

CONSCIOUS IRISH FICTION AND THE REPETITIVENESS OF WAR:

TRANSCULTURAL MEMORIES TO NEGOTIATE PEACE IN “REDEMPTION FALLS” AND “TRANSATLANTIC”

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THE WORLD-FACING AND PERFORMATIVE OUTLOOK OF CONTEMPORARY FICTION

Drawing on recent scholarship on transcultural memory and its role in peacebuilding, this article explores the implications of entangling memories that belong to different pasts, places, and cultural groups in Joseph O'Connor's *Redemption Falls* (2007) and Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* (2013). The selection of these two novels stems from the belief that they are representative of much of the politically and socially conscious literature published in Ireland since the mid-1990s, which does not lie outside the contemporary literary canon but is an integral component thereof. It is a section of the so-called Celtic Tiger or post-Celtic Tiger literature that emerged during the recent years of growing economic, social, and cultural interdependence between Ireland and the rest of the world¹ – a literary production that reflects and critiques the global reverberations of local phenomena and whose poetics can translate into socio-political praxis beyond the page.

¹ A.L. Garcia, *There Has Been a Celtic Tiger of Fiction?: An Interview with Claire Kilroy*, “Estudios irlandeses”, 13 (2018), pp. 158–164.

The last three decades have been a period of rapid modernisation in practically every aspect of the country's economic, social, political, and religious life, with significant repercussions for contemporary literature. The Irish economy experienced unprecedented growth between 1991 and 2000, fuelled by increased foreign direct investment and a competitive labour force. Sudden prosperity manifested in the form of hyper-consumerism, urban gridlock, and a substantial surge in immigration from central Europe, Asia, and Africa, which reached a peak of nearly 110,000 in the twelve months leading up to April 2007 and was both the herald of a multicultural future and a catalyst for racially motivated assaults against foreigners². The 'economic tide' turned in 2008, when the Irish banking sector was caught up in the global financial crisis, and several years passed before stability was re-established, once again positioning Ireland as one of Europe's strongest economies. Meanwhile, other socio-political seismic shifts occurred: inward migration has continued to outweigh emigration, resulting in a more diverse population and a greater acceptance of different cultures and religions; the moral leadership of the Catholic Church waned; the successful negotiations of the 1998 Belfast Agreement brought relative peace to the island of Ireland as a whole; the 2015 historic referendum legalising same-sex marriage marked a landmark achievement for the country's LGBTQ+ community and was evidence of the progressive tendencies gaining ground in Irish society³.

The country's modernisation, diversification, and increasing engagement with the world since the 1990s have propelled the deconstruction and remaking of the national imagination. Intellectuals and artists felt compelled to narrate and scrutinise this Ireland in flux, which was no longer an isolated island on the fringe of Europe, as it had been previously referred to⁴, but a node in a global network. Irish literature, which was undergoing a noticeable flourishing, began to provide narrative responses to "the changing life of the times in general, and to the complexities of a mutating Irish culture and identity in particular"⁵. Irish authors also took it upon themselves to encourage readers to consider how Ireland would navigate its future relations with the global community, both inside and outside of its borders⁶. As a consequence, their literature possesses an original world-facing outlook rather than a nation-centred one, while retaining a distinctive Irishness in that it re-reads Irish history from a comparative perspective to gain a greater understanding of the present. Feted authors such as Joseph O'Connor, Colum McCann, Nuala O'Faolain, and Colm Tóibín, to name a few, have re-written or re-presented key events of Irish history in fiction to open Ireland's past up to the present and to prevent the country's history from being conclusive and teleological⁷. They thus recognised a need so deeply felt by today's Irish community that it even found expression in the realm of governmental politics.

² L. Harte, *Reading the Contemporary Irish Novel, 1987–2007*, Chichester, 2014, p. 5.

³ C. Ó Gallchoir, *Modernity, Gender, and the Nation in Joseph O'Connor's 'Star of the Sea'*, "Irish University Review", 43, 2 (2013), p. 345.

⁴ D. Ferriter, *What If? Alternative Views of Twentieth-Century Ireland*, Dublin, 2006., pp. xvi-xvii. As Joseph O'Connor put it at the time: "We can take nothing for granted now. We thought the text of our Irishness was set in stone but it turned out to be carved in ice, and it's melting fast"; quoted in L. Harte and M. Parker, *Contemporary Irish Fiction: Themes, Tropes, Theories*. New York, 2000, p. 1.

⁵ Harte, *Reading...*, pp. 2–3.

