CHAPTER SIX

DEIRDRE MADDEN'S FICTION AT THE CROSSROADS OF (NORTHERN-)IRISH POLITICS, ART AND IDENTITY[1]

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"There is more to Northern Ireland than shooting and bombing"
(Madden, *One by One* 1996, 139)

Although born in the North of Ireland, in Toomebridge (Co. Antrim), Deirdre Madden has manifested her desire to be seen as an Irish rather than as a Northern Irish writer.[2] Her literary breakthrough coincided with a time of violent upheaval in the North and she shared an initial concern for the conflict with many other writers of her generation, including Bernard Mac Laverty, Eoin McNamee, Mary Beckett, Robert McLiam Wilson, Jennifer Johnston and Glenn Patterson, among others. However, her later novels have attempted to move away—more or less successfully—from such a topical subject. In fact, the exploration of the function of art and the artist in a globalised world, the haunting presence of death, the effects of the forces of nature on characters and existentialist questions of identity underpin her literary aesthetics. Ever since the publication of her debut novel, *Hidden Symptoms* (1986), which was set in the Belfast of the Troubles, and in spite of her concern with universal subjects, her fiction has tended to embed subplots that delve, directly or indirectly, into the emotional responses of the conflict experienced by her characters. Rather than offering committed socio-political insights into the violent situation of the North, for which she has been criticised (Craig 1996; Smyth 1997),[3] Madden particularises painful experiences of loss and of their resulting grieving processes. As Michael Parker has explained, it is her "preoccupation with myths of individuation" through which characters "long for a wholeness, unity and healing that will never be achieved" (2007, 66) that mainly matters in her fiction. Bearing all of these aspects in

mind, the present article will focus on the analysis of the author's particular way of exposing the characters to their own histories of conflict and resolution, which mirror the actual events that have occurred in the North, and especially on how she interconnects this theme with more distant topics.

With a solid production of eight novels and three books for children, and a remarkable number of literary awards,[4] Madden's lack of visibility in many literary anthologies of Irish literature is striking, as already observed by Parker more than a decade ago (2000, 82). This fact has been explained by alluding to her general alliance with the realist tradition and the wrong belief that her aesthetics resists experimental forms (White 1993; Higgins 1999, 145; Carr 2002, 1132; Mikowski 2011). This assumption has been contested by Parker, for whom Madden stands not only as an acclaimed voice in Irish literature, but as "a highly sophisticated, very contemporary writer" (2000, 83), who could well be regarded as an instance of the "postmodern condition". To this, Kennedy-Andrews has added that Madden's work can be conceived as a progression "from a pessimistic to a more optimistic view of the postmodern" (2003, 146). Positioning herself in a liminal space, between Northern Irish politics and transnational issues, while also reclaiming her place within a more inclusive Irish identity, it is not surprising to find that scholarly criticism of her work has diverted into different positions. Whereas a considerably large number of critics have scrutinised her novels searching for the Northern ethos that defines them (Pelaschiar 1998, 2000; Higgins 1999; Harte and Parker 2000; Jeffers 2002; Kennedy-Andrews 2003; Parker 2007; Bartnik 2009), some others have established her reputation among authors who tackle universal themes such as the conceptualisation of dislocation (White 1993), identity issues and gender politics (Fogarty 2002; Ingman 2007; Mikowski 2011), the placement of home (Hughes 1997), or the role of art and the artist in a globalised world (Olinder 2009). Even though Madden's work defies categorisation, my contention in this discussion is that, beyond the myriad of topics addressed, her novels can be essentially split into: those which deal with the psychological traumas triggered by the Troubles, and those which are concerned with aesthetic matters connected to art or creativity. I will further argue that Madden's novel *Molly Fox's Birthday* (2008) neatly interweaves both issues into a fragmentary account that re-addresses and re-calls previous interests explored in her work. Moreover, my argumentation relies on the examination of the recurrent presence of death, which functions as the underlying motif that unites all her novels to date.

