The Cultural Politics of In/Difference

Irish Texts and Contexts

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AUXILIADORA PÉREZ-VIDES

2 Systemic Crime and Social Disaffection in Benjamin Black's Quirke Series: A Struggle for Difference

ABSTRACT
Under the pen name of Benjamin Black, the acclaimed Irish writer John Banville has published seven crime fiction novels, known as 'the Quirke series', set against the backdrop of 1950s Dublin and featuring Quirke, a middle-aged pathologist who works at the Holy Family Hospital. Taken together, the books tackle some of the crimes that stemmed from the strict religious repression prevalent in mid-twentieth-century Ireland, like illegal adoption (*Christine Falls* and *Even the Dead*), sexual exploitation and drug dealing (*The Silver Swan*), incest (*Elegy for April*), paedophilia (*A Death in Summer*) or clerical abuse (*Holy Orders*). It is my contention in this chapter that the existence of systemic crime is suggested along the series, as the stories portray the interconnection of the different agents of hegemonic power that controlled the social order of Ireland's capital city. Similarly, I will attempt to demonstrate that Black's narrative articulation of atrocities that had been absent from public discourse for a long time reveals his critique of the transhistorical indifference to socio-structural victimization that has dominated the Irish milieu. Thus, these crime novels, whose publication coincides with the wave of academic studies, survivor memoirs and artistic productions that have made public some of the hidden intricacies of that era in the island, can be said to demand urgent action over the ongoing effects of such ethos of dominance, as accountability has not been sufficiently purged in the present yet.

Introduction

The worldwide prevalence of regimes of violence as well as the many effects they entail upon present-day communities have been tackled in preeminent works like Judith Butler's *Precarious Life* (2004), Giorgio Agamben's *The State of Exception* (2005) and Slavoj Žižek's *Violence*

(2008), among others.[1] Consistently in these landmark studies, the three critical thinkers punctuate the biopolitical significance of power strategies that, on a structural basis, suspend the rights of individuals as a result of an illicit attribution of control and domination over their bodies. In this chapter, which examines the literary representation of systemic crime in Ireland in two of the so-called 'Quirke novels' – a collection of noir narratives published by John Banville under the penname Benjamin Black, I will particularly draw on the postulates delineated by Žižek in *Violence*. This provocative work starts from the premise of what the philosopher calls 'trias violentiae', that is, a categorization of violence in the contemporary world consisting of, he defends, three typical forms that interact in various ways: *symbolic violence*, which is enacted through language and its forms, *systemic or structural violence*, a product of our economic and political systems, and *subjective or private violence*, the one that can be more easily identified through the people that effect it. Most poignantly, Žižek insists on how the states tend to recognize (illegitimate) private violence but, at the same time, they commonly legitimate systemic violence, so that, to his mind, we should 'resist the fascination of subjective violence, of violence enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds: subjective violence is just the most visible of the three'.[2] On the contrary, structural violence is rarely recognized whereas, for Žižek, those who concur with it consecutively generate subjective violence, despite being supposed to combat it. Additionally, and in order to address the present volume's theme of in/difference in Irish texts and contexts, my critical examination of Black's novels will be informed by Sarah Ahmed's view of 'the circulation of emotions', which identifies contact and relationality as the core signifiers of the affects manifested by subjects in everyday life. According to this line of reasoning, unfolded in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, all our actions are determined by the links we establish with others, which for Ahmed, exhibit a complex

1 Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004); Giorgio Agamben, *State of Exception* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Slavoj Žižek, *Violence* (New York: Picador, 2008).

2 Žižek, *Violence*, p. 10.

nature. In her own words, 'contact involves the subject, as well as histories that come before the subject. If emotions are shaped by contact with objects, rather than being caused by objects, then emotions are not simply "in" the subject or the object.'[3]

