

Guests of a Nation; Geists of a Nation

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Eugene O'Brien



Guests of a Nation; *Geists of a Nation*

Frank O'Connor's 1931 story "Guests of the Nation" is about the Irish war of independence and an imaginary action in which two English soldiers, Hawkins and Belcher, are being held in a gentle form of captivity by two members of the IRA, Bonaparte and Noble. The story begins,

At dusk the big Englishman, Belcher, would shift his long legs out of the ashes and say, "well, chums, what about it?" and Noble or me would say, "All right chum" (for we had picked up some of their curious expressions), and the little Englishman, Hawkins, would light the lamp and bring out the cards. Sometimes Jeremiah Donovan would come up and supervise the game and get excited over Hawkins's cards, which he always played badly, and shout at him as if he was one of our own, "Ah, you devil you, why didn't you play the tray?"¹

From the outset, any form of racial, political, or ideological enmity between the captors and their captives is dissolved: "I never in my short experience seen two men take to the country as they did" (*CISS* 173). The feelings toward the Englishmen would seem to set this story in the realm of honorable comradeship—the notion that war is a form of advanced game and when chaps are not fighting they can show each other mutual respect and treat each other decently, as chums. It all seems a far cry from Abu Ghraib, or the horrific pictures of Iraqi prisoners being tortured by American soldiers, or of suicide bombers destroying themselves and innocent bystanders in the name of their cause, or of the horrific internet-circulated scenes of the execution of the equally horrific Saddam Hussein.

In O'Connor's story, this notion of a genteel conflict is further enhanced in the telling of how the previous captors of the Englishmen used to have dances with the local girls and "seeing that they were such decent chaps, our fellows couldn't leave the two Englishmen out of them" (*CISS* 173). Hawkins,

1. Frank O'Connor, "Guests of the Nation", in *Classic Irish Short Stories*, selected and introduced by Frank O'Connor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.172; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*CISS* 172).

the more garrulous of the two, learned to dance “The Walls of Limerick,” “The Siege of Ennis,” and “The Waves of Tory.” Even the vocabulary used is redolent of a form of British stiff upper lip, as these “decent chaps” seemed quite content to stay among their admiring captors, almost as if they have decided not to escape as it would be a form of bad taste. Thus far, we are in a world of romance, where war is a game for grown-up boys, and where honor and humanity triumph over hatred and horror. The two soldiers are indeed guests of the nation; there is even the stock figure of the grumpy old woman in the house, who is charmed by the more taciturn Belcher, who had “made her his friend for life” (*CISS* 174) by doing little jobs for her and generally being pleasant. The first note of dark irony comes into the story with that phrase “friend for life”; we will shortly see how truncated that life will be, and how this rather jolly affair will end.

This is compounded by another proleptic phrase, a phrase that gave rise to the title of this article. The first person narrator, Bonaparte, is speaking of how Belcher was able to move around the house anticipating the needs of the old woman:

As Noble said, he got into looking before she leapt, and got water, or any little thing she wanted, Belcher would have it ready for her. For such a huge man . . . he had an uncommon shortness—or should I say lack?—of speech. It took us some time to get used to him, walking in and out, like a ghost, without a word.

(*CISS* 174)

The irony here is telling. In a few pages, both Belcher and Hawkins will be transformed from “guests of the nation” to “ghosts of the nation,” as they are executed in reprisal for the killing of four IRA members, “four of our lads” (*CISS* 179). Belcher will die silently, but before his death he will say more than he had ever done while a captive. Both men are shot—Hawkins needing two bullets before he dies—and buried in a nameless grave in a bog. Hawkins argues and pleads for his life, offering to join the IRA, while Belcher seems to find death easier. The story, having begun with céili dancing and chums playing cards ends in one of the starker paragraphs ever written by O’Connor:

It is so strange what you feel at times like that that you can’t describe it. Noble says he saw everything ten times the size, as though there were nothing in the whole world but that little patch of bog with the two Englishmen stiffening into it but with me it was as if the patch of bog where the Englishmen were was a million miles away, and even Noble and the old woman, mumbling behind me, and the birds and the bloody stars were all far away, and I was somehow very small and very lost and lonely like a child astray in the snow. And anything that happened me afterwards, I never felt the same about again.

(*CISS* 187)

It is this movement—from guests of a nation to ghosts of a nation—that encapsulates the effect of violence and death on the perpetrators. These two men clearly affected all of the rest of Bonaparte's life: they fulfilled a ghostly function, physically absent, yet present and influential, changing his perspective about everything and about his future. These “stiffening” Englishmen became part of his sense of self. He undergoes a process of inhabitation by such memories and figures—guests who are no longer welcome. The dead become *Geists*, ghosts, and part of the spirit of Ireland that haunts the mind of Bonaparte.