Within the author's oeuvre, *Hidden Symptoms* (1986) and *One by One*

in the Darkness (1996) are the only novels that overtly address the Northern Irish Troubles.[5] In the two cases, characters have to confront the violent murder of a family member by a paramilitary group in cases of mistaken identity. It is the characters' private emotional responses as they try to come to terms with their loss that mainly matters, leaving aside the exploration of the socio-political struggle that merely functions as the contextual referent. Spanning the publication of these two novels, a third one, *Remembering Light and Stone* (1992), set in Italy, America and very briefly in Ireland, revolved around the notions of home and belonging. Nonetheless, passing references to a wide-ranging meaning of the term "north" led the author to particularise the Irish case and to reflect on how people outside Ireland have tended to trivialise the conflict and to reduce it to religious intolerance and political bigotry, not to mention the perverse coverage that the international press has often given to the Troubles. A second group of novels by Madden is constituted by *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), *Nothing is Black* (1994) and *Authenticity* (2002), which deal with art and creativity and with the resolution of personal inner conflicts that figure as the result of experiences of loss or estrangement from family members. Finally, as suggested above, *Molly Fox's Birthday* neatly plays with the significance of art in the context of drama acting and performance while it reworks the author's previous preoccupation with individual experiences of trauma originating in the Troubles.

Madden's debut novel, *Hidden Symptoms* (1986), which was awarded the Rooney Prize for Irish Literature a year after its publication, narrated the psychological effects of the Troubles in the lives of three students from Queen's University Belfast. Feeling locked in the monotonous life of "an introverted city, narcissistic, nostalgic and profoundly un-European", in sum, "a lunatic, self-destructive city" (80-1), they emerge as victims of their destinies and as passive agents of their own circumstances. The title of the novel symbolically alluded to the state of the region, which was suffering from the wrongs of a sectarian society, even before the outbreak of the conflict: "Ulster before 1969 had been sick but with hidden symptoms" (13). Although early criticism accused this novel of being "deeply conservative and reactionary" (Smyth 1997, 119), other scholars were quick to correct this view and to place it within a much broader and richer panorama (Pelaschiar 2000, 124; Benito de la Iglesia 2002). In fact, the narrative explores controversial themes such as the role of religion in a multi-denominational society, the poignant incidences of death, violence, the loss of faith, the value of art, the lack of communication and the impossibility of peace in such a milieu; all of them issues that would be dealt with in her subsequent novels, in an increasing tendency to contest

the often trivialised and simplified perceptions of the conflict.

Ten years elapsed between the publication of *Hidden Symptoms* and Madden's fifth novel, *One by One in the Darkness* (1996), which was shortlisted for the 1997 Orange Prize and focused once again on the Northern Irish strife. The plot gravitated around three sisters and a mother as they were trying to come to terms with the murder of the father in the hands of a paramilitary group when he was mistakenly taken for his brother Brian.[6] Set in 1994, on the eve of the first IRA ceasefire, and interspersed with the individual stories of each sibling, the novel recollected historical events associated with the beginnings of the Troubles, such as the civil rights parades and the involvement of members of the family in singing rebel songs, the marches of the Twelfth of July, the arrival of the British troops, the internment of civilians—many of them just Republican sympathisers—the riots in the streets and even the difficulties of Catholic children at school, where "sharp divisions of opinions" (154) were so visible.