Taking my cue from Žižek and Ahmed, this chapter attempts to demonstrate how the existence of structural crime in Ireland is suggested in Black's fiction, as his thrillers portray the interconnection of the different agents of hegemonic power that controlled the social order of Dublin in the 1950s, where the actions are set and where bloodshed, corporeal brutality and corruption abounded. An invisible but highly effective web of illicit dealings is progressively disentangled by the protagonist, whom we simply know as Quirke, a consultant pathologist in the Holy Family Hospital whose role as investigator and attachment to the cases is irregular throughout the series. Therefore, in accordance with Ahmed's theory of the mobility of affects, I argue that these crime novels are constructed upon a multi-layered cluster of affective contacts that can be interpreted in a double way. On the one hand, it is my contention that Quirke, the archetypical noir investigator with constant ethical dilemmas, personifies the dialectics of indifference/care that allows the author to raise interrogations about the extent to which interpersonal relations may originate humane awakenings that would ultimately lead to a closer, albeit not fully effectual, encounter with social justice. On the other hand, Black's fictional articulation of atrocities that had been absent from public discourse for a long time not only puts the reader in contact with concealed elements of Ireland's past, but it also reveals his critique of the transhistorical indifference to victimization that have dominated much of the Irish socio-cultural order since that period. Thus, he claims for a rethinking of the ongoing consequences of such ethos of dominance that are somehow still evident upon the Irish collective psyche.

My analysis will concentrate on the two novels in the series where Ireland's structural violence and the need to respond to social inertia are

3 Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 6.

most clearly articulated: *Christine Falls* (2006) and *Even the Dead* (2015).[4] The first one, which inaugurated the series, introduces Quirke's troubled life as the adopted son of a renowned Catholic judge – Garret Griffin – and who remains haunted by his childhood experiences in Carricklea Industrial School. A misanthropic widower with an intermittent drinking problem, he becomes obsessed with the mysterious death of a young girl, the eponymous victim, whose post-mortem leads him to investigate a conspiracy of obscure parturition practices and illegal trafficking of babies born to single mothers. As Quirke gradually unravels the details of the case with the help of Detective Inspector Hackett, a transatlantic and inter-institutional network of clandestine adoption becomes apparent, comprising Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes in Dublin, and orphanages and seminaries in Boston, all sanctioned by the Catholic clergy and sponsored by the high society in both countries. In the second novel, in fact the latest Quirke title,[5] the investigation about the laundries is revisited through the murder of a civil servant, Leo Corless, who happens to be the son of a well-known and committed socialist activist. Again, the pathologist's inquiries about this violent death along with the mysterious disappearance of Corless's pregnant girlfriend expose the collusion of the lay and clerical Dublin elite and their perverse manoeuvres to preserve their regime of intimidation and violence through a supreme command over the Magdalene institutions. Thus, taken together these two Quirke novels shed some light on the continuum of abuse that characterized the Irish social order, not only in the mid-twentieth century but up to the current state of affairs, where

4 Apart from these two, the full series comprise five more: *The Silver Swan* (2007), *Elegy for April* (2010), *A Death in Summer* (2011), *Vengeance* (2012) and *Holy Orders* (2013). All the titles feature Quirke as the protagonist and each one tackles a crime somehow resulting from the repressive milieu of 1950s Dublin, like sexual exploitation and drug dealing, incest and backstreet abortion, paedophilia and clerical abuse.

5 In recent years the author has published two other crime titles, *Snow* (2017) and *The Secret Guests* (2020), also set in mid-twentieth-century Ireland but focussing on a new investigator, the young Protestant Inspector St John Strafford. Quirke is only mentioned tangentially in the former, which was curiously launched in Spain as a Black novel (*Pecado*) but as a Banville one in the anglophone context (*Snow*).

the impunity of the ruling class that sustained them has not been fully redressed and the victims' dignity has not been sufficiently restored.[6] The author's critical stance, which locates the reader in an affective 'intensity',[7] to use Ahmed's concept, suggests the circulation of affects across novels and across time, while it is also imbued with a resounding interpretation of the ethics of care, compassion and militant action. In order to demonstrate the writer's insistence on a rethinking of the relation between systemic crime and affective (and indeed effective) action, I will first examine the elements whereby the structural dimension of evil and victimization is articulated in the two texts as representatives of Irish crime novels, and then describe the circuit of affects and emotions experienced by Quirke in his struggle for difference and on his way towards a possible, or perhaps impossible, but noticeably radical change of ethics and social order in Ireland.

