'The strange heart beating': Bird Imagery, Masculinities and the Northern Irish Postcolonial Gothic in the novels of Sean O'Reilly and Peter Hollywood

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The umbrella-like Gothic genre remains a popular form of social and political critique today. It can be seen, as Catherine Spooner suggests through George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* portrayal of "brain-dead zombies staggering vacantly through a shopping-mall to the sound of piped Muzak, the link between one form of mindless consumption and another comically underlined" (1) , and, as I will argue , through the Gothic imagery and themes in the novels of Sean O'Reilly and Peter Hollywood which interrogate postmodern masculinity and how Northern Ireland's relationship with the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland has been coloured by colonialism. The supernatural, however, has fallen somewhat out of vogue in contemporary Irish writing and criticism, which Bruce Stewart attributes to fact that "in some quarters […] the occurrence of supernatural themes in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Irish writers is seen as the product of colonialism itself, whether in its characters as a weapon or a wound."(2) Thus, in order to eradicate the undesirable conception of Ireland as what Killeen describes as "weird and bizarre[…]a place where the past had never in fact disappeared, a place where the past was the present" (3), although it may still be acceptable to use Gothic themes and motifs, Irish ghost stories, vampire novels and writing about Celtic mythology that includes leprechauns, faeries, the *bean sídhe* or giants are arguably no longer palatable to the modern reader, if such a person can be imagined.

It is not just within the threat of the supernatural or the haunted recesses of the mind that one may be pursued, tortured and held captive in today's Gothic. Botting explains: "Terror and horror are diversely located in alienating bureaucratic and technological reality, in psychiatric hospitals and criminal subcultures" (4). However, more and more frequently, the contemporary Gothic does not simply focus on exaggerated parodies of bureaucracy and monstrous technology, or the subcultures of mental patients and disturbed criminals. One of the functions of the Gothic in recent times is to locate and expose horror in places familiar to the reader, from the workplace, to the home, to the archetypes of modern society. Thus, today's Gothic derives much of its strength from its ability to create a sense of uneasiness about the home, and the urban sprawls so many of us inhabit; in effect, to use Freudian terminology, transforming what should be *heimlich* into the *unheimlich*.

The urban environment is tediously familiar to many twentieth and twenty-first century readers – streetlights, neon signs, pollution, towering buildings, a homeless population who are usually pitied or feared, harmless spaces like parks and lanes that are transformed by night into places of terror and the feeling of claustrophobia at lives involuntarily lived so much on top of each other. Although this scenario is superficially very different from the castles, vast moors and dark forests of older Gothic novels, the settings are connected nonetheless in Botting's analysis: "Gothic landscapes are desolate, alienating and full of menace. In the eighteenth century they were wild and mountainous locations. Later the modern city combined the natural and architectural components of Gothic grandeur and wildness, its dark, labyrinthine streets suggesting the violence and menace of Gothic castle and forests" (5). In a society in which people work all day, employed by large, bureaucratic, faceless corporations; living beside people they might often see or hear but never speak to, and sharing daily transport around the city with others they also never communicate with, the probability of alienation is high. Furthermore, cultural anxieties (a by-product of different cultures existing side by side in many Western cities) provide fertile grounds for the Gothic, particularly since the 'War on Terror' which has meant that these cultures have become increasingly more, rather than less, segregated over time. The fears fuelled by media and right wing

politicians of corruption of the spirit of the American or European nations by Islam or of the legal system by Sharia law run rife and create a rich imaginative territory in which to situate the Gothic. And all of this is further complicated by class, with many Western cities also home to sink estates, ghettoes and the euphemistically named ‘projects’.

It is various parts of urban, postmodern Ireland with its complicated mixture of class, politics and alienation that Sean O’Reilly and Peter Hollywood use as the setting of their Gothic-influenced novels. In O’Reilly’s collection of short stories *Curfew* (2000) and his first novel *Love and Sleep* (2002) it is the city of Derry that figures prominently. As Fionnuala O’Connor argues, place, especially within a Northern Irish context, can be of pivotal importance to the formation and attitudes of the individual: “In Belfast, Derry, Newry and other towns where a very short geographical distance – sometimes less than a mile – can mean an entirely different daily experience of The Troubles, it is far from fanciful to suppose that attitudes can be affected by where people live.”(6) Despite people’s experiences of The Troubles having differed so widely, there are also many parallels between the experiences of post-conflict society across Northern Ireland. *Love and Sleep* is narrated from the perspective of Niall, a dissolute native of Derry who originally left the city several years before the novel begins to go to university in London and since dropping out has travelled all around Europe, most recently to Italy where he was living before his return to his hometown. The novel opens at a macabre party at the house of man who committed suicide and has just been buried in the cemetery on the hill overlooking the city. This opening has the effect of immediately delineating this uncertain, post-conflict time from the ‘dead’ past, metaphorically represented through a literal death. Malachi O’Doherty argues that “although the Troubles went on too long, there is a prevailing idea that they ended too easily.”(7) The seemingly covert, hushed up end to this long and bloody conflict has parallels with this suicide in the novel, as the man chooses to end his life quietly and without explanation, crawling under his own bed to die.

