Dublin à la Noir: Dermot Bolger's
The Journey Home

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Abstract

The article discusses the presentation of Dublin in the novel *The Journey Home* by Dermot Bolger (1990) with reference to both the novel's historical and socio-economic setting in the 1980s and the literary tradition of urban representations, particularly Charles Dickens and the conventions of noir fiction. Drawing on the theoretical concepts of non-place (Marc Augé) and site (Edward S. Casey), it argues that the modernization of the city centre and the sprawling of Dublin's suburbs lead to the transformation of places, understood as locations of history, identity and community, into non-places/sites, i.e. non-differentiated, uniform spaces destructive of a sense of co-mmunity and political responsibility. An analysis of the descriptions of the city centre and suburbs demonstrates that in the novel the urban setting becomes at once a cause and a reflection of the psychological and social problems of the protagonists. In this way, far from being a passive location of the action, the city becomes an active force, which shapes the lives of the protagonists with the inevitability characteristic of literary noir.

Keywords

Dublin, Dermot Bolger, noir, non-place, urban space, suburbs, meta-phorization

Dublin à la noir: *The Journey Home* Dermota Bolgera

Abstrakt

Artykuł omawia obraz Dublina w powieści Dermota Bolgera *The Jour-ney Home* (1990), zwracając uwagę zarówno na osadzenie powieści w historycznych i socjoekonomicznych realiach lat 1980-tych, jak i na literacką tradycję przedstawiania przestrzeni miejskich, zwłaszcza Charlesa Dickensa oraz konwencje powieści noir. Wychodząc od teo-retycznych koncepcji „nie-miejsca" (Marc Augé) oraz „site" (Edward S. Casey), artykuł dowodzi, że modernizacja miejskiego centrum oraz rozrost przedmieść Dublina prowadzi do transformacji miejsc, rozu-mianych jako ośrodki historii, tożsamości i więzi społecznych, w nie-miejsca, a więc niezróżnicowane, zuniformizowane przestrzenie, które wywierają destrukcyjny wpływ na poczucie wspól-noty i politycznej od-powiedzialności. Analiza opisów centrum oraz przedmieść, jak również wpływu otoczenia na bohaterów, prowadzi do wniosku, że przestrzeń miejska ukazana w powieści staje się jednocześnie powodem i odbi-ciem problemów psychologicznych i społecznych. W ten sposób miasto przestaje być jedynie bierną lokalizacją fabuły, a staje się aktywną siłą, która determinuje życie bohaterów w sposób charakterystyczny dla poetyki noir.

Słowa kluczowe

Dublin, Dermot Bolger, noir, nie-miejsca, miasto, przedmieścia, meta-foryzacja

At once central and peripheral, metropolitan and colonial, Dub-lin has always had a complex relationship with the island of which it is the capital. For most of its history it was an English speaking, Protestant urban enclave surrounded by the pre-

dominantly rural, Gaelic and Catholic population. The dialectical tensions of Dublin's position did not disappear, but perhaps intensified when, in the twentieth century, the city became the capital of independent Ireland. Its very hybridity and urbanity stood in marked contrast to the experience of the majority of the still mainly rural population. Neither did it fit with the Republican view of Irish identity, which located essential Catholic and Gaelic-speaking Irishness in the west of the island. Dublin's Georgian terraces, elegant squares, imposing public buildings and monuments such as Nelson's Pillar were not only perceived as alien but also constituted a constant reminder of British domination. In the 1950s and 60s, indeed as late as the 1980s, whole quarters of the eighteenth-century city were demolished to make way for modern offices, often with the enthusiastic approval of both local and central authorities.