In *Specters of Marx*, Jacques Derrida discusses what he terms “hauntology”; he sees ghostly hauntings as traces of possible alternative meanings. Derrida's spectrality involves acknowledging the Other that haunts the self; it involves acknowledging the possibility that the “h” in hauntology is a hovering presence over the certainties of ontology, and above all, that it is predicated on the future. Speaking both of the ghost in *Hamlet*, and the ghost that haunts Marx's *Communist Manifesto* (where the first noun is “specter”), he makes the point that, at bottom, “the specter is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself only as that which could come or come back.”² The ghost is that which can complicate the inheritance of the past, which can fracture the inheritance, and which—far from issuing from a fixed center and from containing an unequivocal meaning—“is never gathered together, it is never one with itself.”³

Certain ghosts are central to the creation of a nation, and of notions of nationalism in particular. These ghosts take the form of myths, misrecognitions, and identifications, all of which combine to give a motive force to the epistemology of nationalism as we know it; and they have a specific influence on concepts of how we treat others, either as guests or as enemies. There is also the point that the very notion of that “we” is defined by those who are “Other,” as in this case. Two types of spectral presence are at work in both the short story and in this discussion. The first are the state-sponsored, reified notions of the spirit of the nation, the ghosts of the past that are used to make us act in the present: the glorious dead, saints, martyrs, people whose deaths are used as an engine of power to make people act. Irish history overflows with the idea of dying for one's country, for ideas, for the dead generations (as Pearse had it on the steps of the GPO), for those killed on Bloody Sunday (there were three), Bloody Friday, etc., in Northern Ireland. But I also hope to gesture toward another form of haunting, which is more open and more emancipatory in terms of its views on the guests that a nation can take, involving notions of hos-

2. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*, transl. Peggy Kamuf; introduction by Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 39.

3. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 16.

pitality as opposed to hostility. O'Connor's story offers a glimpse of this different type of alignment of host and guest.

The work of Jacques Derrida helps to articulate the interactions of communities with their guests. Any adequation of the work of Frank O'Connor and Derrida is going to raise eyebrows; generally, Irish Studies is a striking example of Paul de Man's dictum of the "resistance to theory." With the exceptions of postcolonialism and feminism, Irish Studies is relatively undertheorized in terms of its methodology, and can be quite resistant to any other paradigms.⁴ To see Ireland's literary and political experience in terms of the postcolonial paradigm is valuable, and serves to ground the literary in the political and to probe the ideological effects and consequences of Irish literature more fully. However, there are other areas of theoretical critique that allow for a more nuanced rereading of past and contemporary Irish works in terms of constructions of identity, the force of the unconscious and desire, the whole notion of self and Other, and the influence of race and gender on readings and also on the more complicated relationship between Ireland and the postcolonial.

Yes, we were colonized; yes, we are part of that ongoing dialogue between center and margin; and yes, the language issue has resonances with the postcolonial world. But it is important to remember that the Irish experience of these matters, as so much else, is—to use David Lloyd's term—"anomalous."⁵ Ireland is a First World country, racially similar to its colonizer. It is one of the very few, possibly the only, colonies to have representation at Westminster from 1800 to 1921, and many Irish, both at the level of military participation and administrative or political leadership, have been participants in the colonial enterprise. Theoretical readings that ignore or attenuate these nuances are guilty of taking what Declan Kiberd has termed a "narrow-gauge" approach to nationalism.⁶

Theoretical readings are de facto political readings; and in a world that is increasingly stressing the knowledge economy, and the economic value of knowledge transfer, a theorized reading of Irish texts will allow for cultural self-understanding, and a better grasp of aspects of our past by looking at the underlying literary, linguistic, structural, and psychoanalytic prisms through which that past has been articulated, both factually and imaginatively. By examining the guest-ghost-*Geist* interaction, I hope to demonstrate a different read-

4. Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory. Theory and History of Literature*, vol. 33 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

5. David Lloyd, *Anomalous States: Irish Writing and the Post-Colonial Moment* (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1993).

6. Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995), p. 114.

ing of a canonical Irish text, as well as to show how the text can be seen as criticizing and complicating some cultural and historical givens. The political implications of this and other texts must be brought to the fore; a literary critique not grounded in the realities of our times is a large scale waste of time. (I am far from the ivory tower school of theory; when I see an ivory tower, my attention is drawn to the corpses of elephants that are the unvoiced Other of that metaphor.)

This complication is clear from the different reactions of the various Irish volunteers to the two Englishmen. While Bonaparte and Noble have extreme difficulty in turning their guests into ghosts, the other two men, O'Donovan and Feeney, "the local intelligence officer" of the IRA have less of a problem. They see it as their duty. This sense of "duty" is interesting. One might ask, duty to what, or to what cause? As Bonaparte wryly puts it, "I never noticed that people who talk a lot about duty find it much of a trouble to them" (*CISS* 181).