In the case of *Hidden Symptoms*, its beginning establishes the tone of the narration. The protagonist, Theresa Cassidy, is grieving the traumatic death of her twin brother Francis, who has been tortured and savagely mutilated by a Loyalist group in a violent sectarian attack. As she tries to accept a loss that she compares to the amputation of a part of her own body, the other two characters, Richard and Kate, contemplate their isolated lives, having also lost family members, and feeling alienated by the surrounding atmosphere. Robert is both father- and motherless and feels estranged from his only sister, while Kate grows up fatherless until she discovers that her mother had lied to her and that her father lives in London and has two other children. On the other hand, the beginning of *One by One* confronts Kate's return home from London—where she has built a glamorous career as a fashion journalist—to bring news of her pregnancy, along with the memories of her father's death.[7] Being unmarried, the reaction of her family goes from rejection, due to her religious disrespect, to the acknowledgement of a joy that will neutralise the painful loss of the father. Among the three sisters, Cate[8] is the only one who has dared to cross boundaries: she not only takes delight in travelling to dangerous places in the North, she has decided to raise a baby as a single mother, transgressing the moral Catholic values in which she was educated. Although the setting is an unnamed village in the countryside—somewhere in Co. Antrim—and also briefly Belfast, Madden seems to be erasing the differences between city and country life—as far as the involvement of the conflict is concerned—suggesting that Belfast is as provincial as any other small town.[9] In fact, despite Steve's initial and

genuine interest in exchanging London for Belfast, acknowledging that the standards of living were higher there, he finally moves back, finding the city too narrow-minded and insular. Suggestively, in *Hidden Symptoms*, Theresa suffered the claustrophobia of a town that was "so small, incestuous almost, in the way paths crossed" (1986, 19).

While the three characters in *Hidden Symptoms* feel isolated in a society that alienates them, they also recognise their inability to comprehend what lies beyond the conflict. At some point in the novel, Theresa suggests that Robert write about the Troubles and even reprimands him for pretending to be a liberal in such a sectarian culture where eclecticism is not a possibility:

> What does understanding matter? Nobody understands. Some people say that they can see both sides, but they can't. You can only ever see one side, the side you happen to be on. But you haven't the guts for that, Robert: you haven't the guts to be partial, ye spineless liberal. (1986, 106)

A similar instance occurs in *One by One*, when Cate cannot make up her mind about whether her feelings for the North are positive or negative, even though she knows that she could not live there anymore.[10] Her two sisters, on the other hand, stand at the two ends of her unresolved inner conflict. The youngest, Sally, is the only one who has remained at home working as a school teacher in the same primary school all of them attended. Conversely, Helen is one of the few solicitors in Belfast, specialised in terrorist cases, who has committed to the Troubles through her defence of Catholics accused of political crimes. As Jennifer Jeffers has noted: "Each sister embodies a prototype: the one who got away, the smart loyal one, and the shy, homebound one" (2002, 72). All in all, the story involves the daughters' re-negotiation of identity after the death of their father and the loss of the Oedipal relation, which for Anne Fogarty, "marks the loss of innocence for the three heroines and also instigates a desperate attempt to find a substitute symbolic order to make good the shredding of paternal power" (2002, 7).

In spite of the apparent dwellings on reductive binarisms, with regard to nationality (British/Irish), religion (Protestant/Catholic), politics (Unionist/Republican) or iconography (Orange/Green), the two novels challenge meanings and received assumptions that go beyond the wrongs of a segregated society. In a fictional realm informed by such polarities, Theresa explains to Richard in *Hidden Symptoms* that the law of the community is stronger than the individual and that there is no place for a bourgeois liberalism that hinders its association with politics or religion:

> Just tell me this: if you were found in the morning with a bullet in your head, what do you think the papers would call you? An agnostic? No, Robert, nobody, not even you, is naïve enough to think that. Of course you don't believe: but there's a big difference between faith and tribal loyalty, and if you think that you can escape tribal loyalty in Belfast today you're betraying your people and fooling yourself. (1986, 46)

Although Theresa demands commitment from Robert, uncertainty defines both the climate of the two novels and the actions of the characters. As Sally tells Cate in *One by One*: "In this society it's the people who aren't confused, it's the people who know exactly what they think and feel about things who are the most dangerous" (1996, 142). Even the city, as Kennedy-Andrews has suggested, epitomises this absence of harmony, "its inherent contradictions exposed by the return of the repressed. It is the site of discontinuities, omissions, absences, partial explanations; of that which remains unspoken, secrets that can only be guessed at" (2003, 147).