The first, somewhat gruesome, impression of Derry created in the novel as a place of ‘queasy, humble streets’ (p.7) and ‘sordid lair[s]’ (p.ix), hidden away between ‘new shopping centres and new pubs and new car parks and scaffolding everywhere’ is heightened rather than abated, as the narrative continues, chronicling the ‘frantic months’ Niall spends there, half-heartedly trying to return to his hometown before ultimately admitting defeat, acknowledging his failure to belong and leaving once more. The aspect of the city that creates most unease in Niall is its encroaching modernity, making a place that was familiar to him increasingly unfamiliar, and to Niall’s mind hostile: “I was living in a bedsit in the centre of town… The buildings on either side were concealed behind scaffolding and rows and sheets of white plastic that buckled and slapped like gunfire in the relentless wind. During the months I lived there, I never saw a sign of anyone at work on these vivisected houses; it was the same all over the city, gutted shops and sliced-up streets left to wait under swathes of plastic and wire netting, like the traces of some disease were being kept out of view.” (p.37). Despite its unfamiliarity, the transformation of post-Troubles Derry is in many respects positive, as is apparent even to Niall: “I was up on the old walls of the city, looking out over the newly scrubbed Bogside with its painted verandas, satellite dishes and hidden alleyways. The main streets were tidy and empty.” (p.8)

This parallels Hollywood’s description of twenty-first century Newry in *Luggage* (2008) which, like *Love and Sleep*, introduces the reader to the place through a funeral. This parallel is interesting and it goes further than just this textual coincidence; like Derry, Newry too is a traditionally contested urban area situated near the border with the south, the kind of in-between or liminal space in which the Gothic has traditionally been situated. The funeral in *Luggage* is for a well-known local republican and Thomas, the novel’s central character, is amazed at being able to look around him and see “no binoculars, observers,

check-points, concealed convoys of waiting land-rovers, police cars; no cauterwaul of rotor blades drowning out orations and prayers, no downdraughts scattering hats and headscarves – handkerchiefs; no unmarked cars, spies-in-the-sky; ranks of riot shields leaning Trojan-like in side streets ready to be snatched up; no rubber bullets, batons nor tear-gas; no 'PIGS' nor water cannons, nor dragon teeth; no Saracens; no metallic, megaphone voice booming from on high. No riot." (p.34) Like Niall's ambivalent reaction to the changes in Derry which he perceives to be hostile, Thomas too has a perhaps surprising reaction to these trappings of modernity and normality in Newry; in the absence of all the signs of conflict Thomas expected to see the narrator remarks that 'the hairs stood up on the back of his neck.' (p.34)

In Derry, the renewed economic prosperity is bringing nightlife and hotels to the city; and along with them jobs for the city's inhabitants, including Niall's old school friend Danny who ironically 'has a job behind the bar of a new pub, the biggest so far with four floors, in the post-past city, as he jokingly describes it. He sells the socialist papers every Saturday outside one of the new shopping centres.' (p.xvi) The core political concern for the central characters in *Love and Sleep*, somewhat surprisingly for a city so associated with The Troubles, but directly linking to Botting's explanation for why the city provides such rich material for Gothic, is that of class and whether the new economic climate will bring as dramatic a change for the city's inhabitants as it has brought to the city's appearance and also whether this change will be an entirely positive one.