In an essay published in 1919, Freud probed the intersections of signification that took place in the play of the words *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*.⁷ He attempted to explore, and ultimately, to break down the opposition between the *Heimlich*, the "intimate" or "domestic," and the *Unheimlich*, the strange or "uncanny." He begins by stating the seemingly obvious binary opposition that exists in language between the two terms:

The German word "*Unheimlich*" is obviously the opposite of "*Heimlich*" ["homely"], "*Heimisch*" ["native"]—the opposite of what is familiar; and we are tempted to conclude that what is "uncanny" is frightening precisely because it is *not* known and familiar.⁸

In this story, different Irish people have very different attitudes to their guests, attitudes which can be seen to oscillate, in a Freudian sense, between the *Heimlich* and the *Unheimlich*.

"Guests of a Nation" can be read as oscillating between these two poles—a sort of *Heimlich* maneuver. What begins with the homely imagery of the decent English chaps dancing with Irish girls while being watched benignly by their captors—who have been transformed into "chums" as they dance with "some of the girls of the neighborhood" (*CISS* 173)—ends with the two dead Englishmen stiffening in a bog. The word "stiffening" has an implied sexual connotation, and the movement from the possibility of sexual attraction between the British sol-

7. Sigmund Freud, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, volume XVII, ed. and transl. by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), p. 218. Interestingly, O'Connor had some acquaintance with Freud's work, as any reader of "My Oedipus Complex" will know.

8. Freud, *Complete Works*, volume XVII, p. 220.

diers and Irish women at the céili is cruelly undercut by the final use of the verb “stiffen”: to invoke Freud again, the story moves from the poles of *eros*, love, to *thanatos*, death. Clearly, there is a polysemic notion of what it means to be a guest here. The strength of the story is in this way like the Heimlich rescue maneuver, in that the inherent violence in the idea of the nation is forced to the surface, just as the air in the lungs is forced to the surface—except that in this movement from guests to ghosts it is more of an *Unheimlich* maneuver. Such a sense of the *Unheimlich* is at the dark core of certain aspects of nationhood.

Another *Unheimlich* aspect of this story is the use of the term “guest.” Normally, a guest is a person who is welcomed. Indeed, the whole notion of hospitality is one of the ways in which societies measure their civilized status. However, Derrida makes the telling connection between the guest and the ghost, observing that there is

no politics without an organization of the time and space of mourning, without a topolology of the sepulchre, without an anamnestic and thematic relation to the spirit as ghost [revenant], without an open hospitality to the guest as ghost . . . whom one holds, just as he holds us, hostage.⁹

For Derrida, the idea of the guest is forever connected with that of the host and the notion of hospitality. In a series of readings of the Oedipus myth (a further Freudian connection), he traces connections between hospitality as an unconditional human law—a law that is above all laws as it allows for a connection between the native and foreigner, host and guest and, ultimately, self and Other—and the more practical implications of hospitality in the real world. Tracing the etymology of the word in a series of typical readings, Derrida forms the connection between the “foreigner (*hostis*) welcomed as guest or as enemy. Hospitality, hostility, hospitality.”¹⁰ He moves on to distinguish between the law of hospitality as a Kantian categorical imperative, and the sociopolitical enactments of that law, two codes that he sees as doomed to pervert each other. At the core of the idea of hospitality is that of the home, and of a sense of mastery of one’s home to the extent that one has the power to choose who to welcome, or not, into one’s home, be that familial, communal, or sociopolitical.

Whenever the “home” is violated, wherever at any rate a violation is felt as such, one can foresee a privatizing and even familialist reaction by widening the ethnocentric and nationalist, and thus xenophobic circle. . . . The perversion and pervertibility of this law (which is also a law of hospitality) is that one can

9. Jacques Derrida, *Aporias: Dying - Awaiting (One Another at) the Limits of Truth*, transl. Thomas Dutoit (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 61-62.

10. Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality. Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 45.

become virtually xenophobic in order to protect, or claim to protect, one's own hospitality, the own home that makes possible one's own hospitality. I want to be master at home ... to be able to receive whomever I like there. Anyone who encroaches on my "at home", on my ipseity, on my power of hospitality, on my sovereignty as host, I start to regard as an undesirable foreigner and virtually as an enemy. The other becomes a hostile subject and I run the risk of becoming their hostage.¹¹

This connection between guests, ghosts, and hostages in Derrida's work sheds light on the O'Connor short story. In its ironic use of the term "guests," the story offers a window onto the role of communities and how they create themselves through the interaction with outsiders: how the homely (*Heimlich*) is created by the unhomely (*Unheimlich*). Hospitality, through its enactment of a discourse of mastery, can rapidly become hostility, and those who are these community's guests can risk becoming ghosts so that the home of the community can be validated and reinforced.