The Irish Infrastructure of Disaffection in Noir Narratives

Since the publication of *Christine Falls*, Black's thrillers have contributed significantly to the literary phenomenon of 'Emerald noir', a term coined by the Scottish crime writer Val McDermid, probably in order to

6 Despite the constant efforts and campaigns of advocacy groups, like Justice for Magdalenes Research, and although the Irish state officially apologized for the damages caused also implementing a redress scheme for survivors and their families, the direct administrators of what Smith called "Ireland's architecture of containment" have not been judicially prosecuted (James Smith, *Ireland's Magdalene Laundries and the Nation's Architecture of Containment*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007). Equally alarming is the fact that recently the Irish Government has been discussing a bill that will seal the records, archives and survivor testimonies of the Mother and Baby Homes for thirty years. For a detailed description of some of these campaigns, see Katherine O'Donnell, 'Academics Becoming Activists: Reflections on Some Ethical Issues of the Justice for Magdalenes Campaign', in Pilar Villar-Argáiz, ed., *Irishness on the Margins: Minority and Dissident Identities* (London: Palgrave, 2018), 77–100.

7 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 25.

establish its relationship with the so-called 'tartan noir', of which she is a prominent representative. In recent decades, a large number of writers, academics and critical commentators inside and outside Ireland have tried to determine the common traits that, notwithstanding the conventions of the genre, distinguish these booming narratives. Many of them coincide in grounding its triumph on the rapid growth of Ireland's cultural order in the post-Troubles and post-Celtic Tiger era, which McDermid herself considers a period that provided Irish writers 'a challenge of material'.[8] One of the most remarkable features of Emerald noir has been noted by David Clark, who focuses on the 'national' component of Irish crime fiction when he claims that these narratives have been characteristically inclined to portray 'crime as an essential Irish issue with an essentially Irish context',[9] transcending former restrictions imposed by the parameters of the genre by means of a more localized approach to offense and victimization. Such trend reveals, in Clark's own words, 'the relationship between the individual and society or the authority which represents said society'.[10] Indeed, the books of this genre published in Ireland lately expose the many paradoxes underlying the country's status quo and, while offering no solution to the pervasive social contradictions, they pose for its citizens interesting questions not only about the criminal transgression of social boundaries but also about their role in defying the clear-cut categories of the social axis. As Andrew Kincaid puts it, '[h]ard-boiled fiction allows one to move through *the murky structures that bind us together*'.[11] Arguably, this observation about relationality becomes useful for my purposes here, as Kincaid's words resonate with the notions of structural intimidation and affective bonding that I am discussing in my analysis of the Quirke novels.

8 Val McDermid, 'Emerald Noir: The Rise of Irish Crime Fiction', *BBC Radio Four*, 8 March 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00z5c85>.

9 David Clark, 'Emerald Noir? Contemporary Irish Crime Fiction', in Reiko Ajura-Vigers, J. U. Jacobs and J. D. McClure, eds, *East Meets West* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 144–56, p. 155.

10 Clark, 'Emerald Noir? Contemporary Irish Crime Fiction', p. 145.

11 Andrew Kincaid, 'Down These Mean Streets: The City and Critique in Contemporary Irish Noir', *Éire-Ireland* 45/1–2 (2010), 39–55, p. 40; emphasis added.

On the same grounds, in *Irish Crime Fiction* Brian Cliff has remarked that for some contemporary noir authors the Irish establishment plays a significant role in their representation of evil, in the sense that quite frequently in these narratives 'violence is ascribed less to an individual sociopath and more to pathological institutions, which in turn reflect wider pathologies of the society in whose name they act'.[12] Hence, what stems from such thematic tendency is a concomitant insistence on the joint responsibility of the community in perpetuating such pathologies. According to Fintan O'Toole, many Irish writers stress the shock that arises not simply when details of criminal activities are unveiled, but most importantly, when it becomes apparent that those crimes were sustained by a widespread social concurrence and, subsequently, a total indifference to them. For him, '[t]he problem posed by Irish crime is not, as in the classic detective story, the acquisition of knowledge, but the assumption of collective ignorance'.[13] In fact, Banville has consistently denounced the 'social crime' whereby a greater part of the Irish society decided to ignore the details of the infamous practices of institutionalization in Ireland, through assertions like: 'Everybody knew about child abuse. Everybody knew about these appalling orphanages, these terrible convents, these atrocious so-called industrial schools where children were sent to be tormented and raped. I mean everybody knew.'[14] As will be analysed below, this resentment is projected in *Christine Falls* and *Even the Dead*, where the social collusion for one-time misdeeds is fictionally recreated, while simultaneously hinting at the existing remnants of the ideological structure that triggered those criminal activities.[15]