⁶ S. Moynihan, *War Is Not a Map: Irish America, Transnationalism, and Joseph O'Connor's 'Redemption Falls'*, "Comparative American Studies", 6, 4 (2008), p. 370.

⁷ L. Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, London, 1988, p. 110.

In her 1995 address to the Houses of the Oireachtas, Mary Robinson, then the President of Ireland, urged the country's intellectuals and ordinary citizens to open up to the global community and find a key to the present in Ireland's past of exile and deprivation. In her view, history needed to be "re-interpret[ed]" in an "imaginative way" so that it could be used to promote awareness, understanding, and action on social issues even across national borders. In her speech, she drew parallels between the dispossessed victims of the Irish Famine in the 1840s and the victims of more recent famines in Somalia, Tanzania, and Zaire, arguing that it was the responsibility of the Irish people to speak out against the suffering of the latter: "We cannot undo the silence of our own past, but we can lend our voice to those who now suffer. To do so we must look at our history"⁸.

Since Robinson's tenure, several authors have unearthed "illustrations of the past which help us understand the present"⁹ in Irish history, without limiting their gaze to tales of material deprivation and dispossession alone. At the same time, they have highlighted the contradictions and ambiguities of the standard nationalist account of Irish history: a history narrated as a succession of abuses endured and struggles against the iniquity of British rule; a history unique to the Irish, rooted in binary oppositions – Irish vs. British, Catholics vs. Protestants, republicans vs. imperialists – and in the erroneous perception of the exceptionalism of the Irish case. For example, Nuala O'Faolain's *My Dream of You* (2001) and Joseph O'Connor's *Star of the Sea* (2003) revisit the received history of the Great Hunger, in accordance with Robinson's main arguments, not to blame the catastrophe on English deliberate indifference to Irish suffering, but to establish a dialectical relationship between the past and the present as well as Ireland and the world. Whereas O'Faolain focuses on the legacy of the Famine to discuss the parochialism of contemporary society, which has had the greatest impact on women not only in Ireland but globally, O'Connor blunted the sense that Irish history has been uniquely traumatic in his novel by writing of the defining year in Irish emigration history – the infamous 'Black '47' – during the peak of immigration into Ireland from famine-stricken African countries¹⁰. Tóibín likewise reflects on the conditions of women migrants and subtly critiques the ethnic Other-fearing attitude of the Irish today through his portrayal of the young Eilis Lacey, who moves from 1950s Enniscorthy to a better existence in New York City, in the novel *Brooklyn* (2009)¹¹.

Comparable tensions to openness, both in the sense of opening up Irish history to the present and ourselves to the global community, underlie *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic*. Widely acclaimed for the literary excellence of their human and social portraiture, both novels interrogate Ireland's role on the world stage as well as the value of Irish history in understanding the current situation and responding to glocal issues in accordance with the principles of equity and solidarity. In particular, they give expression and contribute to the "politics of peace" Vivienne Jabri defines as "the capacity at once both to resist violence and struggle for a just social order," rooted in "human solidarity"¹². Thanks to their emphasis on micro-histories, *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* stand out as cultural texts that can complement the peacebuilding action of International Relations, a field critiqued by Christine Sylvester for

⁸ M. Robinson, "Cherishing the Irish Diaspora: An Address to the Houses of the Oireachtas", 2 February 1995.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ M. Schultz, *Haunted Historiographies: The Rhetoric of Ideology in Postcolonial Irish Fiction*, Manchester, 2016, pp. 23–66.

¹¹ J. Carregal-Romero, *The Irish Female Migrant, Silence and Family Duty in Colm Tóibín's Brooklyn*, "Etudes Irlandaises", 43, 2 (2018), pp. 129–141.

¹² V. Jabri, *War and the Transformation of Global Politics*, Basingstoke and New York, 2007, p. 172.

being “a discipline devoid of ‘people’ and lived experience, so remote from the conditions that touched the lives of millions that it could but seek refuge in taken-for-granted abstractions such as a de-historicised state and systems of interaction between states”¹³. O’Connor’s and McCann’s novels, in contrast, fuse significant cultural memories across generations and spaces to build sound knowledge of diverse human experiences and, consequently, foster mutual comprehension – the precondition for productive peace negotiations.