Take, for example, Derrida's discussion of identity, which arises on his being asked about the notion of community as suggested by the American motto *E pluribus unum*. Derrida's answer sets out to define his attitude to the broadest sense of community, international law, which while a valuable structure de jure, is de facto in the hands of "a number of powerful, rich states," a situation which he feels "has to change." It is in the name of such a necessary change that Derrida offers a "new concept of citizenship, of hospitality, a new concept of the state, of democracy."¹² Pursuing this, and referring again to the epistemology of deconstruction, Derrida argues that he has always focused on "the heterogeneity, the difference, the dissociation, which is absolutely necessary for the relation to the other." Here again we see the strong ethical drive that powers so much of his later work. Taking Heidegger's notion of *Versammlung* or "gathering" as a starting point, Derrida proceeds to tease out the status of the limit points of such totalizing drives in terms of identity. He suggests that the identity of a culture is "a way of being different from itself," and when this is taken into account,

you pay attention to the other and you understand that fighting for your own identity is not exclusive of another identity, is open to another identity. And this prevents totalitarianism, nationalism, egocentrism and so on ... in the case of culture, person, nation, language, identity is a self-differentiating identity, an identity different from itself, having an opening or gap within itself.¹³

11. Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, pp. 53-55.

12. Jacques Derrida and John D. Caputo, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. John D. Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), p. 12.

13. Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, pp. 13-14.

Just as he problematizes the notion of hospitality by tracing a connection to hostility, Derrida likewise looks on images of the transcendent, or ghosts, in a number of different ways. In contrast to the Hegelian notion of the *Geist*, or of some sort of organic energizing force that shapes nations and individuals, he posits a more nuanced type of spectral presence: “hauntology.” But Derrida makes an important distinction. He sees spectrality and time as closely connected. The two dead Englishmen do not operate hauntologically at a national level. But their impact on the narrator is lifelong. They will be guests of his memories, his thoughts, his notions—guests of his notions—from that point on.

As a story title, “Guests of the Nation” is, of course, reflexive. There can be no nation without a definition of sameness, of gathering, and by extrapolation, of exclusion. As Derrida has said, “there can be no foreigner outside the pact or exchange with a group.”¹⁴ The act of executing prisoners in reprisal that gives rise to the story is as old as war itself. There is nothing new or startling in this; in all such conflicts, the taking of life is a structural necessity. In a struggle of incipient nationhood, however, the taking of life has a double force. The power to take the life of those who threaten a nation is part of the process of legitimation that a nation or state necessarily undergoes. In the Middle East, one sees groups like Hamas and Islamic Jihad invoking the status of nationhood to validate their attacks on Israel. Generally, these groups are seen as terrorists, whereas the Israeli attacks on Palestinian territories are justified as the protection of the Jewish nation. The right to take life is a central factor in the creation of a nation. In O’Connor’s story, the “guests” in question are doomed, despite the gradual relationship that dawns between both sets of very similar young men, to become transformed into ghosts by the end of the narrative.

The second aspect of this force is the right to take life, not just in a conflict situation, but elsewhere: the planned, societally approved taking of the life of those whose behavior is aberrant to the nation, or—as in this case—who are seen as enemies of the nation but who are not in a position to do it any harm. The sense of communal authority to punish those who are not of the nation is a concrete aspect of becoming a nation.

Ghosts, I would argue, have a similar binding force in the development of nationhood. Almost every nation on earth is built on the mixture of ghostly past and ghostly future, and it is here that the German word *Geist* becomes important. The term, forever associated with German philosophical idealism, and in particular the work of Hegel, means “spirit,” and in the context of the connections already seen at the level of the signifier between “guests” and “ghosts,” this term adds a further dimension. For Hegel, the notion of spirit is important

14. Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 29.

because it is the animating factor in a nation or a people. Indeed, the whole idea of the nation—that is, the Irish nation—is created through a period of struggle with the British government, the very struggle that is the focus of O'Connor's story. Nations, by definition, are created through a sense of spirit, Hegel's "Geist." Ghosts are central to this sense of spirit: the memory of the dead, tributes to their graves, and a sense of communal bonding in ceremonies of remembrance, are common tropes of national practice throughout the world. From the ongoing commemorations of 9/11 to the monuments to war dead (both known and unknown), a bond with the dead, and more specifically with their recalled presence in the present, is part of what makes us a nation.

In an Irish contest, Patrick Pearse made use of the grave of Theobald Wolfe Tone to summon up the spirit of Ireland. In his oration given at the grave of Tone, in Bodenstown, County Kildare, in 1913, Pearse enfolded Tone in the following narrative structure: "we have come to one of the holiest places in Ireland; holier even than the place where Patrick sleeps in Down. Patrick brought us life, but this man died for us. He was the greatest of Irish Nationalists."¹⁵ Here, there is no attempt to commemorate the historical Wolfe Tone, the "child of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment" whose hope was that Enlightenment rationality would supplant what he regarded as superstitious beliefs.¹⁶ Instead, Tone is suavely captated into Pearse's own vision of Irish history. It is not by chance that Benedict Anderson has noted a "strong affinity" between nationalist and religious imaginings.¹⁷ Indeed, he has made the valid point that the dawn of the age of nationalism coincides with the dusk of religious thought.¹⁸