The motivations for this neglect and destruction of historical heritage were not only ideological but also socio-economic. Already by the early 1900s, as recorded in the plays of Sean O'Casey, many of the Georgian terraces had been turned into tenements, where the Dublin working class lived in appalling conditions. Now the dilapidated sites were re-developed to show the modernity of the independent state, while the former inner-city dwellers were moved to better living conditions in the newly constructed corporation housing estates in the suburbs. Meanwhile, the city continued to grow at a rapid pace, owing to both the high fertility rates of Dublin families and in-migration from rural areas in search of jobs in factories, businesses and administration. Naturally, these demographic changes meant a large territorial expansion, with ever-growing Dublin suburbs swallowing the neighbouring countryside and old rural communities. At the same time, however, the infrastructure and services failed to keep up with a growing demand for council housing and social benefits, let alone community centres and leisure facilities. This contributed to widespread political clientelism and corruption. In the realities of the economic slump of the 1980s, the working class housing estates in the suburbs turned into what Siobhán Kilfeather has called "quintessential dystopia"

(Kilfeather 2005: 202), where unemployment led to violent crime, alcoholism and drug abuse, and emigration, yet again in Irish history, seemed the only option.

Hailed as "the best novel about Dublin since Joyce" (blurb), Dermot Bolger's *The Journey Home*, published in 1990, is an imaginative exploration of the psychological, social and political effects of these developments. It is a dark tale of deracination, urban alienation and moral, political and economic corruption, which employs noir conventions to paint a picture of the desperate lives of young Dubliners and offer a bitter critique of twentieth-century Ireland. The plot follows its young protagonists, Hano/Francis and Katie/Cait (the fact that they are both called by several different names or nicknames during the course of the novel is significant, as I will discuss later), as they run away from Dublin after the death of their friend Shay. Since they are hiding from the police, it is clear that they must have committed some kind of crime, which (obviously) is not revealed until the end of the novel. The events that led up to the bloody climax are gradually disclosed through Francis' and Shay's first-person accounts. These flashbacks not only reveal the psychological and social motivations behind the novel's sensational action, but also tell a history of Dublin and its citizens over four decades, from the late 1940s to the 1980s. It is especially Francis' account, charting the experience of two generations of his working-class family, that focuses in great detail on descriptions of the urban setting. In this way the character explicitly links the questions of identity and belonging with the physical and social changes that he observes in his Dublin suburb and the city at large.

The subjective first-person flashbacks are in turn interspersed with the third-person narrative of Francis' and Katie's escape across Ireland in search of refuge in the rural west, coinciding with the last days before a general election, "the third in eighteen months" (this is a comment on the perpetual political stalemate, but also a reference to real events, which would set the novel in 1982). Here again, the third-person narrator combines a noir-type social and political commentary on the

short-sighted and self-serving machinery of Irish politics with close attention to changes in the landscape. Like its capital, Ireland is also a country in transition, leaving its past behind but not offering much in way of a future. The descriptions of the setting juxtapose the timeless beauty of the landscape, the coastline, boglands and prehistoric dolmens, with constructions that are evidence of a changing culture and depressed economy. These include crumbling Victorian warehouses, factories which are either closed down or produce toxic waste, as well as dilapidated dance halls and ruined labourers' cottages, emblematic of an older rural culture, side by side with nondescript modern housing estates. Such a narrative strategy obviously serves to increase suspense, while at the same time it widens the scope of the novel's social critique, the journey across Ireland revealing signs of the same malaise that can be observed in the capital city.

As the title suggests, *The Journey Home*[1] is crucially preoccupied with the questions of home and homelessness, its protagonists paradoxically dogged by a profound feeling of alienation caused by the rapid modernization of the country and, at the same time, terrified of "being trapped" (*TJH* 81) by old forms and ways of life. Importantly, home is a concept that combines spatial, psychological and social categories: it is both a building in a particular locality and a sense of belonging to a particular family and community. This fundamental relation between place and individual identity is at the heart of the novel. Crucially, in all three narratives the setting is far more than a backdrop against which the events take place. Rather, the thrust of the exploration of modern Irish identity and the novel's scathing social critique is conveyed as much through extended descriptions of Dublin and the Irish countryside as the development of the characters and the plot. As a result, in *The Journey Home* the physical setting becomes at once a cause and a reflection of the psychological and social problems presented in the novel. In

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[1] Henceforth in the references the title will be abbreviated to *TJH*. All references are to: Dermot Bolger, *The Journey Home*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991.

this article, I am going to focus on the depiction of Dublin, the city centre and the suburbs, suggesting how, far from being a passive location for the action, the city becomes an active force, which shapes the lives of the protagonists with the inevitability characteristic of literary noir.