Both works recount the entangled histories of individuals whose existence and identities are violently intertwined with cycles of armed conflict and suffering. If McCann’s focus shifts from the aftermath of WWI to the 1998 Belfast Agreement to tell of lives “knotted by wars”¹⁴, O’Connor’s novel deals with the American Civil War and Irish nationalism; both recount episodes of the Great Famine, the ensuing emigration, and the history of slavery. The two authors portray as many journeys through time and space, through disparate narratives that are nonetheless tied to a kind of common thread: a historian’s attempt to reconstruct the story of a mysterious young boy, Jeddo Mooney, in the postbellum America of *Redemption Falls* and, in *TransAtlantic*, a thank-you letter travelling between the two shores of the ocean. By adopting a fil rouge pertaining to storytelling – a historical monograph in one case and a letter in the other – O’Connor and McCann underscore the potential of narratives to sift together personal recollections, marginal stories, and official national history to deconstruct dominant discourses of Ireland’s past role on the world stage and challenge militaristic belief systems, including those that uphold the inevitability of war¹⁵. McCann is so deeply convinced of the power of storytelling to “build a culture of connection” that, in 2013, he co-founded with Lisa Consiglio the non-profit organisation Narrative 4 to “harness” the energy of storytelling “to transform the world”¹⁶. O’Connor, too, attributes importance to the act of sharing stories, stating that “wonderful things happen when people come out of their group, their private inheritance,” and have “met other experiences”¹⁷. The art of narration facilitates the ‘encounter’ of diverse experiences, capitalising on the inherent, sometimes latent, dialogic nature of memory. *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* connect the mnemonic repertoires of (apparently unrelated) groups of people as well as personal and inherited memories – that is, memories of significant events that become central to the identity of generations that have no direct experience of them.

I relied on a broad range of theoretical insights from Memory Studies and the approaches to peacebuilding that emphasise the importance of narratives and emotions to evaluate the socio-political relevance of *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic*. Michael Rothberg’s model of “multidirectional memory” offers a departure from the “competitive memory” that causes us to create hierarchies among memories from diverse pasts, settings, and cultural groups. The creation of a hierarchy of suffering, he cautions, may have dangerous repercussions: when a group perceives the suffering endured by previous generations or its own as unique or more intense than that of others, it may foster a victimhood narrative that obscures the suffering of others or motivates a pursuit of revenge¹⁸. Instead, we can construct solidarity from

¹³ *Ibidem*, pp. 164–165.

¹⁴ C. McCann, *TransAtlantic*, London, 2013, p. 248.

¹⁵ S. McEvoy-Levy, *Peace and Resistance in Youth Cultures Reading the Politics of Peacebuilding from ‘Harry Potter’ to ‘The Hunger Games’*, London, 2018, pp. 1–24.

¹⁶ Narrative 4, <https://narrative4.com/> [access: 15.10.2023].

¹⁷ S. Langan, *The Power of the Past: Joseph O’Connor*, “Irish America”, April–May (2012), <https://www.irishamerica.com/2012/03/joseph-oconnor-interview-ghost-light/> [access: 13.05.2023].

¹⁸ M. Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization*, Stanford,

the particularities, overlaps, and echoes of various memories. Marianne Hirsch's concept of "connective" practice illuminates how the storytelling by O'Connor and McCann connects inherited and personal memories to create a shared, common ground – and this occurs after recognising the distinctiveness of each memory, as connecting memories does not entail equating them¹⁹.

Hence, the article revolves around an extended notion of *oikopoiesis*, i.e., the crafting of spaces of coexistence in the textual. O'Connor and McCann model collective spaces of 'living along' other individuals, in the novels under consideration, which readers would hopefully implement *beyond* the page²⁰. Even though the history of the XIX century and early XX century looms large in the novels, it is today's readers who are encouraged to reflect on how memory is constructed and what the process of passing on memories may entail so as to enact upon the dialogic potential of memories to promote mutual understanding. *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* assert relationality against dominance, mutuality against difference, connectivity against hyper-separation, and engaged responsiveness in the present against claims that rely on an imagined future²¹.