In one of his most famous pieces of rhetoric, Pearse again makes use of a grave, this time the funeral oration at the death of the Fenian Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa. In lines that have often been quoted, Pearse invokes the ghostly legacy of the Fenain dead as a way of connecting their struggle with that of the IRA, the Irish Volunteers, and the IRB in the mid-1900s. He is invoking and summoning the spirit of the nation as he sees it:

The Defenders of this Realm have worked well in secret and in the open. They think that they have pacified Ireland. They think that they have pacified half of us and intimidated the other half. They think that they have foreseen everything, think that they have provided against everything; but the fools, the fools, the

15. Patrick Pearse, *Collected Works of Padraic H. Pearse: Political Writings and Speeches*, vol. II (Dublin: Phoenix, 1917-1922), p. 58.

16. Conor Cruise O'Brien, *Ancestral Voices: Religion and Nationalism in Ireland* (Dublin: Poolbeg Press, 1994), p. 100.

17. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), p. 10.

18. Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, p. 11.

fools! – they have left us our Fenian dead, and while Ireland holds these graves, Ireland unfree shall never be at peace.¹⁹

It is, of course, no accident that the name of one of the IRA men, the leader of the group in “Guests of the Nation” is Jeremiah Donovan. In a case of *nomen est omen*, he is the one who, from an early stage in the story evinces a dislike of Belcher and Hawkins. As Bonaparte notes “it suddenly struck me that he had no great love for the two Englishmen” (CISS 176). It is Donovan who is the instigator of the executions, killing Hawkins himself. The irony of the two unmarked graves being decided by a character named after one of the most famous corpses in Irish nationalist history suggests that this is a deliberate ploy on O’Connor’s part, in order to demonstrate the difference between attitudes to war dead. In the structural pattern of nation-building, graves serve both as the receptacles of the glorious dead and as launching sites for the spirit of the nation, as the *Geist* of the dead hero is summoned to encourage and enthuse the living. During the torturous route to the current peace process, one of the questions most asked at rallies staged by those opposed to any form of truce or cessation was, “Did Bobby Sands die for a renamed police force or for delimited power sharing”? Clearly the power of the ghost stays strong in this discourse.

The ghost of O’Donovan Rossa, the dead Fenian, haunts the consciousness of Irish nationalism through the rhetoric of Pearse’s oration. The stiffening bodies of the two dead Englishmen have no such macro-significance, but they too are ghosts, haunting the imaginations of Noble, Bonaparte, and the old woman who fell on her knees praying for the two Englishmen. Their effect on Bonaparte is hauntological, in that they will shape his views of the future: they are not in any way the spectral tramlines, used to shoehorn the infinite future into a strict direction, as we have seen in the invocations of the ghosts of Tone, O’Donovan Rossa, and Bobby Sands. They will bring the Other to bear on the self. They will be the motive force behind that gap in identity that we saw Derrida mention; they will speak of an identity to come.

In a sense, Pearse’s ghosts expunge the voice of the Other; their message is essentialist, and imperative. Derridean hauntology is predicated on the future, on the Other of ontology, so that it can be seen as an expression of Adorno’s negativity, which always inhabits dialectical thought. Indeed, in discussing dialectics, Adorno refers to the process in spectral terms, telling us that negative dialectical logic is one of “disintegration,” and his negative dialectics would seem to be a mode of resistance to a positivism similar to that of Pearse’s

19. Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: The Triumph of Failure* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1977), p. 236.

notions of identity.²⁰ So, when Pearse speaks of the injunction put on him by the “ghosts of a nation,” he seems to see this injunction as a monological inheritance, an irruption of a fixed and unified past in the present—a guideline to a teleological future.

However, Derrida has discussed precisely this notion of spectral inheritance and has made the point that—far from issuing from a fixed center, and far from containing an unequivocal meaning—an inheritance “is never gathered together, it is never one with itself.”²¹ By moving away from the central preoccupations of Pearse, Derrida’s perspective allows for the influence of the present and the future in interpreting the past, a present that must be shaped by factors that were never available in the past. In other words, he takes cognizance of the fact that messages need to be interpreted. Ideologies are subject to change; it is through the act of reading, an act which, by definition, takes place in the present, that the past is given voice. Hence Derrida’s point that, in interpreting the past, one must “filter, sift, criticize, one must sort out several different possibles that inhabit the same injunction.”²² Derrida’s perspective also leaves room for some kind of dialogue with alterity, in that if even our ghosts are monological and monocultural, there will be no room for any other voices in the creation and presentation of Irish identity.