Although *The Journey Home* is not strictly speaking a hardboiled crime story, it nevertheless shares important qualities of "a 'noir' sensibility", whose elements are defined by Andrew Pepper as "an unknowable, morally compromised protagonist who is implicated in the sordid world he inhabits, an overwhelming sense of fatalism and bleakness, and a sociopo-litical critique that yields nothing and goes nowhere" (Pepper 2010: 58).[2] Importantly, American noir, the novel's literary model, flourished during a period marked by a sense of "profound contingency", when it was widely felt that "the social order barely contained a fundamental moral chaos" (Cochran 2000: 3). This fear of encroaching chaos is reflected in the urban setting, one of the hallmarks of noir: the modern city depicted as a wasteland, "a manmade desert or cavern of lost humanity" (Cawelti 1976: 155), in which "evil has become endemic and pervasive", corrupting even the most respectable citizens and institutions (Cawelti 1976: 156). Bolger's portrayal of Dublin, as we shall see, clearly grows out of similar preoccupations and shares the same literary techniques.

John Cawelti cites the muckrakers and T.S. Eliot's *Waste Land* as literary antecedents of noir (Cawelti 1976: 154), but it was Charles Dickens who was the first writer to make the

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[2] Philip Simpson also points out that it is the conventions of shaping the fictional world and the protagonists, rather than the crime formula as such, that define literary noir: "the element of violent crime does not in and of itself define noir; rather, noir is stamped by its prevailing mood of pessimism, personal and societal failure, urban paranoia, the individual's disconnection from society, and cynicism. It addresses social issues, such as class inequities [...]. Noir's universe is bleak, divested of meaning. Flawed human beings in these stories must somehow make moral decisions with no transcendent foundation of morality on which to base them. The consequences of those decisions are frequently fatal and always tragic to someone" (Simpson 2010: 189). Many elements in this description fit *The Journey Home* perfectly, as will be demonstrated in the present article.

rapidly expanding metropolis one of his chief literary subjects, focusing on the disturbing aspects of urban growth. Bolger's attitude to Dublin has been likened to that of Dickens to London[3] and there are important affinities between the two writers. One of the devices that Bolger shares with Dickens is a frequent use of metaphor and simile, which tend to animate the city, as if it was human, or at least "a living thing" (*TJH* 38). As Francis, the main protagonist of the novel, observes, "It is strange how a city grows into your senses, how you become attuned to its nuances like living with a lover. […] [W]hen I'd walk home at dawn from work in the petrol station, I'd feel a sense of the suburb as being like a creature who'd switched itself off, leaving street lights and advertising slogans as sentinels" (*TJH* 22). The trope is persistent: at the start of the weekend Dublin is described as "moving towards the violent crescendo of its Friday night, taking to the twentieth century like the aborigine to whiskey" (*TJH* 35). Dublin houses "sleep" (*TJH* 82) or "nestle between the crossed arms of the cemetery" (*TJH* 114); abandoned factories look with "blind plate-glass eyes"; a "run-down hospital" seems "more human" (*TJH* 115), while the "ugly […] bunkers of the civic offices" are described as "squatting" (*TJH* 163). In another telling simile, new estates "like a besieging army, […] ring" (*TJH* 5) or "ensnare" old villages (*TJH* 61). When Francis looks back at the city from the cliffs, he sees "The whole of Dublin […] glowing like a living thing sprawled out before his eyes, like the splintered bones of a corpse lit up in an X-ray. Hours before he had still been a part of it, one cell in a vibrant organism" (*TJH* 38). The comparisons here perfectly capture the in-between, limbo-like character of Bolger's Dublin: a vast organism both hectically alive and horrifyingly dead; a fascinating but monstrous, diseased body, both corrupt and corrupting. Needless to say, this strategy of metaphorization serves to strengthen the sense of the city as a protagonist, actively participating in the action of the novel.

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[3] According to Joseph O'Connor, "Bolger is to contemporary Dublin what Dickens was to Victorian London: archivist, reporter, sometimes infuriated lover." *The Family on Paradise Pier*, blurb.