Despite the increase in jobs and amenities available in Derry in the post-conflict period, and Danny's description of the city as being 'post-past', the people who live there, in O'Reilly's portrayal of them, still seem very preoccupied with the horrific aspects of the city's history. Niall's erstwhile girlfriend Lorna comments: "The doctors keep this city going, you know. The men all die young and the women go to the doctor. The whole city's on a wave of Prozac, everybody I know's on it. We're all drugged to the eyeballs. An acceptable level of intoxification. Direct rule by chemists." (p.93) This 'acceptable level of intoxification' spills over into the nightmarish carnivalesque every weekend night, where people drink to the point of oblivion to forget the past or the boredom of their lives: "The streets were teaming with people, drunk and raucous. They gathered in groups, unwilling to go home, with all sorts of glasses in their hands – it could have been a chaotic night-time procession through the city, with glasses instead of candles or flowers, to a vigil in the main square. Bursts of song or fighting started at the slightest provocation[…]There were signs of disorder everywhere I looked: a rampant couple on the roof of a chip van, people gathering in doorways or on their knees, staring furiously at the ground; men pissed freely, writing their names on the walls, taxis revved their engines to get through the crowds." (p.58) Of all the people Niall encounters in his months in Derry, very few have a positive attitude towards themselves or their lives; even his sister-in-law, Maureen, who initially seems relatively content with her situation complains, "I'm a woman with a husband and a child…a depressed husband and a child who won't eat and I'm guaranteed to spend the rest of my life in this place." (p.45) The bad times of paramilitary violence, bombs and curfews may appear to be gone in O'Reilly's Derry but so has the sense of community that once existed, to be replaced with the attitude epitomised by Danny: "Why should I do anything about it? They can blow up the whole town for all I care. What's it ever done for me?' (p.61)

This obsession with the past and the relationship between past and present is typical of the Gothic, and the Gothic is further invoked through the figure of Niall's father. The last time Niall saw his father was when he boarded the bus which would take him on the first step of his journey to London. His father will not even get out of the car to say goodbye to him, so when he dies a few years later Niall refuses to come back for his funeral, much to the chagrin of the rest of his family. Maureen attempts to explain and to some extent excuse her father-in-law's behaviour to Niall on his return: 'He was a cold man, we all know

that. He couldn't help it. The men of his time were all like that. Think what they lived through – the forties and fifties in Northern Ireland; they were treated worse than animals. And then you going off to university. How can they make sense of changes like that?' (p.5) Niall initially reacts by scorning the idea that his failure to return for the funeral or visit home subsequently has anything to do with the past, and says that it has more to do with the fact that nothing in Derry holds any attraction for him.

Nevertheless, later in the novel, to escape a riot between the police and some teenagers, Niall jumps over a gate in the dark and finds himself in the cemetery. Having hurt his foot, he cannot climb back over and so, "With nowhere else to go I started up the slope between the split-open crypts and debauched supplicating angels, dragging my foot. Without acknowledging it to myself, I must have known where I was going." (p.138) The location of course is his father's grave, which, despite the fact that it is dark, Niall has been drinking and he has never visited it before, he manages to find without difficulty. Upon finding it, he promptly lies down upon it and curses his father as a 'wank-stain' and a 'coward' for spending his whole life being 'mute and obedient to the end' (p.139). This act of cursing is not enough to bring catharsis to Niall's damaged psyche: when he wakes the following morning still lying on the grave he discovers "to my horror that the gravel was scattered and there were obvious traces of digging[…]I gaped at the dirt on my hands, under my fingernails, on my clothes. Even the skin on my face felt like it was heavy with dirt. There was grit under my tongue, in my gums – falling to my knees, I puked." (p.140) Niall, while apparently both angry with and dismissive of his father, is also somewhat obsessed with the idea of his return. Whether Niall believes that this return he is so fixated with lies in himself, in the potential to become the man he claims to detest so strongly buried within him, or whether he believes that the attitudes and beliefs of his father are somehow a product of the city and can be unearthed and possibly understood by digging them up is unclear.

Whatever the reason for his fixation and frantic digging, the night Niall spends at the cemetery affects him so deeply he is stricken with a typically Gothic, metaphysical fever, in which he is tormented by nightmares of "digging with the last of my strength at my father's grave[…]children gathered in a vast crowd all around me, naked, seized by diabolical fits, holding burning torches, their faces painted white; I knew that if I didn't obey them they would tear me to pieces." (p.143) In desperation, he sends Danny up to the cemetery to the grave, to "check[…]it's the way it should be", where Danny encounters Michael, Niall's older brother and heir to their father's pragmatic, stiff-jawed, responsible disposition. Perhaps this is the return that is intended by O'Reilly: the legacy of repression inherited by Michael and by the rest of the people of Derry which keep them locked in the destructive cycle of drugs, alcohol, depression and denial as chronicled by Niall, who has managed in some ways to escape from it.