This is contrary to the Hegelian *Geist* that is the animating force of the engine of nation-building: nationalism. Anderson, in *Imagined Communities*, defines the nation, and by extrapolation, nationalism, as an “imagined political community.” This definition has achieved widespread currency, and the spirit of the nation is part of this process of imagining. As Ernest Gellner writes,

Nationalism is primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be congruent. Nationalism as a sentiment, or as a movement, can best be defined in terms of this principle. Nationalist *sentiment* is the feeling of anger aroused by the violation of this principle, or the feeling of satisfaction aroused by its fulfillment. A nationalist *movement* is one actuated by a sentiment of this kind.²³

Interestingly, Gellner utilizes affective criteria in his definition, adverting to nationalist “sentiment” as involving the “feeling of anger” or the “feeling of satisfaction” aroused by the thwarting or fulfillment of its aims. Both Bonaparte and Noble participated in this type of sentiment; while they liked Hawkins and

20. Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, transl. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), p. 145.

21. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 16.

22. Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 16.

23. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 1.

Belcher as people, they were willing, albeit reluctantly, to participate in their execution—they are willing to be part of the nation-building force of an imagined community that arrogates to itself the right to take life.

The issue of taking life is, of course what transforms a guest into a ghost, and it is to another such life-taking—but not a fictional one—that our attention now turns:

On Monday 21 January 2002, Zhao Liu Tao, a 29-year old Chinese man was attacked, along with two friends, by a group of Irish youths on his way home in Drumcondra, Dublin. The youths hurled racial abuse at the Chinese students before a scuffle broke out. Zhao Liu Tao was hit repeatedly on the head with an iron bar and was admitted to hospital where he died on Thursday 24 January. Zhao Liu Tiu's death was widely reported as Ireland's "first racially-motivated murder."²⁴

In this instance, we see the death of someone who is not of the people, someone who is a latter-day guest of the nation; not a member of this nation, but a guest soon to be turned ghost. Lentin and McVeigh note that the murder was hardly mentioned in the press after initial reports, and also that the garda enquiry has been low key.²⁵ This is in stark contrast to the violent killing of a young Dublin man outside Annabel's Disco in August, 2002. In that killing, a young man named Brian Murphy was involved in a fracas and subsequently killed through a series of kicks and blows on the head. The press furor that followed the incident, and the subsequent trial of the middle-class young men accused of the killing, filled thousands of lines of newsprint, both editorial and comment. Clearly for middle Ireland, the specter of a young, middle-class white man being killed by other young middle-class men was the kind of appalling vista that shook it to its core, and various opinions were offered as to why and how this happened.

The contrast with the killing and subsequent reportage of the death of Zhao Liu Tao could not be more clear. As a nation, we are reluctant to comment on this aspect of death. Just as Hawkins and Belcher were buried in a bog, so this young student was buried in the sort of bog that comes from going unreported. His death was not the cause for public outcry. His *Geist* or spirit did not call from the grave to the nation of which he was a guest.

But that of Brian Murphy does. Debates have gone on in Ireland since his murder, as parents of middle and middle-class Ireland asked themselves how safe their own children were in the drink-sodden and drugged-up culture of the

24. *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*, ed. Ronit Lentin and Robbie McVeigh (Belfast: Beyond the Pale Publications, 2002), p. 1.

25. Lentin and McVeigh, *Racism and Anti-racism in Ireland*, p. 2.

contemporary social scene. Brian Murphy's spirit also spoke to people who were the parents of the four accused—and they asked where they had gone wrong. Another aspect of this story, seldom commented on, is that more than three hundred people were in the vicinity of Annabel's that night, but the evidence given has been fractured and contradictory. It is highly possible that the person or persons who delivered the fatal kicks have actually not been charged.

In microcosm, we have the imperative of the power of the nation to impose its will. There was a metaphorical circling of wagons at work here: just as the killers of Belcher and Hawkins felt they had the right to take these lives, and the killers of Zhao Liu Tao felt that they, too, had the right to take life under the auspices of keeping Ireland free from foreign contamination, so the killers of Brian Murphy—and more important, the onlookers—also felt complicit in the taking of this life.

The problem is that so few people actually know of the murder of Zhao Liu Tao and also that so many Irish regard themselves as racist. Robert McVeigh makes the point that Irish racism is on the rise in proportion to the influx, from a very low base, of minority ethnic people. In a recent European Commission poll, some 55 percent of Irish people saw themselves as racist.²⁶ The killing of the Chinese student speaks to this racism; the killing of Brian Murphy speaks to something different. In sociological terms, there is a differentiation between the notion of *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society), and I would argue that in the concept of the nation, the community becomes the society—the people, the *Volk*, become the polis—and the ability to treat guests as one wishes is part of this process. Thus, while the killing of Zhou Liu Tao is validated by a racist *Gemeinschaft*, one could make the same point about the killing of Brian Murphy. He too was killed within a community, albeit a postmodern, shifting one of post-nightclub revelers quite used to seeing rows in the small hours of the morning. The sense that this “just happened,” that there was nothing that could be done to avoid it, and that blame is somehow not an issue, recalls the feelings of Bonaparte in “Guests of the Nation” as he goes through the killings in almost dreamlike state and clearly wishes the whole thing was over. The effect of Murphy's ghost is probably equally as strong on the people who were there on that fateful night.