Like Dickens – and noir writers after him – Bolger also portrays the capital in the throes of rapid change, a modernization tearing down and transforming the very fabric of the city centre, while urban sprawl devours the surrounding countryside and its traditional, close-knit communities. Bolger also follows the example of his literary predecessors in his preoccupation with the consequences of this chaotic erasure of the past, showing how it results in a sense of contingency and loss of agency which threaten the survival of "an urban community with a coherent collective sense of purpose" (Alter 2005: 49). In *The Journey Home* Dublin city centre, usually described at night, becomes a noir wasteland, a dispiriting labyrinth of "crumbling" (*TJH* 35) or "reeling" (*TJH* 36) alleyways, peopled by the homeless, the unemployed, the drunk, addicted and deranged. A frequent stylistic device is enumeration: lists of disjointed bits and fragments which build the cityscape. In this way spatial chaos created by the destruction of orderly urban space is accompanied by, or perhaps even conditions, moral and social chaos – the dissolution of all sense of urban community, of meaning, of direction:

> I drove slowly, with a sickness in my stomach, along the quays and down alleyways where dirty children huddled in groups with bags of glue and plastic cider bottles. Some spat at the slow car, others watched in mute indifference. […] At times we moved at a funeral pace and those badly lit alleyways could have been some ghostly apparition of a dead city which we were driving through. Murky lanes with broken street lights, the ragged edges of tumbledown buildings, a carpet of glass and condoms, of chip papers and plastic cartons, and, picked out in the headlights, the hunched figures of children and tramps wrapped in blankets or lying under cardboard, their hands raised to block the glare of headlights. (*TJH* 162-163)

> We walked across town, up along Capel Street and through the jumble of ruins that had been Ball's Alley and Parnell Street. Watchmen in huts surveyed the last few cars parked on the uneven gravel where houses once stood. A hot smell of grease and vinegar came from the chip shop left standing by itself. A man tried to sleep

in what was once a doorway; a deranged woman in slippers wandered happily by herself. We walked past the Black Church and through the park where a canal had once run. The flour mill was deserted now; the wives and children back among the lines of estates; the workers on the dole swapping memories of jail. The long, straight road home was ahead of us now, past the ominous black railings of the cemetery. (*TJH* 204)

It is highly significant that the Voters' Register office, where Shay and Francis meet for the first time – the only more or less "proper" job they have in the course of the novel – is equally dark and labyrinthine as the city centre. It is "a high, cold room partitioned by a warren of stacked shelving and three long benches besieged by chairs" (*TJH* 16), which Francis compares to a "crypt" (*TJH* 22). Far from performing any meaningful tasks, the staff spend their days in chronic boredom, mindlessly stamping and sorting "the endless procession of blue files" (*TJH* 22) as governments redraw the map of constituencies in order to gain an advantage. Mooney, the boss, dominating this "cramped office" (*TJH* 28) and presiding over the work lives of the desperate employees, is a bully and sexual harasser. Even he, however, turns out to be a victim as much as a persecutor, destructive, but also destroyed by the noir world he lives in: a Monaghan man exiled in Dublin, making up for the sterility of his life by petty cruelty. In a sense, the office reflects the city and its social and political relations in miniature, and is similarly at once morally corrupted and corrupting. The fact that it is located near Kilmainham Jail, where the leaders of the Easter Rising laid down their lives in 1916 in a blood sacrifice meant to awaken the Irish national spirit and inspire the fight for Irish independence, is an obvious comment on the failure of the Irish state to deliver on the hopes and ideals of the Rising. So is the name of the pub, Irish Martyrs Bar & Lounge, where Francis and Shay repair to for their lunchtime drink, daily intoxication numbing them to the stultifying tedium of the job.