Within such a context, the power of the mass media attains uncontrollable proportions, since it involves "the appropriation and translation of violence into visual and verbal forms" and "how repetition and dissemination of such images may have the effect of 'naturalising' atrocity" (Parker 2007, 69). Sally's ultimate motivation for her job derived precisely from the outrageous treatment of her father's death by the press. Comparing the British with the Irish press, she remembers how the Northern Irish newspapers emphasised the pain and the emotions, while the British tabloids were unsympathetic and cold, underlined her uncle Brian's membership in Sinn Féin, and somehow suggested that her father deserved his death. The contrast between these two different approaches becomes more manifest, considering that the novel did not hold Republican claims of nationhood and that, according to Fogarty, it was "careful to align him [Charlie] with a pacifist, constitutional nationalism that dissociates itself from violence" (2002, 8). If, in *Hidden Symptoms*, Frances was presented as an innocent victim unrelated to any paramilitary organisation, Charlie also rejected his brother's affiliation with Sinn Féin and refused to sympathise with mourners who applauded the shooting of guns over the grave of a young man killed when he was planting a bomb. As he told his daughter that same day: "Never forget what you saw today: and never let anybody try to tell you that it was anything other than a life wasted, and lives destroyed" (1996, 105). Thus, although the two novels apparently referred to formulaic religious and political icons, Madden opts to deconstruct the nuances that lie behind these apparent truths and moves beyond reduced identitarian clichés to further explore, not "the possibility of a cessation of violence", but rather "its gaze on the enduring hurt of the

living" (Harte and Parker 2000, 241).

Madden's third novel, *Remembering Light and Stone* (1992), was set in Italy, America and Ireland. Although its subject matter was not directly connected to the conflict, a thorough analysis proves that its subtle presence deserves more attention. The protagonist, Aisling, a woman in her early thirties who has spent most of her life abroad, maintains a relationship with an American man, and sees herself neither as an immigrant nor exiled, but as a dislocated character wherever she settles. Her openness to other cultures, rather than strengthening her horizons and enriching her life, has alienated and estranged her. Although she was able to escape from the "psychic violence" (32) of the Ireland of the Burren that she found too local and repetitive, at the end of the novel she finds her place back at home, where she is eventually able to reconcile with her roots and her country. The novel, thus, revolves around cultural clashes and relies on clichés and prejudices that give shape to stereotypical images of nations even though, according to Ingman, this "encounter with the foreign other" is not as determinant a factor as "the way in which living outside Ireland allows her to get her country into perspective" (2007, 103).

Although the novel does not deal with the Northern Irish Troubles, the subliminal use of the meaning of the term "north", as well as the way in which the image of Ireland has been exported worldwide are further explored in the narration. Almost immediately, on the second page, Aisling announces that: "I associate the north with violence and death, and I had come south to escape that" (1992, 2). Even if the word "north" does not stand here for the sole signifier of this region in Ireland, but for the placement of the country in the north of Europe, it does not pass unnoticed that, as Aisling comments, whenever she is introduced as an Irish woman, the ignorance of the people about her culture becomes evident as they associate it instantly with the violence of the north. The following quote is a fragment of a conversation that takes place during an upper-class party in St Georgio, which is quite revealing in this regard:

> Pietro said that I was from Ireland, and the usual question followed: Is there still fighting in Ireland? I said that there was, but not as much as in Sicily and Calabria. I also explained that the violence was only in a small part of Ireland, and not in the area where I came from.
> 'And can you tell me please,' said the man from Bologna, 'who is fighting in Ireland? Is it English fighting Irish or Catholics fighting Protestants? People always ask me this and I hate it when they do, because there's no simple answer, and they're not interested in a complicated one, in fact they're usually not interested in the answer at all.' (1992, 97-8)