FIRST IMPRESSION: THE INEVITABILITY OF WAR AND VIOLENCE

Written by authors interested in the notions of oppression and suppression of stories, *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* appear to the reader to be very complex in narratological terms. They are polyphonic texts that disrupt any single linear narrative, for they interweave multiple strands of narrative through constant movements across time and space as is typical of many postmodern(ist) novels. Disparate stories are not fitted into a coherent plot structure, and a continual shifting of location – that is, a series of transfers from one place to another, from one historical era to another, but all marked by pervasive violence – initially conveys to the reader a sense of helplessness in relation to the narrated facts as well as an inability to bring order to an experience or a situation of chaos through narrative. Walt Whitman's epigraph to the Coda of *Redemption Falls*, "the real war will never get in the books"²², even suggests the unrepresentability of war and extreme violence. An aporia of representation that O'Connor seems to narratively reaffirm by opting for a highly experimental and fragmentary writing style in terms of structure, characterised by the juxtaposition of several textual forms and the abundance of unresolvable plots. *Redemption Falls* is a dizzying collage of newspaper clippings, posters, patriotic ballads, court transcripts, footnotes, and photographs from the Library of Congress.²³ A series of unfinished, silent documents or documents on which a deliberate silence has been imposed is inserted into the narrative to create the impression of something inaccessible: "the atlas is unfinished"; "maps tell you little worth knowing"; "my collection includes forgeries"; "there follows a lengthy paragraph which O'Keefe's executors have requested the editor not to include"²⁴.

2009, p. 9.

¹⁹ M. Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust*, New York, 2012.

²⁰ K. Rigby, *Reclaiming Romanticism: Towards an Eco-poetics of Decolonization*, London, 2020, p. 6.

²¹ D.B. Rose, *Reports from a Wild Country: Ethics for Decolonisation*, Sydney, 2004, p. 213.

²² J. O'Connor, *Redemption Falls*, New York, 2008, p. 438.

²³ T. Deignan, *Of War and Forgiveness. ('Redemption Falls: A Novel')*, "America", 197, 9 (2007), p. 28.

²⁴ O'Connor, *Redemption Falls...*, pp. 290, 84, 443, and 72.

As we shall see, the fragmented nature of the two novels actually serves to reiterate not so much the unrepresentability of war but, rather, the need to choose what to pass on to posterity and the difficulty of recovering from oblivion the traumatic stories of those for whom “there will never be a statue”²⁵. Recovery and selection are efforts that must be made, though, perhaps remedying the absence of documents with imagination and storytelling. The memories of the forgotten, of those who lived on the margins, complicate received histories and memories of past events enabling us to break away from simplistic categorizations of people as either perpetrators or victims. In contrast, stories that glorify violence as entertainment or extol vengeance are to be exposed as perpetuating a cycle of hatred. This is accomplished, for instance, by the narrator of *Redemption Falls* when he refuses to dwell on the tale of Thomas McLaurenson, an Irish-American bandit who is responsible for unprecedented violence against harmless women and children: “I have already done too much to preserve in language a man that should be permitted to rot”²⁶.

Redemption Falls and *TransAtlantic* plunge the reader into a context of war and endemic violence from their very incipits, even though the first part of O’Connor’s novel, titled “The End of War,” begins with a poem and a photograph about disarmament and the transcribed testimony of a freed slave, and McCann sets the prologue to his narrative in a rural, seemingly idyllic setting where nature is taking over. The main settings chosen, the unsympathetic portrayal of many characters, and the repetition of elements from one micro-story to the next give the impression, at first, that History repeats itself cyclically and that humankind is predisposed to violence, war, and injustice.

One protagonist of *Redemption Falls* is General O’Keefe, an Irish-born Union general with a troubled past, who rules over a territory in the American West in the years following the Civil War. O’Keefe is an Irish revolutionary, exile, and ex-convict designated acting governor of the titular territory, Redemption Falls, which has attracted a diverse cast of characters. Among the most prominent are a poet from New York who is also O’Keefe’s estranged wife, Lucia; a furiously bitter former Confederate soldier, Cole McLaurenson, now an outlaw; and the 17-year-old Eliza Duane Mooney, who is travelling on foot from Baton Rouge in search of her brother, the mulatto Jeddo, and carries with herself the inherited memory of the Great Hunger, from which her mother fled before her birth. Eliza’s mother is indeed the protagonist of *Star of the Sea*, of which *Redemption Falls* is the sequel.

Redemption Falls is often almost unbearably bleak. The reader is left with the impression that transgenerational cycles of violence cannot be interrupted. “The story never ends. It spindles out like a web, a netting of filigrees twisting into a petticoat”: and it is a story of “pain and hunger” for Eliza, as it had been for her mother²⁷. War goes on, elsewhere or in the minds of “backward-looking mewlers (...) reversing into the future they hate”²⁸. In the last letter to his family in 1862, one of O’Keefe’s soldiers writes: “general okeef says when this war is over we will get in boats & go over to ireland & put out the englishmen which som of the boys reckons a mighty plan but i think i will have my belly ful of sogerin by then & will go no more to it”²⁹. Moreover, *Redemption Falls* tellingly ends on Christmas Eve, 1937, with rumblings of the ascent of fascism in Spain and throughout Europe. Professor Jeremiah McLelland,

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 447.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 216.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 101–102.

whose scrapbooks constitute the novel's multifarious material and whom we will later identify as Jeddo, recalls a "small brotherhood of Americans" who "had gone the previous winter to fight Fascism in Europe. Some Irish were among them; others would join them, at Jarama, at Zaragoza, at Madrid and Valencia"³⁰.