12 Brian Cliff, *Irish Crime Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2018), p. 12.

13 Fintan O'Toole, 'From Chandler and the "Playboy" to the Contemporary Crime Wave', *The Irish Times*, 1 November 2009.

14 Steve Inskeep, 'Sleuthing around Dublin's Dark Corners', Interview in National Public Radio, 2 September 2011, <http://www.npr.org/2011/09/02/139922975/sleuthing-around-dublins-darkest-corners>.

15 In *Time Pieces: A Dublin Memoir*, Banville has beautifully elaborated on the correlation of past and present in the following terms: 'Let us say, the present is where we live, while the past is where we dream. Yet if it is a dream, it is substantial, and sustaining. The past buoys up, a tethered and ever-expanding hot-air balloon. And yet, I ask again, what is it? What transmutation must the present go through in

Drawing on these aspects of the Irish noir panorama, it seems relevant to comment on Black's choice of the 1950s as the specific backdrop for his Quirke stories. The writer himself has admitted that this decade in Ireland has always figured for him as the 'perfect noir territory'.[16] Indeed, the deep economic crisis, high levels of emigration and political instability that the country experienced in that period proffer a suitable contextualization for the criminal activities portrayed in detective fiction. However, it is to the social stagnation and extreme State and Church supremacy over the rights of the individual that characterized the period that the author has acknowledged to having felt most attracted. To quote him again, 'the Ireland of the 1950s was a controlled state. The country was entirely in the grip of the church [...]. We had an iron ideology that controlled every aspect of our lives from birth to death'.[17] The prevalence of such ethos and the social polarities that it kindled during the second half of the twentieth century and beyond have been the focus of much critical attention and artistic production in recent years.[18] In the case of Black, his retrospective portrayal of 1950s Ireland through the noir genre bears an added insight into the criminal activities rather frequently contained in that milieu, so that, as Audrey McNamara has argued, by means of Quirke the author 'has opened a door to an embarrassing decade in the newly formed Irish Free State'.[19]

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order to become the past? Time's alchemy works in a bright abyss' (John Banville, *Time Pieces: A Dublin Memoir* (Dublin: Hachette Books, 2016), p. 4).

16 Inskeep, 'Sleuthing around Dublin's Dark Corners'. For further details of Banville's fascination with this period, please see John Banville, 'Memory and Forgetting: The Ireland of De Valera and O'Faolain', in Dermot Keogh, Finbarr O'Shea, and Carmel Quinlan, eds, *The Lost Decade: Ireland in the 1950s* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2004), 21–30.

17 Inskeep, 'Sleuthing around Dublin's Dark Corners'.

18 See, for example, Gerardine Meaney, *Gender, Ireland and Cultural Change: Race, Sex and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2009); Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile, 2009); Emilie Pine, *The Politics of Irish Memory: Performing Remembrance in Contemporary Irish Culture* (London: Palgrave, 2011); or Tom Inglis, *Are the Irish Different?* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

19 Audrey McNamara, 'Quirke, the 1950s, and Leopold Bloom', in Elizabeth Mannion, ed., *The Contemporary Irish Detective Novel* (London: Palgrave, 2016), 135–48, p. 142.

In *Christine Falls*, the representation of some of the unscrupulous activities behind the close collaboration among the three main social bodies in Ireland, particularly through the patriarchal control and victimization of women, attests to the structural corruption prevalent in that decade. As the story unfolds, Quirke tries to elucidate the circumstances of Christine's fatal childbirth and the whereabouts of her baby, an interest that is also fuelled by the fact that she used to work at the Griffins' house. It is the matron who attended the childbirth, Dolly Moran, the one who eventually puts Quirke in the picture of the incident, but she is mysteriously murdered after her revelation. When the action shifts to the Irish community in Boston, Quirke encounters a complex conspiracy of adoption procedures and irregular funding of orphanages that also implicates his family. This covert network proves to be sanctioned by the State, managed by several religious orders and sponsored by high-class Catholic families and organizations, like the 'Knights of St Patrick', who derive both economic benefits and spiritual 'rewards' from it.[20] During the trip to America, the pathologist uncovers this pseudo-religious educational scheme, whose details are confirmed by sister Anselm, a nun in St Mary's orphanage that, after twenty years of complicit participation, finally resents the network's creed and the treatment of babies born to Magdalenes and other single mothers from Ireland. She sheds some light on the intricacies of the illegal trafficking of babies when bluntly admitting to Quirke:

> They care nothing for the children. Oh, they think they do, but they don't. Their only interest is see them grow up and take their place in the structure they've devised [...]. Then when the children are old enough they are taken back and put

20 In *Banished Babies*, Mike Milotte describes extensively this underground baby export trade, which found its peak moment in the years around the passing of the Adoption Act of 1953. Based on a large number of official documents, Milotte's study proves the collusion of the wider Irish society and the participation of the State, not only for its abdication on the Church for the control of 'illegitimacy', but also for facilitating the system, as the Department of Foreign Affairs is reported to have issued face certificates and passports for the babies and their adoptive parents (Milotte, *Banished Babies: The Secret History of Ireland's Baby Export Business* (Dublin: New Island, 2012), pp. 7–8).

> into seminaries and convents – whether they like it or not. […]. It's a machine for making priests and nuns.[21]

This passage is worth consideration for two reasons. Firstly, because it reveals Black's reflection upon the extent to which the Catholic doctrine can be distorted for the sake of an idiosyncratic proselytism and mission, thus demonstrating the grave disaffection of some of its agents and the violation of its own supposed principles of piety, care and protection of the poor and the vulnerable. Indeed, Bill Phillips observes that 'in *Christine Falls* the Church is the great villain, tearing newborn babies from their mother's arms, controlling and perverting the lives of the faithful and stooping, whenever necessary, to threats, violence and murder'.[22] And secondly, because the confession opens up new ways of thinking about the systemic dimension of illegal adoption in Ireland that, I believe, had not been represented in literature in these terms by the time of the publication of the novel.[23] Later, once the network is disclosed and its artificers spotlighted, Quirke and Hackett realize the huge, international reach of the crime. The details confirm what the pathologist had been cynically foreseeing: the whole episode was not an isolated case that coincidentally affected his father, who turns out to be the father of Christine's baby and one of the benefactors of the baby smuggling organization, but rather 'a wide and tangled web in which he had become enmeshed'.[24]

Likewise, in *Even the Dead*, the two men conduct a thorough investigation after Leo Corless's body is found inside a burned car in Phoenix Park and they gradually expose another strand in the shadowy businesses of those who support the politics-religion alliance in the country. Their enquiries to

21 Benjamin Black, *Christine Falls* (London: Picador, 2006), pp. 324–5.

22 Bill Phillips, 'Irish Noir', *Estudios Irlandeses* 9 (2014), 169–77, p. 174.

23 *The Magdalene Martyrs* (Dingle: Brandon Books, 2003) by Ken Bruen briefly touches on the Irish laundries and mother and baby homes, as well as on the illegal adoption of babies born to women interned there. However, weighed against *Christine Falls*, Bruen's novel provides a much weaker commentary on the structural, official apparatus that sustained these institutions, concentrating instead on more minor figures that were somehow involved in the system and not covering its magnitude in as full detail.

24 Black, *Christine Falls*, p. 253.

Corless's father and fellow civil servants at the Department of Health reveal that the victim was gathering statistics regarding 'mother-and-child issues' that would unmask the regular infringement of the law in this government office.[25] Simultaneously, Quirke's daughter – Phoebe – befriends Corless's girlfriend, who is confined to a Magdalene laundry shortly after her family discovers that she is pregnant out of wedlock. When Phoebe is planning to visit the institution and to ask the police to release her desperate friend, thinking naively that 'the Church isn't above the law',[26] Quirke warns her that '[p]laces like that laundry are protected. There is an *invisible fence* around them that you won't break through.'[27] What they eventually find out is that the girl's father – Costigan, a respected member of the Knights of St Patrick and a thug at the service of powerful families – was responsible for Corless's murder and had tried to obtain economic benefits from his own daughter's consignment to the Magdalen laundry and the under-the-counter adoption of the 'illegitimate' baby.