In O'Reilly's second novel, *The Swing of Things* (2004), the focus has shifted to Dublin but the northern gothic undertones remain through the central character, Noel Boyle. Boyle, who is from Derry, is a former republican prisoner who has turned his back on the IRA and is trying to begin a new life as a Philosophy student in Dublin; reflecting the description of Derry as 'post past' in *Love and Sleep*, Boyle describes Dublin as 'the non-unionised, postcolonial city.' Once again politics of class and colony are centralised, although the status of exiles and refugees is also explored in *The Swing of Things*. Boyle is regarded with a mixture of fear, pity, wariness and frustration by the other characters in the novel and his greatest flaw is his seeming failure to make a decision and stick to it. He joins the IRA and then changes his mind about the organisation just as he is driving a bomb towards a security checkpoint. After his release from jail he moves in with his friend Dainty, who lives in a new waterfront apartment. The first thing Boyle notices about his new home is not its luxury or stylish design but, perhaps unsurprisingly given his own recent experiences, its 'clear view down into the lighted car park of the Strand Road police station, an inhuman

gloom of inscrutable and fastidious experiments.' (p.27) He soon realises that he cannot shake the post-jail paranoia, understanding that 'when [he] stepped through the gate into the cheering crowds[…]his sentence had only begun" (p.27) and he eventually decides he has to move elsewhere in order to rebuild his life. He moves to Dublin and enrols as a student, only to find that after eight months he is still having difficulties settling in and making friends, and he begins to think about dropping out of university: "Boyle had lost his way and he knew it." (p.10)

Noel is often referred to by his surname and in fact often refers to himself in this way. The name Boyle has obvious connotations with the idea of things boiling over, which matches his edgy temperament and his struggle to keep the violence and rage, which despite his best efforts seem to be constantly simmering within him, under control. Boyle's unlikely friend Fada, a street poet, describes Boyle as having "tension around him, a consternation in the air. He was serious, slow to banter, maybe humourless[…]He reminded Fada of a bar after closing time, stools knocked over. The words came out of him sparsely, reluctantly like he didn't trust them or he knew they'd be back to haunt him. But there was also naivety, a fear of all before his eyes, and it could turn quickly into violence. He was uncomfortable in the world, ashamed, sullen." (p.77) Boyle seems to recognise his own capacity for reckless destruction, telling himself: "He couldn't lose control of himself in public. One thoughtless reaction and he would be back inside. He had to keep a grip, a focus, submerge himself in the books, and wait. That's what he had come down here for. To take his life into his own hands and make something." (p.73) The use of the word 'submerge' is ominous here: the notion of submersion applies to three important bodies in the novel: that of the unidentified woman found in the Liffey; that of the murdered artist thrown into the river by Boyle, and finally that of Boyle himself, who does not submerse himself in his books but winds up submerged in a ditch, betrayed by the organisation he himself betrayed eight years before.

Boyle has been brought up in a culture where the state is mistrusted by all those he knows and which in turn routinely discriminates against these people, a striking example being when his friend Dainty's older brother is shot dead by soldiers. Dainty's parents react to the murder by sending their other son to live with relatives in America, thus preventing him from becoming involved with the IRA, while Boyle is left behind. Although stopping short of allowing the past and his circumstances to completely excuse his behaviour, O'Reilly's portrait of Boyle's upbringing in a republican stronghold by affectionate but unconcerned parents who would rather be out drinking and dancing than worrying too much about what their son is up to paints a complex and sympathetic picture of why and how young men could become involved with the republican cause in the north.

O'Reilly's empathy as such is at odds with the vehement anti-revisionism of historians such as Desmond Fennell, who embodies "a sense of piety towards our nationalist past, with allegiance to the essential tenets of Irish nationalism, and with critical respect for contemporary Irish nationalism" (8) or the condescending attitude of academics such as Butler Cullingford, who argues that militant republicanism is 'the Irish version of [a] fascist discourse: a discourse which still holds sway in the Maze prison and the Catholic ghettoes of Belfast' (9). Of this tendency to either completely ignore or totally disassociate oneself from The Troubles, O'Doherty scathingly comments: 'It's not hard to see why the Troubles are an embarrassment. For one thing, they went on far too long. They seemed to represent a society which was incapable of learning from the sensible and mannered intellectuals. The sensible and mannered intellectuals quickly ran out of things to say and concluded, therefore, that the violence was just an embarrassing lapse into barbarism' (10).

He may not exactly believe the Troubles to have been an embarrassment, but Dainty's absence from Derry at the crucial juncture after his brother's murder, seems to have prevented him (as well as Northern Ireland's 'absent' middle classes and their Southern counterparts, who were also able to avoid the worst of the violence) from being able to understand why Boyle would have followed this path of becoming involved with paramilitaries. He reprimands Boyle for not being able to enjoy the party to celebrate his release from prison: "Jesus…just try and get into the fucken swing of it will you for fuck's sake? Just for me. Just this once. There's enough big faces in this town without you joining the ranks. And get rid of that beard for a start… Do you expect them all to get down on their knees in fucken thanks? Do you think they feel beholden to you or something? Catch yourself on Boylo." (p.29) For whatever reasons, right or wrong, Boyle has spent eight years of his life in jail and when he is released, having shunned all association with the IRA he is left with no support network. All Boyle has is Dainty who blithely encourages him to move on, take night classes and forget the whole thing ever happened or a former prisoner called Doe Hoe who hosts a 'pow-wow' for ex-prisoners every month in a caravan in Donegal, where they all drink excessively and take any and all drugs they can get their hands on as their lives and marriages fall apart.