The Journey Home does not restrict its social critique to documenting the transition and crisis transforming the city centre

into an urban wasteland, but also explores the effects of the uncontrolled growth of Dublin's sprawling suburbs. The main protagonists, Francis, Shay and Katie, all live in a suburb in the north of Dublin, closely modelled on the village of Finglas, where Bolger himself grew up. Significantly, however, while the depiction of the city centre often relies on topographically mimetic detail, real landmarks and actual street names, the suburb is never named. This not only frees the author from strict adherence to outside reality, allowing him to mould the space of the fictional world as it suits his imaginative purposes, but also stresses the universality of the presented issues. Katie, slightly younger, is perhaps the most obviously uprooted of the three: an orphan who finds that she needs to amputate the memories of her childhood in the rural west of Ireland in order to fit in the harsh reality of the capital city (this change of identity is reflected by the change of her name, from Gaelic Cait to Katie). Francis and Shay, however, though born and bred in a Dublin suburb, are also deracinated, if in more subtle ways. Even though their parents come from different backgrounds – inner city working class in Shay's case and a Kerry farm in Francis' and "would not have mixed, being from different worlds, with different sets of experiences" (*TJH* 5), both feel equally exiled in the suburb. In Shay's estate, its "backyards ringing with displaced Dublin accents", he "must have woken to the noise of pigeon lofts, that city man's sport" (*TJH* 6), while "his uncles and great aunts left behind in the Liberties […] welcomed him like a returned *émigré* to the courtyards of squalid Victorian flats and led him around ramshackled streets choked with traffic, pitying him the open spaces of the distant roads he played on" (*TJH* 8).

If Shay's family find it difficult to adjust to the suburban setting, Francis' parents, like other neighbours coming from rural areas, try to overcome the culture shock of moving to the city by making it as similar to the countryside they left behind as possible: "[they] transport[ed] their country habits from bedsits along the canal back to the laneways again. […] They planted trees in the image of their lost homeland, put down potato beds,

built timber hen-houses. I woke to the sound of chicks escaping through the wire mesh to scamper among rows of vegetables" (*TJH* 6). People like Francis' father choose to uproot themselves and move to Dublin in the hope of offering the prospect of better lives to their children. The city, however, remains an alien and inhospitable space, which they try to fend off not only by recreating surrogate farmyards in their tiny gardens, but also by keeping rural habits and routines, kneeling down every day to say the family rosary, tuning in to folk programmes on the radio, following the results of their native Gaelic football teams. From the beginning Francis – or Francy as he is called by his parents, a rural Irish, and hopelessly unfashionable, form of the name – is taught that his home is elsewhere. Yet during his visit to Kerry, seeing his father happy and relaxed milking a cow, Francis feels disoriented as if he has stumbled "into the Russian outback" (*TJH* 133). It is the first time he feels a gulf opening between him and his parents, a gulf that is going to widen until it is no longer possible to bridge it, their lives like "two dialects of a lost tongue growing ever more incomprehensible to each other" (*TJH* 118).

The process of Francis' alienation from his parents is exacerbated by the progressive modernization and urbanization of the suburb. When his parents move to the estate in 1951, it is still very much a village surrounded by green fields, even if bulldozers are already moving in to destroy the old labourers' cottages and new housing estates begin to "ring" the old centre "like a besieging army" (*TJH* 5). It is the submerged memory of this village, the lost possibility of a true home, which continues to haunt both Francis and Shay. With its pagan holy well and an ancient Celtic cross, the ruins of a Gothic church in an old graveyard, the post office, pub, skittle alley, a parochial hall and a cinema, the original village fully answers the description of an anthropological place as defined by Marc Augé: it is "a place of identity, of relations and of history" (1995: 52). Its inhabitants are a stable community, meeting at annual Corpus Christi processions, Christmas concerts and dances in the parochial hall, and preserving ancient customs and old local

legends. In the course of time, however, in two parallel processes, as Francis and Shay grow up – and grow away from the traditional worlds of their parents to embrace more internationally-minded modernity – the village is also transformed. It becomes a modern "non-place".

