On Saturday, 5 October 1968, about 400 people gathered outside the walls of Derry city, in Co. Derry, Northern Ireland, for a peaceful protest against one of the most painful aspects of the systematic discrimination against Catholics existing in Northern Ireland: the allotment of council houses, which in the North were almost always assigned by Protestants to Protestants, regardless of how much more needy or more numerous Catholic families were. The march was not the first of its kind, nor were its dimensions particularly impressive. On 24 August, the civil-rights march from Coalisland to Dungannon had attracted more than 2,500 people, but it had been a relatively peaceful affair: when the marchers found their route blocked by the Royal Ulster Constabulary (backed up by the Ulster Protestant Volunteers led by Ian Paisley) moderation had prevailed and, after a few moments of tension, both marchers and police had dispersed. On 5 October 1968, in Derry, things did not go so smoothly. They did not go smoothly at all. Indeed, if there is one particular date which can be taken to signal the beginning of the Troubles in Northern Ireland, 5 October 1968 would certainly be it.

In Derry, “all the nationalist problems were crammed into one small, unhappy city on the edge of the province” (Bowyer-Bell 61): two thirds of the population were Catholic but the local government was completely controlled by the Protestants, unemployment affected both communities but especially the Catholics and the housing conditions of the minority were the worst in the Province. For the Protestants, on the other hand, Derry — or Londonderry to give it its post-plantation denomination — had since 1689 been the symbol of Protestant resistance to Catholic domination, their
‘Maiden City’ where the Apprentice Boys from all over the Province gathered every 12th of July to parade in hundreds of thousands and celebrate the Protestant victory over the Catholic enemy, that of William of Orange over James II. This was a festive family day out for the Protestants, but an arrogant and intimidating display of Protestant power and domination for the Catholics.

Because of everything Derry represented; because the march had been banned the night before by William Craig, the Province’s Home Affairs Minister; because civil-rights marches were a new phenomenon in Northern Ireland and neither the police (90% Protestant) nor the government of the province (100% Protestant) had understood their potential danger; and because the tension in the North was waiting to explode, in one split second on 5th of October, a world was shaken to its foundations. After the marchers had drawn to a halt in front of the police cordons to decide what to do next, suddenly, for no reason, and without provocation, the police drew their batons and attacked the first row of demonstrators. One of the first to be hit and seriously injured was Gerry Fitt, a respected, skilful and peaceful Member of Parliament who had always been opposed to violence of any form. From that moment on, all hell broke loose. The police continued batoning the marchers, turned the water cannons on them, hit innocent passers-by and chased the fleeing demonstrators back into the Catholic ghettos. Only late that night did the violence begin to die out, to be resumed the next day with a rash of petrol bombs, looting of shops and so on.

It is not unlikely that the Derry march of October 1968 would have been consigned to oblivion — as has happened with so many episodes of violence all over the world — had not Gay O’Brien, a cameraman from Radio Telefis Eireann (the Irish national television station) been on hand to film the event, as Jonathan Bardon states:

A few hundred feet of film, captured by Radio Telefis Eireann cameraman Gay O’Brien, changed the course of Ulster’s history. Images of unrestrained police batoning unarmed demonstrators, including MPs, ‘without justification or excuse’ as the Cameron Commission judged later, flashed across the world. William Craig’s unrepentent bluster on television and radio that the RUC had not used undue force and that the civil rights march was ‘in fact, a Republican front’ and associated ‘with the IRA and Communism’ only served to convince the British media that a reactionary regime had been caught in the act of suppressing free speech within the United Kingdom. At a stroke the television coverage of the events of 5 October 1968
destablised Northern Ireland, and the sectarian dragon was fully reawakened, the region was plunged into a near-revolutionary crisis, characterised by bitter intercommunal conflict and protracted violence and destruction (655).

This was 1968 in Northern Ireland.