History seems to repeat itself, sometimes even with paradoxically ironic outcomes. Not only is O'Keefe a far cry from the ideal hero fighting for Faith and Fatherland – his cook, once a slave, recalls that "he get to the liquor" endlessly, "he fight his wife", and "got a reputation for a hard character" – but, in the eyes of the secessionist citizens of Redemption Falls, he is a "O'Nero of New Oirland", a "Crusoe, the slaver", even as much as an "Erin's Robinson Crusoe"³¹; ironic enough for an Irish republican hunted down by the British to be compared to a Roman emperor known for his excesses and to the character invented by Daniel Defoe, who on the island of his shipwreck builds a colonial microcosm.

TransAtlantic, likewise, features a mixture of historically existent and fictional characters grappling with the pervasiveness of armed violence and injustice. To defend a universal anti-war thesis and promote solidarity, global catastrophes such as wars and the slave trade are viewed from a private, rather than historical, perspective. The narrative is initially structured by the historical stories of famous men who followed known transatlantic pathways: in chapter "1919 *cloudshadow*," aviators Alcock and Brown cross the Atlantic Ocean after World War I on a bomber of the Royal Air Force, only to land at Clifden, in Ireland, where they see "soldiers against the complicated Irish sky," for "there's a war going on (...) there's always some sort of war going on in Ireland." In "1845–46 *freeman*," Fredrick Douglass visits Ireland to raise awareness about slavery in the United States, and he is appalled at seeing "streets (...) thronged with the poor Irish, the Catholics," while his hosts and sympathisers – mostly with "English accents. Magistrates. Landlords" – promise to "send the money across the Atlantic"³². Other sections tell of US Senator George Mitchell negotiating a truce in Northern Ireland in 1998 and talking to victims of the low-intensity conflict in the country.

The narrative is then given greater depth through the incorporation of a fictional account of the lives of an Irish woman, who immigrated to the United States after meeting Douglass in Dublin, and of her descendants. *TransAtlantic* focuses on the story of the young Lily Duggan, who escaped the 1840s Famine and settled in the Midwest of the United States prior to starting a family. Following the vicissitudes of this family to the present day, the novel concludes with the ageing Hannah Carson, the last female descendant of Lily to survive. In 1978, an IRA terrorist attack had resulted in the death of her son, Tomas, leaving her alone in the world. Lily had also lost her eldest son in tragic circumstances: Thaddeus had enlisted in Unionist regiments, "swollen with the prospect of war," and died at the age of seventeen³³.

Therefore, the readers' initial impression is of being trapped in an inescapable, cyclical escalation of violence, except that each displacement in either novel represents a new building block for the path to peace. As we shall see, through their experience of moving between locations and the memories of the people who inhabit them, some of the main characters acquire a greater awareness of what it means and entails to exist in the world and to live with others. At the same time, readers witness their epiphanies and moral development through

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 452. See also: Moynihan, *War...*, p. 359.

³¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 161, 97, 83, and 47.

³² McCann, *TransAtlantic...*, pp. 34, 66.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

the filter of O'Connor's and McCann's words, grasping the power of storytelling to mediate across temporal and cultural boundaries.

HIDDEN VOICES TO BE HEARD TO CREATE A SUSTAINABLE AND SECURE FUTURE

As agents of change, both novels feature marginal characters – those concealed from public view and whose deeds are not recorded in the narratives of nations. O'Connor has often stated that he is interested in the unsung protagonists of Irish history and, with reference to *Redemption Falls*, once said: "I think the Irish immigrants of the southern states really are the ghosts, the missing people from the pages of Irish fiction (...) I'm always interested in people who've been left out of the picture"³⁴. Likewise, when McCann was asked for a keyword that would define his writing, he chose 'anonymity', referring to "the story that needs to be told. The story that seldom gets told. The story that tells other stories. The part of the world that is left dusty. The part of the world that is ignored"³⁵.