Augé defines non-place as the opposite of place and its human, community-binding significance. It is a space (space itself being a "non-symbolized" and abstract area or distance devoid of any local meaning (Augé 1995: 82)) "formed in relation to certain ends (transport, transit, commerce, leisure)", which "create solitary contractuality" (Augé 1995: 94). As examples, Augé points to international hotels, supermarkets, air-ports and motorways. The distinction between place and non-place is similar to the distinction which the philosopher Edward Casey makes between place and site. Like non-place, site is "place […] considered a mere 'modification' of space […] that is, leveled-down, monotonous space for building and other human enterprises […], reduced to locations between which movements of physical bodies occur" (Casey 1998: x). Place, by contrast, "brings with it the very elements sheared off in the planiformity of site: identity, character, nuance, history" (Casey 1998: xiii). Casey also points to another important aspect of place, namely the link between place, ethics and politics. The Greek words polis (city) and ethea (habitat), as he notes, form the root of the modern words politics and ethics, firmly connecting both concepts with the idea of place. Similarly, rituals which bind individual people into community need specific places where they can be properly performed (Casey1998: xiv). Here again Casey's observation chime with Augé's, whose concept of "solitary contractuality" associated with non-places clearly points to their destructiveness to a sense of community.[4] Importantly, also, as the common etymology suggests,a transformation of place into site/non-place may have grave ethical and political consequences, leading to

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[4] It may also be noted that Augé's and Casey's concepts of place have a lot in common with Eliade's description of ritually sacralized space marked as "own" by a community (Eliade 1963: 32–58).

the deterioration of a sense of communal responsibility that should form the foundation of political life.

In *The Journey Home*, the first step on the road from place to non-place is the construction of a dual carriageway, one of Augé's prototypical non-places, which bisects the village. As lorries zoom through the old centre and overspeeding cars crash through the railings, the village loses its focal point, the meeting place necessary for the constitution of community. The carriageway thus becomes a vivid image of the way the anonymity and mindless speed of modernity destroy old places, which used to give a sense of identity to their inhabitants. The suburb is now divided into East and West, and young Francy, wandering by accident into the other half of the village, feels like "a West Berliner who'd strayed across the Iron Curtain" (*TJH* 27), a comparison clearly implying a double alienation. The village soon sports other non-places, such as new shopping centres, while the parochial hall falls into ruin. Trading the traditional for the modern, the local for the global, the suburb not only loses its identity and connection with the past, but also discards all the old community-building rituals and traditional social events. Its inhabitants also lose their connection with the natural world: in an effort to adapt to the urban and cosmopolitan modern world, the neighbours replace hedgerows with concrete walls, pave their gardens and give their houses fancy names:

> The world of the gardens had changed. Where neighbours once kept the city out with hedgerows and chickens, now they used broken glass cemented into concrete walls. A decade had worked its influence. The alder bushes were gone, the last of the hens butchered. Patios had appeared with crazy paving, mock Grecian fonts made of plastic, and everywhere, like a frozen river, concrete reigned. Porches had sprung up bearing ludicrous names, Ashbrook, Riverglade, The Dell, each neighbour jockeying to be the first to discard their past. (*TJH* 9)

In this context, the "unmodernized" though increasingly neglected garden at Francis' place becomes a symbol of his father's stubborn attempt to cling to his Kerryman identity, a refusal to

give in to the city. His attitude, however, produces a powerful sense of disorientation in his son, required to live simultaneously in two places and two times: the family home, where his father insists on preserving Irish country traditions, and the modern world of "the American films, the British programmes, the French clothes, the Dutch football" (*TJH* 80). At fourteen, he begins to go hitchhiking in the countryside mythologized by his father, enjoying the freedom to invent "other names, other lives" (*TJH* 147), trying to discover a sense of identity and a place where he could belong. The news he brings back home, however, is of a country in transition, an incomprehensible world of foreign tourists and fighting skinheads. Much later, when he is hiding from the police in the countryside – the traditional location of true Irishness – he realizes that "He was no prodigal returning home" but "an intruder in a landscape he could never call his own" (*TJH* 133). It is significant that the only person he truly befriends (and the only person who calls him by his real name, Francis) is an old Anglo-Irish Protestant, a woman just as dispossessed and isolated as he is. Incidentally, it is also this friendship that clinches his alienation from his father, who forbids him to meet the woman again.