Having spent eight years in prison, it is hardly surprising that Boyle is still finding it difficult to adjust after just eight months in Dublin but while Dainty cuts through to the core of the matter, he still fails to show any empathy for what Boyle is going through: "You think you're different but you're not. You're panicking now at being part of the state. They let you into the libraries and classrooms and give you a wee identity card. You've never had to face that before. You can't cope with it. You're just the same as everybody else now. Biting your lip, waiting for payday." (pp.112-113) O'Connor comments in 1993 that 'The South has been a sore place in the Northern nationalist soul for a long time'(11). Dainty, however, is an unusual example of a northern nationalist who sees the Republic of Ireland as being 'the state', and being as much the country of men from Derry as men from Dublin. He cannot understand why, after spending eight years in jail for being involved with an organisation that sought to bring about a reunification of the two separate political entities on the island, by whatever means necessary, that living in and belonging to this other state may be a strange experience for Boyle.

Dainty has wholeheartedly embraced post-conflict Derry, with his waterfront apartment and his new girlfriend. O'Doherty draws attention to the "prevailing idea that [The Troubles] ended too easily" (12) and that as a result people are afraid to "scrutinise how they ended or to test the compromises by which they ended, in case we bring them back." (13). This is reflected in Dainty's resolute refusal to give credence to the idea that The Troubles and the country's paramilitary organisations could still exist, even residually, vehemently trying to convince the mistrustful Boyle that: "Nobody gives a fuck any more. It's just gangland stuff now. Drugs and protection rackets. Everybody knows that. They can't even remember what they fucken did last week never mind eight years ago. You're fucken paranoid. The only person after you is yourself for being such a stupid wanker in the first place." (p.106) Interestingly, this is the exact opposite of the reaction Hollywood's character Thomas gets when he remarks on all visible signs of The Troubles and all security service surveillance having disappeared and seemingly gone in Newry: ''They're still here… They're in the air… Mobile phones? Emails? Computers? The internet… I guarantee you someone was watching, they had both assured him.' (p.34) Dainty and Thomas both assume that this period in the north's history can now be considered closed and they base their assumptions on the veneer of modernity and normality which glosses over lingering problems in contemporary northern life. However, better informed characters such as long-time Newry inhabitants or Boyle who has spent eight years in prison disrupt and unsettle this assumption with their insights and experiences. In this way the Gothic theme of the dreaded return and the Gothic image of corruption beneath a desirable façade are

present in the narrative and create feelings of uneasiness in the reader. Society may have progressed and with this progression has come the appearance of further progress but, despite the forceful optimism of characters like Dainty, things in Northern Ireland have not really changed all that much in essence. Given the end that Boyle meets, Dainty is forced to revise his opinions somewhat, although he still concludes that the problem must be Boyle, that "stupid fucker… stupid arsehole", rather than accepting that there might be any genuine problem in the postcolonial society he is so eager to be part of.

Fada's invocation of the Leda and the Swan myth is another clear example of postcolonial anxiety in the novel. *The Swing of Things* begins with an epigraph from Breton and Eluard's 'The Immaculate Conception': 'My whirling wings are the doors through which she enters the swan's neck, on the great deserted square that is the heart of the bird of night.' The 'she' that enters the swan's neck in 'The Immaculate Conception' or the Leda who is overcome and raped by the swan in Yeats' poem is not a frightened young girl in O'Reilly's novel but, rather, the Irish male psyche. Fada is the modern day epitome of 'the land of saints and scholars', a dissolute, mentally unstable Irish poet who peddles his poetry on the street and promises: "Poetry on tap, the great classics of Irish literature. Joyce and his chamber pots. Wilde and his twilight balconies. Yeats and his randy ghosts. I'll take you turf cutting with Heaney or onion eating with Jonathan Swift, lamenting the earls with O'Leary, into the monasteries and out on the misty hills, I've got ballads of the Easter Rising and odes to autumnal hussies… poets from the North and the South, Bobby Sands and Lady Gregory, bohemians and rednecks, dreamers and believers, wasters and wantnoters, scavengers and squanderers, a poem for everybody alive and dead, for the yawning refugees and pale-faced gunmen, the new Spanish armada and the Russian gangsters." (p.17) Half-crazed with the idea that he has been cursed, Fada spends his nights drinking and taking drugs with anyone that will pay for them and regaling anyone that will listen with the story of the night during which he, in a perverse caricature of a Gothic heroine, believes he was sexually assaulted, allegedly by a swan on the beach: "I looked around and there it was standing over us, wings outspread, the beak open wide, right over us. So Jess got out from under me and she grabs her clothes and runs along the beach. I keep slipping on the sand and falling over. We'd had a few drinks as well. And it's coming after me. I can hear Jess screaming. And the big white neck straightens up and bends and it snaps at me and I roll out of the way and I'm trying to get up off me knees again and then it gets me by the back of the neck and pushes me face down in the sand[…]It got me by the back of the neck in its jaws. I was pinned down. Blinded, couldn't breathe. Have you ever smelled a swan's breath? It's like burned skin. Scorched flesh. Like you're being branded. I couldn't do anything. It was stronger than me." (p.76)