Even though the novel did not tackle questions related to the conflict, as the paragraph reveals, Northern Irish politics are often in the news headlines of most European countries, placing violence, terrorism, fear and irrationality as inseparable elements of the landscape of this region. As mentioned above, the abuse of the media is a recurrent issue in Madden's fiction. In *One by One*, there is a passage in which Helen objects to her journalist friend David about the Troubles being too localised, and about nobody caring much because the Irish take it for granted and the foreign reporters only look for particular headlines: "The background isn't exotic enough and, anyway, it's never been a full-blown war" (1996, 50). Even more, in *Molly Fox's Birthday*, Andrew is appalled by a documentary on a terrorist attack that is perversely shown on television with music in the background playing down the whole incident, "there was a soundtrack over it, a voice-over and music. The music changed everything. It was a kind of soft jazz; for me it trivialised the images, and I was incensed" (2008, 198). All these instances reveal that Madden's concern narrating the Northern Irish strife is placed on the emotional effects of violence upon the individuals rather than on the Troubles as such. In Kennedy-Andrew's words, "she is interested in the ways in which traumatized characters represent violence to themselves. Beyond this subjective problematic, she is interested in the ways in which violence is represented in public, institutional arenas such as the mass media and the law" (2003, 153).

Leaving aside the novels that directly or indirectly address the conflict, there is yet another group that is constituted by those that engage in questions dealing with art or creativity. In Madden's second novel, *The Birds of the Innocent Wood* (1988), which received the Somerset Maugham Award, the author moved away from the reality of Northern Ireland and set her narrative in an unnamed and isolated farm where "the cruelty of nature" figured as an extension of "the hardness of country life" (54). The dramatic story of Jane, who became an orphan at only two, was adopted by an aunt who did not love her, and was put into a boarding school at five, establishes the pessimistic tone of the narration. Jane's plot intertwines with that of her twin daughters, Sarah and Catherine, who have inescapably inherited their mother's existential dissatisfaction with life and are now mourning her death. While Sarah has grown up fearing that she was bound to reproduce her mother's life, "just as cold, just as calculating and just as self-contained" (31), Catherine's discontent rests on the rejection she has received in order to enter convent life, even though religion "is no comfort to her, but a torment" (92). Following a process of re-invention, Catherine re-writes and re-creates her life in her diary to

counteract her bad memory in a striking emulation of her mother, who used to take pleasure in startling people with the stories of her dramatic and wretched life. In fact, her mother's detachment and coldness endowed her with a power that she used to manipulate others, as the following fragment reveals:

> Every time she told her story she felt as if she was leading the unsuspecting children to a vast black pit, and when she had taken them right to the edge, she would suddenly draw back and abandon them there. She craved their pity and their sense of horror; and at the same time she utterly despised the other little girls for allowing her to induce these feelings in them. It was her tragedy, and she was never so weak as to cry for the loss of her parents. (5)

As is usually the case in Madden's fiction, in spite of the presence of relevant male characters, *The Birds* focuses on a female world and on family relations, whose intrigues hint at the possibility of hidden secrets that might lead one to conclude that incest, as subtly present here as in *Hidden Symptoms*, could possibly figure as an underlying motif (Kennedy-Andrews 2003, 148; Parker 2007, 73). In this narrative, Madden also explored the possibilities offered by the presentation of differing viewpoints of the same event, while the lack of communication turned out to be symbolically significant, becoming mistrust among the characters. Other themes recalled in *The Birds* are trauma and death, through suicide, stillbirth and terminal illness.