Despite his sense of isolation and unstable identity, reflected in his name: Francy to his parents, Hano to Shay and their friends, Francis still feels a sense of identification with, and fidelity to, the lost village. In this, he is markedly different from the teenagers only a few years younger. Their disconnection from the local past is complete: they have never been told the old stories and legends, they have no recollection of the processions to the holy well or dances in the hall: to them, the "obscure images" from Francis' memories "would seem from another planet" (*TJH* 227). Even recent national history remains an alien concept, as evidenced by the graffiti-smeared monument to Eoghan Plunkett, a (fictional) hero of the Easter Rising of 1916, around which children gather to dance to reggae music from ghetto blasters. As Francis observes: "They were an autonomous world, a new nation with no connection to the housewives passing or the men coming home from work in the factories. And

little even in common with me, though I was only a few years older than them" (*TJH* 227).

The teenagers, Katie's friends, are not only cut off from the past and a sense of connection with the village and its people, but also deprived of a future, doomed to boredom, frustration and unemployment. This is again suggested by the descriptions of the setting: in the absence of community centres, their usual meeting places are, again symbolically, the graveyard or cavernous, abandoned factories. The latter, a reminder of the hopes raised by the industrialization policy of the 1960s, is where the teenagers drink cider, sniff glue, plan how to rob pensioners to get money for drugs, swallow ecstasy pills, and finally graduate to heroin and shared needles. Katie describes her friends as "violent, brutal stars", "burn[ing] out" (*TJH* 42) before their lives have a chance to start properly: ending up as heroin addicts, locked up in prison for brutal assaults, or in psychiatric hospitals, with damaged brains. It is significant that the only time they are relaxed and happy is when they go joyriding through the countryside to the beach outside Dublin, away from the "mishmash of shapes and plastic signs" (*TJH* 276), away from the dual carriageway and the empty shells of disused factories: "All the screaming and slagging stopped when we hit the shoreline, like we were at the end of a journey. When the wheels touched the sand there'd be silence, all of us just staring out at the sea" (*TJH* 40). The natural beauty and tranquillity of the seaside, which "belonged to nobody" (*TJH* 41), offers them temporary respite from their violent and hopeless existence.

The decline of the old order and the advent of the new is symbolically captured in Francis' description of the village centre: "The shopping centres ringed the edge of the hill – before us Plunkett Auctioneers'; behind us Plunkett Stores; down a lane to the left Plunkett Motors; and, beside the Protestant church across the bridge, Plunkett Undertakers on the right to complete the crucifixion. [...] Through the Gothic arch of the ruined church wall the shopping centre rose like a space-age monster" (*TJH* 74-75). While the Gothic ruins evoke the lost sense of the sacred, of history and community, the shopping centre is

a modern temple of consumerism, where human contact is reduced to "solitary contractuality" (Augé 1995: 94). The contrast between the two clearly acquires the force of a symbol. However, the suburb is also, as becomes more and more evident, a place owned and ruled by the Plunkett family: Pascal, the powerful, corrupt businessman, his brother Patrick, a member of parliament and a silent partner in all Pascal's business ventures, and Justin, Patrick's son. Justin, a pimp and drug dealer who provides drugs to Katie and her friends, is already groomed to become his father's political (and his uncle's business) successor. The family relationship is here obviously emblematic of the shady interpenetration of business and politics, corrupt politicians and businessmen equally profiting from the inadequacy and weakness of the central and local administration. This terrifying, grotesque three-headed beast becomes a nemesis presiding over the lives of both the protagonists and the whole suburb.

It is Pascal who (with Patrick's political influence) acquires planning permissions for land to be "rezoned" for residential housing; Pascal who buys out or intimidates family businesses. It is also Pascal who, in the absence of adequate social services, fills the void between the government and the citizen, providing loans to desperate people no bank would talk to. He then, of course, recovers the debt, plus interest, using the services of two gun-carrying gorillas. Like Francis, Pascal's tough guys have families to support, and no prospects for work. It is also Pascal who is the main employer in the area and so Francis inevitably has to turn to him when he is looking for work to support his mother and four younger siblings after his father's death. He then finds himself humiliated and isolated from the rest of the workers, progressively compromised, and finally sexually abused. Needless to say, in this noir world there is no point in complaining to the police, who are as much on the Plunketts' payroll as the rest of the suburb.