In Yeats' poem, the poet asks if 'the staggering girl..put on his knowledge with his power'. This has been a troubling concept at the heart of Yeats' poem for many critics. Butler Cullingford argues that "Yeats never abandoned those essentialising myths that, in using woman as a symbolic object, deprive her of her own voice" (14), yet here it is suggested that the raped girl was somehow complicit in and benefited from her rape, gaining knowledge and power from the experience. This has been one of the key arguments for reading 'Leda and the Swan' as an allegory about the colonisation of Ireland. The violence of the poem's imagery, given that it was published in 1928 may have been influenced by the 1916 rebellion, the ensuing War of Independence, followed by the bitter and bloody civil war. The poem also challenges the dominant nationalist metanarrative of resistance in asserting that many Irish were indeed complicit in being colonized and the nation gained in certain educational and some economic respects from its colonisation.

Complicit or not, as a result of colonisation the Irish male psyche arguably was or at least was seen as being emasculated and feminised, a point which Butler Cullingford illustrates by referring to the writings of nineteenth- century ethnographers such as Ernest Renan: 'If it be permitted to us to assign sex to

nations as to individuals, we should have to say without hesitance that the Celtic race…is an essentially feminine race' (15). The effect of this feminisation is explored by Stewart in relation to Matthew Arnold who shared similar sentiments to Renan in relation to the Irish: 'In our own day Irish critics have strenuously repudiated this formulation, however well-intentioned it may have been on Arnold's part: the conception of Ireland as an emotional rather than a thinking being is clearly the prologue to its feminisation and hence an adjunct of colonial domination.'(16)

Controversially, in *The Swing of Things*, women are excluded from this particular process of colonisation. In the novel women are actually identified with the birds which symbolise colonial domination: Fada describes a woman on the street as 'lady with the swanlike body' and Boyle nicknames Emer, a girl he meets at university, as 'The Dove'. It is difficult to see what meaning is being inferred here. Fidelma Ashe comments that in contemporary Western society, "The qualities of 'manliness' have also been framed as under threat, attacked and undermined by feminism, gay culture and commercialism" (17). On the one hand, neither Boyle nor Fada nor many of the other men in the novel are particularly at ease around women and so it could be argued that O'Reilly is attempting to paint women into the picture of being responsible for some of the many threats to Irish masculinity. On the other hand, the woman who Fada describes as having a 'swanlike body' screams when he approaches her, in what could be described as the kind of sound a wild bird might make but is just as likely to be associated with Leda, a woman under attack, issuing "a loud shriek of warning down the centuries of women." (p.17) Nor is Emer, with her enthusiasm and innocence, a very threatening character. Perhaps, then, what O'Reilly is suggesting is that these women are not actually threatening or in any way malevolent but a damaged male psyche could perceive them as being such.

Una Brankin's novel, *Half Moon Lake* (2003), set in rural Country Antrim in 1976 also has a strange 'swan' episode in which local girl Grace goes on a walk by the lake with a man staying with her family who the other characters in the novel at this stage know little about and suspect of being an on-the-run paramilitary: "The swans had drawn closer and when the mother spotted us, she butted out her neck with a shrill heckle. Saul threw a pebble at her and she bolted, the cygnets flapping in her wake. "Swans give me the creeps. Vicious things, you know." " (p.61) Grace agrees and mentions that her brother too is afraid of the birds, but she proclaims herself to be much more frightened by the unmistakeably Freudian 'eels'. If swans and gulls can be read as metaphorical signifiers for colonialism, then one subtext of these narratives is that while Irish men are obsessed with, afraid of, and bitterly hate the reality of their subjugated colonial status; Irish women feel just as, or even more, threatened by the violent version of masculinity created by colonialism.