Madden's fourth novel, *Nothing is Black* (1994), was set in the North of the country, although not in what politically constitutes Northern Ireland, but in a remote part of Donegal. The plot circled around the stories of three unhappy women who unintentionally end up forging a bond that will bring significant changes to their lives. The protagonist, Nuala, is a wealthy and successful woman who seems to have everything except peace of mind. Leaving her husband and a newborn baby behind, she travels north to stay with her cousin Claire, who leads a solitary life as a painter in a rural village. There, she will meet Claire's neighbour Anna, a Dutch woman who is estranged from her daughter. Through their introspected stories, Madden will explore the themes of friendship, family ties, death, the nature of creativity, alienation, the search for meaning and belonging, and motherhood. Expanding these issues, *Authenticity* (2002), Madden's sixth novel, largely centres on the function of art in a contemporary and fragmented world. The protagonists are a man and a woman. The painter Roderic Kennedy, after enjoying a life of success, is overtaken by a series of crises that lead him to alcohol: the failure of his

marriage to an Italian woman, the loss of affection from his three daughters following his return to Ireland, and his inability to resume his life as an artist. On the other hand, artist Julia Fitzpatrick is both his opposite and his complement, twenty years younger and at the beginning of a promising career. All of a sudden, she gets involved with another artist-to-be, the rich lawyer William Armstrong, and the three of them maintain a relationship that becomes dramatic and complex, in which death once again acquires a symbolic dimension.

Unifying Madden's interest in art and creativity with her northern concerns, *Molly Fox's Birthday* (2008), a novel that was shortlisted for the 2009 Orange Prize, stands out. The narrative takes place in just one day in Dublin—"the twenty-first of June, the longest day of the year. It was Molly Fox's birthday" (11)—and concentrates on the long-standing friendship among three characters: the unnamed narrator, who is a renowned playwright; the celebrated actress Molly; and Andrew, an internationally acclaimed television art critic. Although all of them are successful professionals in their early forties, keeping in tone with Madden's previous novels, they are loners affected by personal choices made in the past. The protagonist, Molly Fox, a renowned actor who refuses to be called an actress (2), does not actually appear as a character.[11] Her story is fragmentarily interspersed in the text in italics and the reader only makes sense of her existence through the recollections of her friend, a well-known playwright who resides in London and has installed herself in Molly's house in Dublin while the latter is in New York. Struggling to overcome a mental block, during the course of this day, she reflects upon her life, Molly's, and that of their mutual friend Andrew, whom she had met at university and with whom she shares divergent views on the Northern conflict. Even though the main theme of the novel is defined in terms of the function of art in a globalised society, a subplot dealing with the Troubles unfolds the narrative.

Both the unnamed narrator and Andrew are Northern Irish, although they come from opposing religious, political and familial backgrounds, and they have only recently reconciled with their pasts. In the case of the narrator, she was the youngest of six brothers and sisters and a misfit in the family, as she was not prepared to follow in her siblings' footsteps marrying, bearing children and remaining there. Even though she refused to return to the North after she left to attend university, she always felt that the place "remained a constant in my life, a touchstone, the imaginative source of so much of my writing" (2008, 58). Like her author, for whom the physical distance does not grant its actual detachment, she has explained in an interview that:

> I grew [up] in that part of the country during the 1960s and 70s, and it was a very significant, unhappy and important part of my life. The whole memory of living through that, seeing the marches when I was a child and experiencing the atmosphere and the tension of that period was something that is absolutely a part of me, and it comes back into my life and my thoughts, and into my work, I suppose, whether I like it or not. (Morales 2011, 245)

In the case of Andrew, he admits to have grown indifferent towards his family as a result of his mother's neglect, in favour of her favourite son, who happens to be a Loyalist paramilitary. When his brother is murdered, Andrew's grieving process is complicated by feelings of confusion—since he had also been responsible for the death of Catholics—and of rejection, hate and rage for the whole situation of the North. However, his inability to express sorrow and to mourn his brother turned into a burden that haunted him until he had his own son: "Here he was, a miniature version of the dead brother I'd never much cared for, and I'd have walked through fire for him" (2008, 180). When his parents died years later, he announced that he would never return to Belfast, exchanging it for London, while he also got rid of his northern accent.