And if we are being logical, the people who killed Hawkins and Belcher are also part of a *Gemeinschaft* as opposed to a *Gesellschaft*. They are a community on the way to becoming a society and it is to this end that they kill the two Englishmen. Indeed, it is in terms of the taking of such power on behalf of their sense of home, of the *Heimlich*, that such an *Unheimlich* maneuver is sanc-

26. Lentin and McVeigh, *Racism and Anti-Racism in Ireland*, p. 211.

tioned. For the *Volk* to be the *Volk*, the guest, the foreigner, must be brought under control—what Derrida terms “the collusion between the violence of power and the force of law and hospitality.”²⁷

We return to this ability to take life as a sanctioning of some form of community when we look at an event nearer to us in time, namely the death in Belfast of Robert McCartney. On January 30, 2005, Robert McCartney was murdered outside Magennis’s pub in the Short Strand area of Belfast. Reputedly, the murderers were members of Sinn Féin and the Provisional IRA and, in the aftermath of the murder, the pub was cleaned of fingerprints, CCTV evidence was removed, and threats were issued to the witnesses as to the consequences of reporting any of this to the Police Service of Northern Ireland.

The sisters of Robert McCartney—Catherine, Paula, Claire, Donna, and Gemma—and his partner Bridgeen have spoken out in a campaign to see justice done to their brother in death. Their campaign has had a deconstructive effect on Sinn Féin and the IRA, who have always used the dead as potent symbols of oppression, and who have made commemorations of their own dead key staging points for political and military rebirths. Even more ironically, the members of Sinn Féin and the IRA who killed McCartney were returning from a commemoration of Bloody Sunday, an event when members of a British paratroop regiment killed thirteen protest marchers in Derry in 1972. They were commemorating the ghosts of their own past struggle even as they created another one. Here, the epistemological waters of communal sanction for violence become more muddied. Had these members of Sinn Féin the right to kill Robert McCartney, and had they the subsequent right to demand silence from those in their own *Gemeinschaft*? The ghost of Robert McCartney haunts the political process to this day, as his killers have still not been rendered up to the PSNI.

But the ghosts do not stop there. Eleven years ago, an event made the little village of Adare in County Limerick—ironically, a town that almost appears a transplanted English village, with its manor house and the cottages—world famous. Adare was the site of an abortive post office robbery by the Provisional IRA that resulted in the serious wounding of garda Ben O’Sullivan and the murder of his colleague, garda Jerry McCabe. McCabe’s death was a catalyst in the peace process; it forced a lot of people to ask some hard questions of the IRA and also of the Sinn Féin leadership. His ghost has haunted that organization, as the Irish people have steadfastly expressed their ongoing revulsion at the deed, and his wife Ann, like the sisters of Robert McCartney, will not let his memory die.

It is also another case of the community being complicit in a crime. Witnesses to the murder suffered serious intimidation, threats were issued, people

27. Derrida, *Aporias*, p. 55.

withdrew evidence, and the charge was changed from murder to manslaughter. This in itself is a misnomer; manslaughter suggests death as a result of unpremeditated actions. I would question whether the sticking of a Kalashnikov semi-automatic rifle through a window of a car and spraying the occupants, neither of whom had a weapon drawn, can be seen as in any way accidental. A further aspect of this was that the Provos were on ceasefire at the time and initially denied all responsibility. That point was made by the then-minister for justice, Michael Noonan, who uttered the ill-fated words that “when they do something they normally admit it.” This is another interesting case of the hospitality issue we have been discussing; the state provides hospitality to an organization whose express aims are the destruction of that state.

It is doubly ironic that a movement that has had such a strong association with the ghosts of the past, and with the construction of a particular nationalist vision of the Spirit of Ireland—a strategy which as Bennington and Gellner have noted, is seminal to nationalist discourse—should itself fall victim to ghosts of its own creation. The specters of McCabe and McCartney have haunted the Sinn Féin leadership: two Irishmen stiffening in their graves whose spirits, in a *Heimlich* maneuver, have caused people never to feel the same again about that movement. To amend Gerry Adams’s famous phrase about the Provos on ceasefire, “They haven’t gone away, you know.” Indeed, one wonders if the ghosts of McCabe and McCartney have been haunting the unconscious of the electorate in the Republic of Ireland. In the recent election, Sinn Féin was expected to take ten seats as a boost from the successful peace process and inauguration of devolved government in Northern Ireland, but actually took only four, and just 6.9 percent of the vote. Perhaps these revenants been influencing the Irish social and cultural unconscious in the same way as the ghosts of Hawkins and Belcher have influenced the unconscious of the narrator of “Guests of a Nation.”