As terrified as Fada is of the swans and as much as he identifies himself as Leda, he is also fixated with the birds. While institutionalised in a mental hospital, it is revealed that Fada "liked to draw many headed swan-like shapes on the walls in excrement not necessarily his own." (p.194) He also seems, at points, to identify with the swan rather than Leda, savagely flapping 'his arms like a starving carrion bird.' (p.18) Fada's attitude to the swans varies between fear, obsession and an all-consuming hatred, sneering to himself "at the swans patrolling the canal beyond the weir. Guarding against what? Always the suggestion of their aloof waiting, always circling and gliding and stretching their wings in preparation for the wondrous moment. How could people control their rage at the sight of them, the revolting dignity, the decadent grace? Why didn't people attack them with hammers? Pour petrol in and set the waters aflame[…]See them the tumultuous fiery wings outspread." (p.64) He incites others to attack them too, although the prevailing attitude seems to be: "We've lost our way as a people when we start harming animals." (p.262)

The postmodern aspect to Fada's fractured psyche is underlined when Boyle claims to disbelieve his story about being raped by a swan: "It was more likely you jumped the poor animal." "When I have a child, people will believe me and rejoice. Her face will launch a thousand peace-keeping land-to-sea mobile units." (p.234). The Irish may have won to an extent their freedom from Britain but the legacy of colonialism remains in the emasculation of the male psyche and the nation's lack of military power as an officially neutral country with a small army reserved only for peace-keeping missions, as a result of De Valera's tactical manoeuvring during WWII. There is no suggestion in the novel that O'Reilly in any way supports the idea of a more aggressive, militarised Irish nation but the continuation of the legacy of colonialism and the constant presence of the swans suggests the exposure of a subconscious fear that the nation may still be vulnerable to domination even today, again the great Gothic fear of the return, whether that domination is colonialism, capitalism or globalisation.

A telling detail in whether it is the old colonisers or the new state the citizen should fear is well captured in another image involving hostile birds: "He turned his face away and saw a camera moving on a lamppost towards the door of a sex shop where a man was throwing bread to the swooping screaming gulls." (p.149). Compared to the Irish nation under De Valera, this new, relatively secular, postmodern state may allow the citizen more personal freedoms as symbolised by the sex shop, but this liberty is carefully monitored in a Foucauldian gesture symbolised by the camera whereby the subject is taught to watch and discipline itself. Moreover, the subject now feeds the birds which are the harbingers of colonialism, this curiously benevolent act being perhaps indicative of Celtic Tiger Ireland's attitude towards courting the dominating forces of global investment or of the anxiety created by modern Ireland's position within the EU. Fada's final comments on the swans in the novel references both 'Leda and the Swan' and a later Yeats' poem, 'Wild Swans at Coole': "They flew up from the lake… I saw them gathering last night. Forty, fifty of them. A shudder in the loins. Their hearts don't grow old" (p.300). In 'Wild Swans at Coole', the poet sombrely reflects on the passing of time and the loss of the passion and exuberance he had in his youth, while the swans remain 'unwearied'. After Boyle's killing of the artist, and Boyle's being killed in turn by the IRA, Fada's final mention of the swans is a poignant elegy to the difficulty and exhaustion of living in such a rapidly changing, undefined society.

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland, the nationalist male remains an uneasy part of an old colony, so the fear of return conjured up by the swans in Dublin is replaced by the paranoia induced by army helicopters. The birds have not completely disappeared, the colonial eye is watching from the ceiling at a pub in Derry through "a badly painted *trompe l'oeil* of swans with the faces of children drifting across a gloomy lake." (p.51) In Hollywood's Luggage, Newry man Thomas is very aware of the presence of birds even on holiday in France, warily watching "eight griffin buzzards from the bridge at Les Millandes" (p.18). The first thing Thomas notices on arriving in a coastal French town later in his holiday is that the beach is named after seagulls, La Plage des Mouettes. Upon noticing this, Thomas instinctively remembers that he has neither seen nor heard these birds in the previous three weeks and points out to his children that "the Dordogne is the farthest in-land you've ever been" (p.57), a fact which implies his children have never been too far away from these sentinel birds, growing up as they are in a supposedly new and peaceful society.

Helicopters too are representative of colonial power and domination, if somewhat more obviously than the birds are. Like the swans, helicopters are airborne and like Fada's fear of being assaulted by the swans, the helicopters create fear of being followed, tracked like prey, arrested and hauled off for brutal interrogation or worse. At the very outset of *Love and Sleep* as the crowd gather in the dead man's house

after his funeral, outside "above the city a helicopter was taunting a silent street" (p.xi), reminding the reader from the outset of the colonised status of the city the novel is set in and the feelings this provokes in the city's inhabitants. Boyle in *The Swing of Things* fixates on the symbol of the helicopter in his post-jail paranoia: "You're walking down the street and suddenly you are convinced somebody is following you. Or a car. A helicopter, new silent ones they haven't announced yet." (p.16) The silent, unannounced assault is the most feared one. Moreover, in Boyle's nightmarish recollections of the day he is arrested he recalls running panicked across the fields while "there was a helicopter coming down over his head and they were knocking out the window to him, waving, blowing kisses, the camouflaged faces[…]there was no fucken mercy." (pp.91-92) Just as the swan conjures up fears of sexual assault, the sight of a helicopter full of men with their faces painted blowing kisses at Boyle while they bear down upon him creates a similarly sexual, predatory image.