Though neither of the two characters is ideologically positioned in the Troubles, the histories and identities of their families attach them to each of the two sides of the conflict. The rejection of their origins discloses Madden's endeavour to transcend clear-cut identitarian stereotypes that had emerged in earlier works in order to underline the unsolved paralysis that still lies beyond the intricacies of the strife. At some point in the novel, Andrew explains that one of its most malign traits was that people were unable to break free from their ties to the past, which was the reason behind "why the peace process wasn't working, that the whole population was locked in a trance of grief that they didn't break out of because it defined them, it made them feel real" (2008, 115). Ironically, Andrew eventually comes to terms with the death of his brother while he is in Paris and a bomb goes off in a place where he had been a minute before, saving his life just because of a few seconds:

> I'd obviously heard bombs when I was growing up in Belfast, and I'd been caught up in things, scares and riots and stuff, but this was the closest call I'd ever had. And even as I was sitting there the irony of that struck me. My whole life had been a kind of flight from the north and everything that happened there … Life had brought me at last after so many years here to Paris, to look at some drawings, and I'd almost been killed in a bomb blast as a result, in a dispute that had nothing to do with me. Then I thought about Billy and how he had died, even though for years I had actively tried

> not to think of him. I rarely felt sorry or sad about him, just angry and disgusted at the waste of a life. And suddenly I felt the whole loss of him in a way I'd perhaps never allowed myself to feel it before. It was just awful. I couldn't bear it. (2008, 186)

The experience of being close to a violent death while he was so far from the North triggers bereavement for his brother's death. Thus, he can initiate a healing process that will eventually free him from the sour feelings that destructively tied him to the North and to his past.

Madden's two major themes, art and political violence, usually appear overlapped with the presence of death. While in *The Birds*, Jane recognised that "[a]ll her life she had defined herself in terms of death, because she was the child of dead parents" (1988, 74), in *Remembering Light*, Aisling equates Ireland with death:

> I had had more than enough of death in Ireland—not just personal bereavement, but the way it was in the air the whole time. People at home always seemed to be talking about who was dead, or just about to die, and they were always going to funerals. When I moved to France, I found it so strange. People must die in France as they do in Ireland, but it's more unobtrusive there. I was seventeen when my father died. I know that I was gossiped about because I didn't cry much, because I didn't seem to be particularly sad. I was gossiped about years later for exactly the opposite reason when my mother died, for crying too much. They said I felt guilty, and they said I deserved to, for having gone away and left my mother on her own. I didn't care what they said. I knew my own heart on these things, and that was what mattered. They hadn't had to live my life, they didn't know the things that had happened, they didn't know the complicated web of lies, secrets and violence there had been. (1992, 61)

Striking as it may seem, death and birth are also inextricably linked in Madden's fiction. In *Molly Fox's Birthday*, Andrew's reconciliation with his parents takes place the moment his son Tony is born. In *Nothing is Black*, Nuala moves to Donegal to stay with her cousin in order to be able to find the peace of mind she needs to grieve the loss of her mother, which incidentally coincided with the beginning of her pregnancy. As the two conflicting processes progressed, she found herself with the need to free emotions that had been bottled up. Death also re-emerges as a theme in Claire's miscarriage, in the baby that her own mother lost in pregnancy and in her own pain after losing her artist friend Marcus. The combination of death and birth makes a further reappearance in *One by One*, when Cate recognises the connection between her maternal instinct and her grief over her father. In all of these novels, new life seems to be the antidote to death.

As the protagonist of *Remember Light* says: "The power of human love can unsettle me, even though I know that there are only two things at the centre of life: the search for love, and the fact of death" (1992, 62).