Is this case similar to that of the other ghostly victims of communal violence here? Is this how the spirit of the nation is enacted, through a violent purging of the Other? And who makes the decision as to who the Other is, or draws up the criteria of Otherness? In terms of such spiritual hauntings, Derrida has coined a difference between what he calls messianism and messianicity. As he put it, the “messianic” attitude is one which constitutes,

The historical opening to the future, therefore to experience itself and to its language, expectation, promise, commitment to the event of what is coming, imminence, urgency demand for salvation and for justice beyond law, pledge given to the other inasmuch as he or she is not present, presently present or living.²⁸

28. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 22.

For Derrida, the messianic structure is “a universal structure,”²⁹ which is defined by waiting for the future, by addressing the Other as Other, and hence, by refusing to base notions of the present and future on a lineal descent from a particular version of the past. He goes on to note that the messianic structure is predicated on a promise, on an expectation that whatever is coming in the future “has to do with justice.”³⁰

What he terms messianism, on the other hand, is culturally and temporally limited and constrained to the “determinate figures” of “Jewish, Christian, or Islamic messianism.” He adds,

As soon as you reduce the messianic structure to messianism then you are reducing the universality and this has important political consequences. Then you are accrediting one tradition among others, and a notion of an elected people, of a given literal language, a given fundamentalism.³¹

We see this fundamentalism in the reactions of those who have killed in the name of community. But possibly more important, we also see it in the reactions of those who do not initiate the violence but who abet it, like Bonaparte, like those who watched the deaths of Murphy, Zhao Liu Tao, McCartney and McCabe—all revenants, all specters who haunt our imagination. These specters should ask us questions about the nature of our community.

I began by looking at Derrida’s ideas of the ghost. In *Specters of Marx*, he offers a spectral reading of the ghost who appeared to Hamlet, the ghost of a murdered father. This ghost offered Hamlet an obligation and an invitation: he offered Hamlet a chance to both avenge the past and to alter the future. I would argue that, at its best, “Guests of a Nation” offers us the same challenge. The ghosts of Hawkins and Belcher, those Englishmen stiffening in an unmarked grave, are signified not as ideologues but as people, human beings to whom justice was not done. Their ghosts haunt our own ideas about war, and its justification.

In the real world, the ghosts of the other dead men can pose us the same question. If the work of writers, critics, and theorists is to have a socially ameliorative role, then it should, I think, be this: to use text and theory as a vehicle of critique; to use text and theory as a way of understanding the power dynamics of our culture, our politics and our ideology; to use text and theory as ways of looking, not at the sweeping narratives of ideologically suasive discourses of history but at the individuals in this story, to connect them with other individuals in real narratives; and to make sure that the memory of these

29. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 22.

30. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 23.

31. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell*, p. 23.

ghosts makes us “never feel the same again.” Whatever is a given can always be reimagined, to paraphrase Seamus Heaney—that is the sociocultural value of literature, critique, and theory, to speed this process of reimagining, to bring to the surface that which was hidden and to look clearly at the uncanny aspects of what we deem familiar, to look at the ghosts of memory and desire, and above all, to focus on the future. We should, and must, remember the ghosts of Zhao Liu Tao, Brian Murphy, Robert McCartney, and Jerry McCabe. In memory they join with the fictive specters of Hawkins and Belcher. In our work, they should help us reimagine the inheritance of the past in such a way as to ensure that the future will, to an extent, be better.

~ MARY IMMACULATE COLLEGE

Nuacht faoi Údair: News of Authors

Readers of contemporary poetry will welcome *Eavan Boland: A Sourcebook* (ISBN 978-1-85754-964-5) edited by Jody Allen Randolph and newly released by Carcanet Press. Among the helpful critical essays gathered there are excerpts from two articles that lately appeared in these pages: Pillar Villar’s interview “The Text of It’: A Conversation with Eavan Boland” from volume 10, number 2 (Summer, 2006) and Helen Lojek’s essay “Man, Woman, Soldier: Heaney’s ‘In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge’ and Eavan Boland’s ‘Heroic’” from volume 10, number 1 (Spring, 2006).

Readers attuned to the history of Irish tourism will look forward to William H. A. Williams’s new book, *Tourism, Landscape, and the Irish Character: British Travel Writers in Pre-Famine Ireland* (SBN-13: 978-0-299-22520-9), forthcoming from the University of Wisconsin Press. The book expands on themes presented in William’s article in *New Hibernia Review* volume 2, number 1 (Spring, 1998), “Into the West: Landscape and Imperial Imagination in Connemara, 1820-1870.”

This summer saw a new title added to Creighton University Press’s impressive and ambitious offerings in Irish Studies, Gerald Dawe’s *The Proper Word: Collected Criticism—Ireland, Poetry, Politics*, edited by Nicholas Allen (ISBN 978-1-881871-52-1). Included in the volume is a later version of Dawe’s article “History Class: Northern Poetry, 1970-82,” which appeared in *New Hibernia Review*, volume 7, number 1 (Spring, 2003).