The sexual theme continues after Niall is rebuked by Danny for trying to seduce the quiet young girl, Niall realises he pities Danny and his repressed, narrow minded attitude towards life: "Inexplicably I felt sorry for him. He snorted mockingly to himself as I gave him my excuses for why I had to go. A helicopter was out. Danny struck me as sickly and depressed; I found it painful to even look at him. After the gloom of the house, I was relieved to get back out into the air and the night streets." (p.84) At this juncture the helicopter serves again to remind us of the north's colonised status and how this goes some way to explaining attitudes towards sexuality and towards women in the city, a point which is well articulated by Gerardine Meaney: "The psychodynamic of colonial and postcolonial identity often produces in the formerly colonized a desire to assert a rigid and confined masculine identity, against the colonizers stereotype of the subjects as feminine, wild, ungovernable. This masculine identity then emerges at state level as a regulation of 'our' women, an imposition of a very definite feminine identity as guarantor to the precarious masculinity of the new state" (18). In *Love and Sleep*, Dainty and his friends, who want to give Niall a beating for his attempted seduction of the girl, are arguably clear examples of this mindset.

After Lorna is shot dead by an army foot patrol, the first indication that something is amiss in the city is the sound of helicopters circling overhead. It is never made clear why Lorna is shot, and in a book published in 2002 this seems slightly out of place, as the last killing officially attributed to the British Army or security forces in Northern Ireland took place some time before this, several years before the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 (19). Realistic or not, however, Lorna's murder seems to confirm the worst fears of men who are unable to recognise women as being autonomous agents; men like Danny, whose first remark to Niall when he breaks the news to him that Lorna has been shot is that she was alone when it happened: "She was walking along the street by herself, he roared into my face." (p.194) The worst-case scenario of the native woman, left alone and vulnerable to harm by the colonising forces, has been realised. However, somewhat anachronistic as the shooting of Lorna appears, O'Reilly is careful to show how the mindset caused by colonialism does not seem to affect the younger generation: "It was a Saturday morning and a group of teenagers were sitting on a garden wall across the street… None of them bothered to glance up at the sound of a helicopter." (p.190) The implication is that the helicopter, the symbol of domination, has nothing to do with them. It is not clear whether this implication increases or detracts from realism in the novel, which is set in a society where children are obviously influenced greatly by their parents' prejudice and many still live in segregated housing estates and attend segregated schools. Nor is it clear whether it is intended to be a positive thing from O'Reilly's perspective that the younger generation are so blithely able to ignore what is going on around them, when it of course still affects them.

O'Doherty criticises the wilful ignorance of the existence of hardened sectarian mindsets and the deliberate refusal to acknowledge the realities of discrimination that existed in Northern Ireland before the Troubles, which allowed the country to "[walk] into the Troubles looking the other way." (20) A key theme in the Gothic that I have explored in this article is that of the feared, half-anticipated and much hated return. Forty years after The Troubles began, the question that remains to be answered is if O'Reilly's postmodern portrayal of disinterested youth in *Love and Sleep* and characters like Dainty in *The Swing of Things* are indicative of this same mindset criticised by O'Doherty; a mindset of averting your eyes and refusing to admit the reality of your own involvement whether it is something you have chosen or not. Moreover, if this is the case, how is this long and bloody conflict meant to be finally and lastingly resolved if everyone, from the public to politicians, journalists, playwrights and novelists, is too busy looking the other way to address the disturbing legacy it has left behind?

The potent Gothic fear of the return holds much currency in a region still scarred and fragmented by thirty years of bitter conflict. The question of whether the reasons behind this conflict have been explored and resolved is left hanging in literature and journalism produced within or about the region, and increasingly it is a question that demands an answer. However, for as long as it remains unanswered Northern Ireland encapsulates the Gothic image of desirability and prosperity, corroded and corrupted beneath with the potential for poison and horror to seep through the cracks and crevices of the public consciousness. It is for this main reason that the Gothic is experiencing the beginnings of a resurgence in the reason, and it is also for this reason that this genre is already proving effective and unsettling in the accuracy of its social critiques.

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