Both the re-emergence of this business some years after its introduction in the main action of *Christine Falls*, and the emphasis on how its orbit affected women from different social classes – like Christine, Dolly Moran and another maid in the Griffins' house but also Costigan's daughter – demonstrate the author's insistence on its ubiquitous proportions. Accordingly, it is through Quirke that Black articulates the endemic pathologies of power in the Irish society, inscribing the terms upon which they have been constructed in a truly graphic metaphor:

> In times to come, Quirke thought, people will look back and say 'How could it happen?' The future never understands the past. He and Hackett had tried to destroy the network that Garret Griffin operated, … but they had failed, overruled and overborne by the forces raged against them […]. Could he have done more? Should he have persevered? Should he have carried the fight into the belly of the beast itself? Pathetic notion. The beast would have belched him out and turned its back and slouched off about its beastly business.[28]

25 Benjamin Black, *Even the Dead* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015), p. 144.

26 Black, *Even the Dead*, p. 194.

27 Black, *Even the Dead*, p. 195; emphasis added.

28 Black, *Even the Dead*, p. 215.

Embedded in this conjecture is the author's comment about the extent to which the extremely violent grip of the structural power could affect individuals while it also alludes to the past/present correlation mentioned above. In an anticipatory tone that crystalizes our current shock at past indifference, Black renders the petrification that affective reactions invariably generated but he also suggests that proactive overturns are necessary, demonstrating that, as Kincaid puts it, 'the noir detective moves between the old and the new, a character of continuity'.[29]

The Circuit of In/Difference in Quirke

Black's articulation of the intersection of systemic crime and the movement of affects can be grasped through Quirke's characterization, and particularly, through the conflicted side of his subjectivity, as conventionally associated with the detective or the private eye, who is invariably the moral centre in noir thrillers. From the early pages of *Christine Falls*, the outsiderness and distrust of humankind of the pathologist are present in statements like 'it was not the dead that seemed to Quirke uncanny but the living'.[30] This uneasiness, which takes different expressions throughout the stories, shapes his queerness and distant attitude towards others. It is working by himself at the hospital morgue where the pathologist feels most comfortable and where his ruminations about existential issues become apparent, like the fact that for him, 'the spark of death was fully as vital as the spark of life'.[31] Hence, when after performing a post-mortem on Christine's corpse Quirke finds that his brother Malachy had manipulated the death records of the young woman, he experiences an epiphany of sorts that becomes the catalyst for a first turn in his ethical code. What is relevant at this point is the way in which the discovery transforms him from a professional pathologist to an amateur detective,

29 Kincaid, 'Down These Mean Streets', p. 48.

30 Black, *Christine Falls*, p. 7.

31 Black, *Christine Falls*, p. 64.

and most importantly for my purposes here, from an indifferent citizen to a caring one. In this vein, his awkward position as a close relative to Malachy but having always been at odds with him, as a medical expert obliged to respect his hypocritical oath towards colleagues and patients, and as a lifetime misanthropic human being is inscribed in the many rhetorical questions that, following a classic technique in this type of novels, pervade the narration, like: '[W]hat was he to do with this knowledge? And why, anyway, did he think he should do anything at all?'[32] Even at this early stage in the course of events, readers are acquainted with the fact that although Quirke maintains a privileged position with the agents of power on account of his distinguished job at the hospital and his father's acquaintance with most of Dublin dignitaries, he remains marginal and has a limited scope of action against the establishment. This hindrance and its effects upon the protagonist's identity illustrate Elizabeth Grosz's argument when she claims that '[w]e need to think subjects in terms of their strategic placement within power networks; that is, in terms of what they are able to do, more than in terms of who they are'.[33]

However, the notions of duty and responsibility, which will recur later in this novel and others in the series, begin to dawn upon Quirke, and this is unequivocally presented to the reader as an extrinsic trait, that is, something that springs up not from his inner self but from his successive contacts with others. Such initial affective encounter encapsulates the terms upon which Ahmed grounds her concept of the 'sociality of emotion', by which, she claims, 'emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of "towardness" or "awayness" in relation to such objects'.[34] Indeed, the regular flux from one position to another acquires a major significance for understanding Quirke, as it is with his constant doubts and indecisions about the role he plays in the investigation and about his obligation towards others that he evolves as a character, while they also constitute the

32 Black, *Christine Falls*, p. 64.

33 Elizabeth Grosz, 'Histories of the Present and Future: Feminism, Power, Bodies', in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss, eds, *Thinking the Limits of the Body* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2003), 13–24, p. 14.

