic and thuggish, cunning and mad, politicians and fighting men according to need: variegated. Then came our parents who made money. Solid-coloured individuals. Green for them meant pound notes and government contacts. You and I, the chameleon grandchildren, didn't know how to react and keep our individuality. Cormac's gone back to the tartan. (327)

But by far, the character who suffers from nightmares most is Owen, a surrogate of Pádraig Pearse, a hero of the Irish war and later a politician in the new Dáil. As it is shortly revealed, the Republican myth has once again being preserved to displace real history since he was, in fact, a "weathercock" (O'Faolain 1987:272), a traitor to his cause and, according to Michael, "an old fart" (274). As Judith clarifies, Owen had used Pearse's ideology to accommodate it to his own purposes:

"Out of failure comes success," said her aunt's voice. That's from Pearse's writings. "And from the deaths of patriot men and women come living nations." Owen twisted that. Pearse meant deaths freely risked but Owen meant murder. "Execution", he called it. There

was a lot of that sort of talk. It wasn't so bad when it was ourselves against the English but things got bitter later when factions began to form in our own ranks. (124-25)

Curiously, this misogynist and "macho" man sees his virility questioned when Sparky suggests that he is a homosexual, which might have been the reason why he went into seminary (299-300). His double-facedness finds a parallel in a pair of characters of the plot taking place in the 70s: his own son Owen Roe, whose objective is to help "the IRA tear the country apart" (49) and who organises gatherings in a youth club to recruit activist Republicans (86); and the fanatic Patsy Flynn, who is responsible for James' death because he still feels that "there's a war on" (221). On the opposite side, the alcoholic Michael admits being a failed musician, son, husband and father, and reminds the reader on a couple of occasions that he is, ironically, "the grandson of a patriot hero and the son of a maker of underpants" (44).

Two outsiders, Sparky and James, also experience the nightmare of Irish history when, on discovering the truth behind the received Republican myth, become cannon fodders.¹⁰ It is Larry, the film producer, who warns James:

*Even if your nutty nun's got the truth, we don't want it.
[...] This is a Republican film, remember? To raise funds, right? In America. We do not want to show Republicans murdering an American fund-raiser. [...] We are constructing a myth, [...] We don't give a goddam about truth. It does not set you free. It dissipates energies. Myths unify. (O'Faolain 1987:320)*

A further connection is suggested through these two Americans, who travel to Ireland in an attempt to tighten the Irish-American relations, seduce a woman who is either engaged or married to an Irishman, dare to question Irish procedures and, in addition, presuppose that they will be able to take these women back to their country. Sparky, who did not sympathise with war or violence, becomes a martyr of the Irish cause when the Republicans use the Orangemen as scapegoats, and James is killed when he finds out the truth of Sparky's death. However, there are also contextual differences that need to be taken into consideration because, although both are murdered in similar circumstances, they "represent, ironically, different aspirations: Sparky had sought an end to the civil war, whereas James's film is designed to attract funds to continue that war seventy [?] years later" (Weekes 1986:99).

Given the political dimension of the novel one would be tempted to put forward that the source of disagreement –and consequent violence– between the characters comes from their allegiance or disloyalty to the Treaty signed in 1921, when: "The Dáil itself was split into those who accepted the new Free State –the 'Staters'– and diehard Republicans who could not renounce the dream for which they had been fighting: and All-Ireland Republic independent from the exploitative and haughty old oppressor. For them, the delegates had sold the pass. The Treaty should never have been signed and must not be ratified" (O'Faolain 1987:224).

Nonetheless, my contention is that, for some characters, this seems to be rather an excuse. Kathleen's more moderate brother Seamus explains it to Owen in terms of men who understand politics and gunmen (232), and also Mrs Kennedy tells James that many people in Ireland are not interested in peace, "they need war the way some need strong drink. Yez wouldn't know what to do with yerselves if there was peace tomorrow. [...] there's some have made the gun a way of life" (131).¹¹

Having analysed the pervasive influence that a nightmarish past plays in the minds of the characters as much as in the development of the plots, I would like now to explore the function of humour in the novel. In spite of its dramatic undertones, from the very beginning the reader feels comforted by the efforts of the narrator to hide the appalling political outcome of the Troubles behind a veil of comedy. As the story progresses, however, humour turns bleaker until it dilutes in the final tragedy. The novel then becomes a "painful comedy", as Van Dale calls it, "retain[ing] a twisted touch of comedy, which challenges the readers' emotions; we laugh sometimes only because otherwise we would cry" (1991:17). The character that best encompasses this blending of comedy and tragedy is Judith in her endless attempts to tell the truth and convince people that there is a secret of national importance hidden somewhere in her mind – a "buried trauma" (O'Faolain 1987:10). Thus, when she tells the doctor that "she dreamed of a man who held his guts in his hand", it is funny that he can only associate this image with Christ and the sacred heart, or also, when she recognises having made some advances in the recovery of her memory thanks to watching murders on television (10-11). At times, her comments sound anachronic, for instance, when she returns to Dublin after fifty years in convent and tells Michael that she finds the town old-fashioned, accustomed as she is to watching towns like Los Angeles or San Francisco on TV (43). No doubt, everyone takes her as mentally unstable. The big irony lies in the fact that she is continually telling the truth, but a truth that is difficult to believe considering that she is only a woman living in a patriarchal society. This means that the chaplain will take her confessions as part of female imagination and that she will repeatedly be seen as a "sexually unstable" (269) nun who suffers from "suppressed sex" (89).¹²