The preference for reinterpreting history from the margins and the private serves a dual purpose. First, the emphasis on the individual strategically assists in collapsing the boundaries between the personal and the national and points to the gap between the normalising/grand public discourse of the nation and the intensity of individual, familiar, transgenerational memories of traumatic experiences such as war, displacement, and subjugation. Such experiences are presented in a vivid and highly imaginable manner to engage readers emotionally and empathically. In addition, the plethora of perspectives and voices – some of which are hitherto rarely heard, some of which are historical, and others wholly fictional – enables readers to know and identify with characters whose memories undermine the perception of uniqueness or moral superiority we may have over our past and past collective conduct.

For instance, both authors show the cracks in the standard narrative of the Irish nation as a country victimised by injustice for seven hundred years under British rule by weaving into their tales the personal and inherited memories of slavery and enslavement of characters that are descendants of African-American slaves, free African-American former slaves themselves, and, on the other hand, Irish slave-owners. The introduction of such characters with their painful memories or inherited memories of inflicted violence is particularly intriguing because it uncovers a hidden historical chapter in Irish history: the complicity of Irish people in perpetrating violence and colonial aggression so that even the repositories of traumatic memories like the Irish cannot be pigeonholed into the role of victims only. *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* break ways from the recurrent pattern described by Peter Bruck, whereby "the human community needs to be split into perpetrators or transgressors, objects or victims, and authorities and responsible"³⁶.

Second, the focus on the individual rather than the collective, with historical macro-events mediated through a person's consciousness and thoughts, allows O'Connor and McCann to examine how memory is constructed and what the act of remembering entails. To contribute to the construction of a future less susceptible to the systematic repetition of violence, one must broaden their narratives and memories of suffering by placing the mnemonic

³⁴ N.P. Greene, *An Interview with Joseph O'Connor*, "Xavier Review", 28, 1 (2008), p. 5.

³⁵ C. McCann, "Anonymity", in: *The Novelist's Lexicon: Writers on the Words That Define Their Work*, ed. V. Gillet, New York, 2010, pp. 4–5.

³⁶ P.A. Bruck, "Crisis as Spectacle: Tabloid News and the Politics of Outrage", in: *Media, Crisis and Democracy: Mass Communication and the Disruption of Social Order*, eds. M. Raboy and B. Dagenais, London, 1992, p. 112.

repertoire of the Other in dialogue with them. *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* encourage a dialogical and open-ended approach to collective and personal memory. McCann once said: “It is the job of literature to confront the terrible truths of what war has done and continues to do to us. It is also the job of literature to make sense of whatever small beauty we can rescue from the maelstrom”³⁷. To paraphrase him, we could say that a terrible truth suggested by *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* is that violence and conflicts are frequently fuelled by our inability to free our minds from fossilised memories that entrap them in a dynamic of continual violence, in the belief that the only answer to abuse is further abuse³⁸.

The reader is presented with the dangers of the ‘unique’ story passed down from generation to generation and the positive consequences, instead, of connecting memories. O’Keefe, for example, is the inheritor of a memory of suffering, which has made his heart as fixed as a stone, as W.B. Yeats would put it. Since he inherited from his ancestors the belief that Ireland has been the victim of Britain for centuries, O’Keefe is determined to avenge his country. The only moment of epiphany he has occurs when he is delirious from fever and drunkenness; looking at young Jeddo, who reminds him of his mulatto son in Australia and who has endured racist abuse in addition to the evils of war, he expresses the hope that the boy and his son “will be spared the terrible experience, for all their lives, of war between American brothers”³⁹ or any other internecine conflicts. Yet, except for this moment, O’Keefe does not change his mind and spends his life in a perpetual state of intoxication, dreaming of one day returning to Ireland and fighting for freedom. The memory of past abuses he endured forces him into a moral paralysis that causes him to view the independence struggle as the only glorious thing, while he is unaware of the suffering he causes by abusing his power as governor and idol of the nationalist crowds.

The same can be said for many other characters in *Redemption Falls*, who are frequently observed treating African Americans and mulattos with contempt and inflicting on them the violence their progenitors endured or were themselves subject to in the Civil War. In *TransAtlantic*, the marriage between Lily’s granddaughter Lottie and Northern Irish Ambrose, which will prove to be enduring, is in jeopardy of not being celebrated because his parents are unwavering in their belief that there can be no harmony between Catholics and Protestants due to the fact that history, as they know it, has always pitted them against one another and they grew up in a society scarred by sectarian violence. The authors thus expose the possibility of conflicts driven by inherited memories that cannot be altered or are perceived to be essential to a group’s identity: what Vamik Volkan defined as “chosen traumas” traps individuals like O’Keefe or Lottie’s parents-in-law in a cycle of grief, enmity, and violence⁴⁰.