34 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, p. 8.

means whereby we follow the author's line of social critique. Throughout the narration the protagonist is constantly struck by his own reactions to violence and injustice, which gradually move from shock to indignation to rage, among other affects. One of the most significant moments in this respect takes place in a conversation with Malachy at the hospital chapel, where he demands explanations from his brother on both the forgery crime he has committed and the disappearance of Christine's baby. The dysfunctional scale of religious values of the obstetrician, a practicing Catholic who refuses to confess, appears in clear contrast to the pathologist's ethical unrest, whose conscience, despite being a declared sceptic, is continually self-examined, as made clear by the narrator in passages like:

> Quirke was surprised at himself. Where did it come from, all this anger? And what injustice was he protesting – the one done to Dolly Moran, or to Christine Falls or Christine Falls's child, or to himself? But who had been unjust to him, or injured him? It was not he who had died amid the blood and screams of childbirth, or had his flesh burned or his head cracked open?[35]

The mobility of Quirke's affects is evidenced here, while the relational terms upon which they are represented by the author clearly hint at the increasing effects that liaising with others is having on his subjectivity. In particular, it is the corporeal brutality suffered by the victims that appals him most, obviously given the noirish effect intended by the author and as a kind of premonition of the severe beating he would later receive as a warning message, which he would interpret as receiving 'first-hand instruction in that [death's] dark knowledge'.[36]

The fact that Quirke becomes the perfect canvass for Black to portray the interdependent component of the construction of identity can be brought to bear on Lauren Berlant's postulates in *Cruel Optimism*. In this fundamental work for Affect Studies, she declares that 'our sense of reciprocity, with the world as it appears, our sense of what a person should do and expect, our sense of who we are as a continuous scene of action, shape what becomes our visceral intuition about how to manage living'.[37]

35 Black, *Christine Falls*, p. 132.

36 Black, *Christine Falls*, p. 231.

37 Laurent Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 52.

Significantly, and as formulaic in the genre, the pathologist is rendered as a *continuous scene of action* upon whom, simultaneously, the reader can be mirrored, in what constitutes a cumulative practice of interdependence, or what Berlant calls 'reciprocity'. In this sense, in the final stages of the investigation of the baby export trade Quirke interviews the Mother superior of the Mother of Mercy Magdalene laundry in Dublin. After this move, which brings back the ghosts of his own institutional past, the circulation of his emotions is presented as unbeknownst to him but again, functioning as in relation to others. Hence, when leaving the laundry building, he meditates:

> Why was he persisting like this? he asked himself. What were they to him, Christine Falls, or Christine Falls's bastard or Dolly Moran who was murdered? … And yet he knew he could not leave it behind him, this dark and tangled business. He had some kind of duty, he owed some kind of debt; to whom, he was not sure.[38]

Besides, in the process of Quirke's characterization there is an element underscored by Black that is worthy of note. It has to do with the fact that despite having to detect the most intricate pieces of the conundrum and its structural artefacts, the pathologist reaches a criminal scenario that is indeed familiar to him, insofar as the crime, its perpetrators and its victims are always another string in the systemic violence that he is trying to expose and dismantle. Apart from echoing O'Toole's comments about the deliberate collective ignorance of Irish society mentioned above, this circumstance can be interpreted through the lens of Carolyn Pedwell's ideas in *Affective Relations*, where she observes that

> empathy might be understood not as a 'positive' emotion that could be cultivated to overpower 'negative' emotions, but rather as a critical receptivity to being affected by ways of seeing, being and feeling that do not simply confirm what we think we already know.[39]

Such sense of confirmation surfaces over the course of the two novels and it provokes a wide range of emotional impacts upon Quirke. In *Christine*