Shay, Francis' friend and role model, tries emigration, an obvious option which Francis is too scared to take. But instead of freedom and adventure, he meets other homeless and dislocated

people, and when, broke and homeless in Amsterdam, he stumbles into Patrick Plunkett, he is subjected to a harrowing sexual experience. Finally defeated after his unsuccessful attempt to seek a better life on the continent and failure to secure any job other than temporary stints as a kitchen porter or security guard (all in the black economy) back in Dublin, he becomes a drug courier working for Justin Plunkett. The way both Francis and Shay are drawn towards, and corrupted – sexually and morally – by the Plunketts has all the inevitability and sordidness of a classic noir. And it is in the inexorable way of a classic noir that the novel develops towards the double murder which sends Francis and Katie on their hopeless flight across Ireland.

But if Pascal and Patrick Plunkett are dark sources of corruption, they are too, in a sense, victims. Pascal, like Mooney, the bullying but pitiful boss from the Voters' Register office, is also a countryman, displaced and alienated in the urban setting. He has vowed to himself he will never be poor again, but for all his success, he is a desperately lonely man. As a homosexual, he cannot reveal his true identity and achieve personal happiness. As a working-class man who has made his money working on British building sites and selling saucepans to housewives, he is secretly despised not only by fashionable Dublin circles, but even by his more sophisticated brother, whom he put through college and whose career he has sponsored. Patrick, in turn, may appear to be a successful politician, but his craving for degradation shown during his encounter with Shay in the Netherlands might also suggest some deep-seated uneasiness and sense of guilt. Only Justin, "the angel of death" (*TJH* 80), the heir to the dynasty, cut off even from the last vestiges of traditional moral norms and obligations, is devoid of any feeling of guilt and shame whatsoever.

Towards the end of the novel, the transformation from the old village into the noir wasteland ruled by the corrupt Plunkett dynasty is summarized in a passage in which Francis reminisces about old buildings and childhood neighbours. As he details the mismatched and disjointed fragments that have replaced the old order, spatial chaos once again comes to reflect

the loss of all sense of coherence, community and political responsibility:

> I walked slowly through the village, if village it could still be called. Plunkett Motors, Plunkett Undertakers, Plunkett House, the ugly façade replacing the Georgian mansion that once stood there. I surveyed the twisted wreckage of the main street which had been bought and sold by the Plunkett brothers: a mishmash of shapes and plastic signs; the ugliest fountain in the world which would be switched off after the election; the grotesque metal bridge over the carriageway. [...]
>
> Home, before the Plunketts came. Home, before the family shops were bought or intimidated out; before the planning laws were twisted in the heady sixties; before the youngest TD in the Dail and his brother bought the lands that were rezoned. [...] Home where a detective spoke without looking at you [...]; where queues were already forming both inside and outside the prefabricated community centre for Patrick Plunkett's clinic – respectful worried faces, hoping for a reference there, a claim here, a word with the guards or health inspectors: the subtle everyday corruption upon which a dynasty was built. (*TJH* 276)

Home, then, understood as a place in Augé's and Casey's sense of the word, is irretrievably lost. It is thus not surprising that the only sense of identity and belonging possible in the world of the novel can be found in private, personal relationships – as in the concluding sentence, "When you hold me, Cait, I have reached home" (*TJH* 294). Given the inevitability of Francis' arrest, however, even this home can offer only temporary respite and consolation.

In conclusion, it should perhaps be noted that Bolger is no starry-eyed traditionalist, advocating a return to holy wells, country dances and national rituals as a remedy for the disintegration of intergenerational, social and national bonds. Rather, in documenting the transformation of Dublin into a noir wasteland of non-places, *The Journey Home* attacks the corruption and clientelism of Irish political life as well as a lack of vision for a truly modern Irish identity or a clear sense of direction

for the country's future development (other than as a theme park or a reserve of cheap labour for other European countries). In a typically noir fashion, however, it is a critique that identifies the roots of social malaise, but at the same time it "yields nothing and goes nowhere" (Pepper 2010: 58).

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