To conclude, as I hope to have been able to demonstrate, although Madden's literary production is wide and diverse, the range of topics that inform her novels could be classified in two groups: Northern Irish politics, as they mainly affect female characters; and the exploration of the role of the artist and the nature of creativity in contemporary society. Following Molly Fox's assertion that "art was a means of avoiding reality rather than confronting it head on" (2008, 16), this novel connects these two main themes, to which she adds subjects that have already been explored previously, such as the nature of faith and its function in a world without values, problematic and delayed grieving, friendship, lack of communication, loss, alienation, and the role of the family in the construction of identity. Even though Madden's initial concern for local politics has developed into an attraction to more universal subjects, there are specific issues that keep reappearing in all of her novels. These range from a singular interest in exploring the psychological states of the minds of her characters, the focus on the female experience, trauma, the use of a variety of perspectives from which to offer a multifarious reality, the weight of the past, and the resolution of a conflict that usually lies at the core of a troubled life, alienated or isolated by society. All in all, I could end by stating that even though Northern Irish politics figure in Madden's novels in a more or less subtle way, her fiction tends to locate characters both at home and abroad, where they confront their own (Northern-)Irish identities in light of the alternatives proposed by other sites of cultural interaction, for which death stands as the underlying motive.

Notes

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[2] In her own words: "I would always call myself an 'Irish writer' and I would be quite resistant to the definition of 'Northern Irish writer' because, I suppose, I don't like or respect the concept of Northern Ireland" (Morales 2011, 245).

[3] Craig accused her of being too vague about the mechanics of the actual conflict since her interest seemed to lie on "the small-scale and the quotidian" (1996, 26). Smyth also criticised her fiction for being "essentially apolitical and ahistorical" since the Troubles appear "as the occasion rather than the theme" (1997, 119).

[4] Madden has been awarded many literary prizes, among which we find the Hennessy Award for Short Fiction (1980), the Rooney Prize (1987), the Somerset Maugham Award (1989), the Kerry Book of the Year (1997) and the Eilís Dillon

Award for her children's fiction. She has also been nominated twice for the Orange Prize for fiction (1997 and 2009).

[5] Madden has just published her eighth novel, *Time Present and Time Past* (2013), which is set in Dublin, but the protagonist and his sister continually muse over their holidays as children in the North, where they used to stay with Granny Buckley. Memories of their past trouble them as they come to terms with their present lives. Unfortunately, this novel was not included for discussion in the present article as it came out months after I had sent the article for publication and it is only at this phase of revision that I can acknowledge its relevance within Madden's production.

[6] Although Eamonn Hughes has interpreted that the lives of the four women "are 'off centre' in relation to Northern society", and identifies the concept of home as the unifying theme of the novel (1997, 155), I contend that the exploration of the emotional responses to the conflict sets the narrative in tune with Madden's first novel. Hughes' argumentation is that the plot "is really concerned with the nature of home and the ways in which home changes and aides", therefore "the novel explores how various factors, among them, the beginning of the Troubles, bring about a change in this sense of home" (1997, 155).

[7] Parker interprets her pregnancy and return home to break the news as "a rejection of the anonymity, transience and purposeless energy which London now seems to embody for her" (2007, 269 n12). Although she has occasionally considered the possibility of moving back to the North, she discards the idea, since "it didn't amount to anything, this fantasy; she would do as much if she were on holiday in the Cotswolds or in Tuscany, and build a vague life for herself around some house or market or town half-glimpsed and as quickly forgotten, both the fact of the place and the thought it had stirred" (Madden 1996, 83).

[8] Her name will alternate between Kate and Cate, depending where she is, since the change in the spelling was a reaction to her seeing her name as being "too Irish ... too country" (Madden 1996, 4).

[9] See Laura Pelaschiar for a discussion of the different ways in which Belfast is portrayed in Madden's *Hidden Symptoms* and *One by One* (2000, 124-5).

[10] As the following quote suggests, "if she had been asked to pick a single word to sum up her feelings towards Northern Ireland she would be at a complete loss" (Madden 1996, 83).

[11] Although the protagonists of Madden's novels are usually female characters, they escape from both the restrictions of a patriarchal society and from the confines of certain feminisms. See Mikowski's article on gender issues in Madden's novels (2011).

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