Apart from Judith, there are other sources of humour and ridicule in the novel. From the production of a film about a nationalist hero who was a pacifist, to nationalism, which is referred to as the national sport of Ireland (O'Faolain 1987:308), the parody of patriotic songs or the problematic sexuality of Owen allows the author to emphasise the narrative quality of history. Role reversals are also seen as comic in such a "macho" culture when, for instance, James feels a sex object of Grainne and does not doubt to see himself as a "nineteenth-century whore [...] a promenading penis!" (228). Furthermore, the interviews conveyed by James are comic because either he finds the wrong person, meets them at an inconvenient noisy place or gets them too drunk to talk. Finally, language can also be humorous, especially through the word-play and the use of puns, which are

defined in the novel as a "verbal equivalent of the gun: a device unamenable to argument. De Valera's opponents called his term in office «the devil era». They called his party, Fianna Fail, «the Fianna failures» which, since *fail* is the Gaelic for «destiny» – it rhymes with boil – is a better joke" (67).

Connected with this, something that should not pass unnoticed is that the novel abounds in clichés about Ireland and what it means to be Irish. Reductive as they can be, they are further confirmed in the text, especially in the case of the two American characters, who are able to see the country from a different perspective and also of Theresa, James' wife, who interprets travelling to Europe as a "regressive act" and criticises Ireland for being a nation of priests, homosexuals and women who run into the arms of foreign men (O'Faolain 1987:14-14). Her judgement, although offensive and simplistic, is premonitory. Soon after his arrival, James is deceived by the place and the people, and in a letter to his wife compares them to noisy children, "sly, devious in an obvious way, often parodying themselves and each other. They think highly of their own tricks and imagine that foreigners are perplexed by them. Judging by myself, the foreigners are entertained, but not inclined to join in. The histrionic note is hard for a sober adult to sustain" (217). Sad as it is, he feels the odd man out in Ireland, whose historic nightmare will finally swallow him.

No Country for Young Men emerges then as a novel that views Irish history in static terms, in the vein of Terence Brown's discussion of what was happening in the eighties in much of contemporary literature, which

[...] presumes that the 'plot' or Irish history means that events at different periods are merely recurrent manifestations of an underlying theme. And, as such, these interpretations consolidate an awareness which has reminded constant since at least the beginning of the nineteenth century. For in the last two centuries nationalist Ireland has told itself an oft-repeated tale which emphasizes the recurrent nature of Ireland's historic dilemma as that of a subject people, and it is this vision of 'a most distressful nation' which governs popular historical consciousness despite recent social and political advances north and south, and despite the revisionism of modern Irish historiography. (1988: 245)

Interpreting history as a nightmare allows the reader to see how created myths and legends are revived not only in the minds of the characters but especially in their actions. Given the postmodernist quality of the novel it should not surprise that this account foregrounds one of its premises, that history is not objective but a construct, a narrative that can be re-inscribed incessantly. Therefore, I have tried to show along this paper that in the novel the Troubles are not a mere historical reference but a metaphor for the troubled and nightmarish lives the characters lead. All the people and situations of the plot set in the 1920s find a parallel in that of the 1970s because history is repeated if only to perpetuate a created truth, an invented myth. Although most interviewees coincide in their saying that "the yo generation will make up for the corruption of their elders" (O'Faolain 1987:20

novel makes clear that the following one will fall into the previous pattern. For this reason, as the title of the novel suggests evoking and revising Yeats' famous line in his poem "Sailing to Byzantium" (1926), by the late seventies "the Irish Republic is a country by and for old men" (St. Peter 1994:152), a country that maintains the old values that fed the past in an stagnant present and dormant future. Time and time again history will be re-written so as to adjust to the postulates of the resentful group, which assumes that there are certain dangerous truths that need to be erased from the records. Owen and all those who fought in the Civil War are finally seen not as heroes but as gunmen. Hiding this truth, as well as Sparky's death in the hands of Judith—actually "a secret diehard" (312) who "was viscerally on Owen's side" (314)—constitute the main motives for safeguarding a heroic Republican myth. As Owen Roe tells Grainne, "there *are* secrets, stories, dirt which could discredit half the party. Things get done in a Civil War that might look criminal in peace-time. No time for due process. You may imagine. But, today, because of the new terrorists, nobody wants to be seen being *too* imaginative" (160).