What, then, is the beauty we can salvage from the maelstrom? Here, beauty relates to the capacity of individuals to be receptive to other, distinct memories to form a connection. The purpose is to connect, not to compare, because, as Marianne Hirsch explains, the act of connecting “eschews any implications that catastrophic histories are comparable,” thereby avoiding “the competition over suffering that comparative approaches can, at their worst, engender”⁴¹. This is what a character on the periphery of history and who has suffered the

³⁷ C. McCann, “Foreword”, in: *Fire and Forget: Short Stories from the Long War*, ed. R. Scranton, M. Gallagher, Boston, 2013, p. vii.

³⁸ Rothberg, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

³⁹ O’Connor, *Redemption Falls...*, p. 301.

⁴⁰ C.L. Duckworth, *History, Memory, and Peace Education: History’s Hardest Questions in the Classroom*, “Peace & Change”, 40, 2 (2015), p. 170.

⁴¹ Hirsch, *The Generation...*, p. 206.

loss of a son, such as Hannah, can do. Through the character of Hannah, McCann establishes a connection between different inherited memories that relate to key moments in the history of Ireland and humanity that express a desire for peace in times of war and sectarian, ethnic violence: promoting emancipation in 1845, joining two worlds after World War I thanks to a modified bomber, and building the Northern Ireland Peace Process in 1998⁴². Indeed, Hannah is the last owner of the letter that forms the common thread among these stories of hope for a better future. Douglass allegedly penned the letter while he was in Ireland, and then it crossed the Atlantic Ocean twice: in the hands of Lily on a ship and of the 1919 aviators flying towards Ireland. Hannah intends to sell it because she believes it is valuable, but she ultimately donates it to the Kenyan-born, Ireland-based academic David Manyaki and his Irish wife.

The act of giving carries a strong symbolic charge. First, the meeting between Hannah and Manyaki takes place in 2011, when both President Barack Obama and Queen Elizabeth II are in Dublin on official visit. The latter is scheduled to visit the Garden of Remembrance, which commemorates Ireland's fallen for freedom – a stop on her itinerary that represents a moment of reconciliation between England and Ireland based on the recognition of the suffering of the Other. Obama's presidency signifies the culmination of an emancipation process that began, in *TransAtlantic*, with Frederick Douglass. However, while these two background events provide the reader with a sense of an approaching happy resolution, the central stories do not offer similar narrative satisfaction. This is because we do not have complete resolution and can only hope for it⁴³. The letter never reaches its intended recipient and Hannah's family line dies with her due to national trauma. But this does not mean that the novel ends on a sad, pessimistic note.

Her grief over Tomas' death has not led Hannah to pursue vengeance or become oblivious to the plight of those outside her community. Regarding Manyaki, she wonders: "What distances had he come? What stories did he himself carry?"⁴⁴. More importantly, she decides to sell her cottage and give the letter to Manyaki and his multiracial family. A family whose members embody in their very flesh and blood the inherited memories of diverse cultures and communities. Oisín and Conor, the two sons of Manyaki with Irish-sounding names, "would have been called mulatto once"⁴⁵; therefore, their very presence demonstrates to the reader that hatreds based on ethnic or religious difference can be and, in part, have been surmounted. Those centuries-old hatreds, which prompted Douglass to seek aid in Europe and Lily Duggan to travel in the opposite direction; which led to the deaths of Thaddeus and Tomas more than a century apart, due to their ability to generate fixed ideas and ideologies.

In *Redemption Falls*, Professor McLelland, who is actually Jeddo, the mulatto boy who fled Louisiana during the Civil War, embodies the same optimism for a better future that has yet to be constructed. Jeddo was welcomed into the wealthy household of Lucy, O'Keefe's wife, albeit after numerous hesitations and the death of the General. Now that he is retired, the professor has begun to "collect as much as [he] can nose up of James O'Keefe and the boy Jeddo Mooney, those long-forgotten actors from America's Civil War, who somehow contain

⁴² M. Mianowski, *The Space In-Between in Colum McCann's Novel 'TransAtlantic'*, "Études Britanniques Contemporaines", 47/2014, <https://journals.openedition.org/ebc/1810> [access: 15.10.2023].