38 Black, *Even the Dead*, p. 209.

39 Carolyn Pedwell, *Affective Relations: The Transnational Politics of Empathy* (London: Palgrave, 2014), p. 36.

Falls, he admits that what he learns from Sister Anselm about the laundries and orphanages 'had not been news to him, not really',[40] but it is his new 'way of seeing' beyond social conformism what really stands out: 'He had begun to consider the possibility that this unfocussed anger would be the condition of his life from now on, that he would have to keep bouncing along before it helplessly for ever, like a piece of litter buffeted by an unceasing wind.'[41] Similarly, in *Even the Dead* the ongoing practices of the baby trafficking and forced detention of Magdalene women demonstrate how Quirke is a product of the social indifference that prevails in the country. Hence, in one of his most thought-provoking introspections, the pathologist ponders: 'However tranquil the scene before us, beneath our feet another world is thrashing in helpless agony. How can we live up here, knowing what goes on down there? How can we know, and not know at the same time? He could never understand it.'[42] What these two quotes have in common is the author's Joycean-like comment on the paralytic character of Irish society, that demonstrates its transhistorical indifference and that has hindered social transformation in this respect and immersed the country in an unremitting collective inertia.

Nonetheless, even if Quirke clearly embodies Ahmed's statement that 'social transformation is difficult to achieve because of our attachment to social norm',[43] perhaps the most striking aspect of his characterization is that eventually his affects are reoriented towards a more self-conscious reaction to the systemic violence he has found throughout the cases. During the enquiries around the disappearance of Leo Corless's girlfriend, in a conversation with Hackett the narrator clarifies that Quirke 'had no illusions that the world could be set to rights, at least not by him, who could not even set rights to his own life'.[44] This existential resignation towards the moral disorder of his immediate social surroundings becomes another exponent of the conventional inability of the noir detective to change a

40 Black, *Christine Falls*, p. 327.
41 Black, *Christine Falls*, p. 327.
42 Black, *Even the Dead*, p. 216.
43 Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, pp. 11–12.
44 Black, *Even the Dead*, p. 100.

status quo that usually engulfs them or to reach an ethically sustainable solution to social justice. However, it is his continuity as the moral axis of the story and his revived stance what opens up new possibilities at the end of the case in *Even the Dead*. Thus, the appearance of Costigan's corpse exactly in the same spot where Leo Corless's body was found ushers in a re-invigorating sense of both personal and social transformation, as illustrated in the following lines:

> Costigan, the ultimate fixer, had represented, for Quirke, all the vileness and cruelty of life, and now he was dead, and Quirke felt nothing, nothing at all. He wondered if his indifference, like his acknowledgment at last of who his parents had been, was perhaps a sign that 'something momentous' had indeed occurred. Was change possible, radical change? He had never believed it before. Now it was as if a door that had long been wedged shut had opened a crack and let in a narrow chink of light.[45]

Quirke's pivotal revelation constitutes, to my mind, one of the most significant moments in the narrative arc of the novel, and probably in the series so far. Delineating again the paradoxical disposition of this noir character and what he embodies by means of his landing to an emotional space of indifference after several affective encounters with evil and evildoers, the narrator annotates the pathologist's final realization, through his own emotional reciprocity, that another world is possible.

Conclusions

A close look at Black's *Christine Falls* and *Even the Dead* reveals that the infrastructure of power in Ireland has woven a web that has been historically hard to disentangle. Through his imagination of a noir context of Irish structural turbulence, the author delves into social and religious corruption, and into the atrocities committed against some of the most abject individuals in the mid-twentieth century, whose consequences

45 Black, *Even the Dead*, p. 260.

prevail substantially today. The two texts trace the harm inflicted by those who endorse and benefit from structural violence, echoing Žižek's perception described above, upon the members of social groups that they in turn victimize for exposing or jeopardizing the pillars of their intricate system of power and influences. The extensive reach and impenetrability of organized criminal activities are captured in the two cases that Quirke examines in these narratives, where two of the most notable scandals in Ireland's recent history, like the Magdalene laundries and the illegal trafficking of infants from Mother and Baby Homes, are rendered in quite thorough and incisive terms. By means of a labyrinthine pathologist with a constant inquisitiveness, Black capitalizes on the need to reflect upon the failures of Ireland's past history in order to be able to transcend trans-historical indifference and construct a more socially sustainable present and future. As experienced by Quirke, a direct contact and interaction with the realities of the long-term targets of systemic power may prompt a transformative approach to the controversy. What the novels ultimately address is, then, that a fully affective order can only be reached when practising this renewed affinity with the victims and a proactive response to the injustice that has seeped through the past decades.

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