The final pessimistic note of the novel is made evident in the lack of positive characters, of liberating forces that might triumph in the end.¹³ If the Irish seem to be trapped in history reviving the same tragic nightmares once and again, the two Americans, who could stand for freedom, are seen in no better light. The author fails to give an alternative to such oppression of the past, especially that exercised on women, in spite of the fact that, as regards humour, Judith is the main source of comedy. Owen Roe is again very clear in this respect when he explains to Grainne that: "In history as in matter, nothing [...] is lost. It comes back in another form. You and Michael thought that the dead time in which you grew up would go on forever. You thought the Troubles were over and the curtain down. It was an intermission" (O'Faolain 1987:164). In O'Faolain's revision of myth and history there is no place for subversion since Grainne's transgressive decision to exchange husband and son for lover is finally invalidated with the death of James, which leads her to succumb to the past. While the nationalist Republican myth of the blood sacrifice projected by Yeats, Pearse and other leaders of the Easter Rising is deflated in the hands of those who did not die for Ireland but killed in the name of Ireland, the author perpetuates another myth that will hook women to a history of silence and oppression. The women of the novel—the "clay", the Ireland of the opening quote—are as colonised by the Irish patriarchal system as Irish men are subjected to the British crown. If Kathleen, through her blind support of Owen's politics, is made to reinforce patriarchy, Kathleen and Grainne's efforts to reject violence and challenge male dominance will prove futile. To conclude, as Derek Hand has affirmed: "The best historical novels are those that interrogate the processes of history as well self-consciously interrogating how historical narratives and myths are created. The supposed boundaries between 'history writing' and 'fiction writing' become necessarily and invigoratingly blurred and indistinct" (2003).

NOTAS

- 1 The research carried out for the writing of this paper has been financed by the University of Alcalá –Vicerrectorado de Investigación, research project UAH PI2004/020– and by the Spanish Ministry of Education –research project HUM2004-02413/FILO.
- 2 Not surprisingly Derek Hand has said that: "The best Irish writing over the last 200 years concerns itself with trying to make connections between the past and the present in order that a more fruitful future can be imagined" (2003).
- 3 O'Faolain also co-edited with her husband a collective feminist work on the status of women entitled *Not in God's Image: Women in History from the Greeks to the Victorians* (1973).
- 4 See O'Connor's (1996) intelligent and cogent article. See, along many others: Weekes (1986) for an analysis of the underlying myth of Diarmuid and Grainne; Van Dale (1991) for a study on the development of Judith as a "revolutionary" character; Mahony (1995) for an assessment of the role of women; Moore (1991) for an exploration of triangular relationships in the novel; and St. Peter (1994) for a consideration of the relationship between sexism and nationalism.
- 5 O'Connor affirms that O'Faolain followed Vico's theory on the circularity of history "in his *Scienza Nuova* (1744) as a kind of scaffolding for her comic history of history" (1996:135).
- 6 The play, which re-enacts the image of Mother Ireland as the personification of the nation, is nowadays attributed to both Yeats and Lady Gregory, as a work written in collaboration.
- 7 Judith's memory is metaphorically described as a bog, which means "soft" in Gaelic. To this, the narrator adds that: "The bog was pagan and the nuns saw it as an image of fallen nature. It signified mortality, they said, and the sadness of the flesh, for it had once been the hunting ground of pre-Christian warriors, a forest which had fallen, become fossilized and was now dug for fuel" (O'Faolain 1987:12).
- 8 America had supported the Irish in their fight against Britain but, naturally, would not send money and arms to see the Irish kill each other.
- 9 According to Mahony, Michael is portrayed as emasculated because he "is the only male character in the novel who eschews politics entirely" (1995:152).
- 10 O'Faolain's cosmopolitan life –born in Ireland and educated in France and Italy, she now resides in London and Los Angeles– has allowed her to interpret the Irish history from the outside. Along with this, Weekes points out that "non-romantic tendencies allow her to view her various societies with detachment and a cold eye for pretence" (1990:175).
- 11 In this sense, I disagree with Van Dale's interpretation when she argues that: "In their youth, Judith, Owen, and the rest of the «revolutionaries» cling to an idyllic image of a united Ireland where differences are forgotten and peace replaces violence as the common fare. They are willing to attain this dream through fighting, the only way they know to make themselves noticed" (1991:25).
- 12 However, the two murderers in the novel have a noticeable repressed sexual life. In the case of Judith this is clear when Sparky kisses her and she later despises him not out of dislike but because her body had become uncontrollably wild (O'Faolain 1987: 260). Patsy Flynn, on the other hand, is a convinced bachelor who "had never touched a female" (265), hates women and despises sex. Violence could be then interpreted as the result of their repression, as many critics have already suggested (Burleigh 1985:11; Weekes 1990:187; O'Connor 1996:139 and 146; Cahalan 1999:147 and 156).
- 13 Here, as in other aspects of the novel, some biographical details might lie behind the text. O'Faolain is the daughter of literary parents who paid an enormous influence in her development. As regards politics, Weekes has explained that: "In early enthusiasm for the new Irish state, her father changed his name from the English Whelan, spoke the Gaelic language in his home, joined the Irish Republican Army, and addressed traditional Irish subjects. He was, however, to become as disillusioned with the Republicans as he had been with the British empire" (1990:22-23)

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