⁴³ N. Mara and A. Mara, "Ireland on the Waves: Colum McCann's 'TransAtlantic' as Intergenerational Female 'Immram'", "Nordic Irish Studies", 14 (2015), p. 24.

⁴⁴ McCann, *TransAtlantic...*, p. 281.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 283.

in themselves, so it seems to their collector, everything larger of war"⁴⁶. Consequently, he ends up reconstructing also the stories of other characters neglected by the nation's grand narrative, who endured and frequently fell victim to wartime, racial, and sectarian violence. McLelland, who was once even believed to be insane and locked up in an asylum, is a mulatto like O'Keefe's never-met son and Manyaki's two sons. Thus, McLelland is not only a receptacle for the memories of others, which he repurposes side by side in the book he is writing; he embodies within himself the memories of disparate communities: those of Irish Catholics fleeing starvation; slaves of African descent; veterans of the losing side of the Civil War...

Nevertheless, as stated, the novel concludes with yet another depiction of conflict. This is because neither *Redemption Falls* nor *TransAtlantic* provides complete resolution. The two novels address the present, the reader of today, to realise this hope. "All history is contemporary history," argued Italian philosopher and humanist Benedetto Croce; that is, history writing stems from concerns of the present⁴⁷. This also applies to the two historical novels examined in this article. O'Connor said about his novel: "I suppose I was thinking of all civil wars, (...) I wasn't trying to do something that a trained historian would do, but, yes, I was trying to write it in such a way as it would have echoes and resonances with other conflicts"⁴⁸. The convergence of inherited memories in *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* binds the past with the present and the future, for the characters' recollections remind of contemporary conflicts and global phenomena involving actual Ireland, whose role in them is implicitly interrogated.

By fusing significant cultural memories across generations and spaces, and denying narrative resolution, the novels assert our 'historical duty'⁴⁹ to remember and share memories in order to promote negotiation and mutual understanding between cultural groups. Moreover, *Redemption Falls* and *TransAtlantic* provide readers with a key to interpret the current situation and contribute to peacebuilding, as they depict the historical dynamics that have led to the outbreak or conclusion of conflicts. The unfolding of the main vicissitudes in the novels may make us readers realise that a performative engagement with our past can help to create a sustainable and secure future.

⁴⁶ O'Connor, *Redemption Falls...*, p. 442.

⁴⁷ N. Masalha, *The Palestine Nakba: Decolonising History, Narrating the Subaltern, Reclaiming Memory*, London, 2012, p. 7.

⁴⁸ Greene, *An Interview...*, p. 7. See also: Moynihan, *War...*, p. 359.

⁴⁹ M. Corporaal, *Moving Towards Multidirectionality: Famine Memory, Migration and the Slavery Past in Fiction, 1860-1890*, "Irish University Review", 47, 1 (2017), p. 50.

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SUMMARY:

Drawing on recent scholarship on transcultural memory and its role in peacebuilding, this paper explores the implications of entangling memories that belong to different pasts, places, and cultural groups in Joseph O'Connor's *Redemption Falls* (2007) and Colum McCann's *TransAtlantic* (2013). Both novels, written by authors interested in the notions of oppression and suppression of stories, are polyphonic texts that disrupt any single linear narrative by interweaving multiple storylines through constant movements across time and space. McCann's focus shifts from the aftermath of WWI to the 1998 Belfast Agreement, while O'Connor's novel deals with the American Civil War and Irish nationalism; both recount episodes of the Great Famine, the ensuing emigration, and the history of Abolitionism. Hence, painful memories of the Irish mingle with the mnemonic repertoires of those who suffered the abominations of slavery or internecine conflict in an attempt to give voice to the marginalised and highlight bonds between (apparently unrelated) groups of people. Moreover, this convergence of inherited memories binds the past with the present and the future, as the recollections have echoes of contemporary conflicts and global phenomena involving Ireland, whose role in them is implicitly interrogated. By fusing significant cultural memories across generations and spaces, these novels assert the 'historical duty' to remember to promote negotiation and mutual understanding between different cultural groups today. This paper, therefore, will first offer an overview of contemporary Irish fiction, characterised by an original world-facing, rather than nation-focused, outlook. Second, it will undertake the analysis of the selected novels to contribute to the ongoing discussion about the potential of literature to build sound knowledge of diverse human experiences and, as a consequence, promote peace.

KEYWORDS:

Redemption Falls, *TransAtlantic*, peacebuilding, transcultural memory, war