But something else, of a total different nature, was also beginning to happen in those years in Belfast, where a group of young unknown poets, all former students of Queen’s University, were meeting regularly to discuss and talk about poetry and were now beginning to publish some collections of poems. The first, with *Death of a Naturalist* (1966) was a 27-year-old Catholic from Co. Derry who had just been given a temporary lectureship in Queen’s: his name was Seamus Heaney.

Then came Derek Mahon (b. 1941) with *Night Crossing* in 1968, the same year in which James Simmons (born in 1933) founded the highly influential magazine *The Honest Ulsterman*. The following year Michael Longley (b. 1939) published *No Continuing City*. Such was the quality and freshness of this work that critics soon began to talk of a poetical “Northern Renaissance”.

While the bombs were exploding all over the Six Counties, the Province began to simultaneously produce an incredible amount of first-class poetry, and has continued to develop new forms and registers for the past 30 years.

And if one adds to this poetic output the equally impressive body of theatre that has been produced, and an apparently inexhaustible supply of narrative, one is left with an impression of Northern Ireland as a place bursting with artistic energy, a generous literary cornucopia strikingly at odds with the hate-ridden minefield of violence conveyed by newspapers and the television.

A political minefield and a literary cornucopia: contrasting as these images may be, Northern Ireland is both. And the question which one naturally asks is this: is there any relationship between the two? Why is it that such a small, complicated province situated on the far edge of Europe has created such an incredible amount of good literature?

Of course this outburst of creative energy is certainly part of that “shift in the balance in cultural power away from the Oxbridge-London centre, commanding the immediate post-war situation, to the ‘provinces’” (Martin 387). As Rushdie put it, the Empire writes back to the Centre, and it is an
accepted fact that of late the art-works of the Periphery (the ex-colonies) have been more interesting, vital and vibrant than those produced by the Centre (Great Britain). This is because on the periphery issues such as identity and language are crucial, while in the Centre, for obvious historical reasons, these things are taken as given.

Technically speaking, Northern Ireland should not perhaps be called the Periphery (the Protestants of the North would cry outrage at the idea), as it is part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. But history tells us differently. It tells us that Northern Ireland is what is left of the once British colony of Ireland (Ireland was in fact the first colony of the British Empire); it tells us that in Ulster the Plantation — the colonizing action of James II and of his successors — had been intentionally more radical than anywhere else, since up till then Ulster had been the most stubborn, rebellious and difficult province to control; it tells us that the Protestant majority of the Six Counties — the people for whom the political entity called Northern Ireland was created in 1920 — were mostly the descendants of the Scottish and English planters of 400 years ago.

Four hundred years — one might think — ought to be long enough for colonizers and colonized to come to terms with their history, to mix, mingle, intermarry, have children, live together and become one population, especially when they have the same skin colour, speak the same language, worship the same God and by now have pretty much the same style of life. Not so in Northern Ireland. Here segregation, from being the dominant feature, the key word of the Plantation of Ulster, immediately became the dominant feature of the mentality firstly of the colonizers, then of the colonized. The so-called “siege mentality” of Ulster Protestantism is the most evident sign of this: NO SURRENDER, NOT AN INCH, ULSTER SAYS NO are still the favourite slogans of the Unionists, for whom a united Ireland meant (and to an extent still does mean) the extinction of their race and identity, and was seen as the major threat to the political, social, cultural and economic control they exercised in the province.

Segregation feeds prejudice, which feeds mistrust, which feeds injustice, which feeds hatred, which feeds violence, which feeds more hatred, which feeds more violence... That is the tragic impasse, the vicious circle which is strangling Northern Ireland. This is the social and political climate of this apparently normal-looking region situated at the northern extremity of our
peaceful, civilized, wealthy and re-assuring European Community, the
natural background of Northern Irish writers. Because of its history,
geographical position and contemporary reality, Northern Ireland is one of
those difficult places where history, religion, tradition, myth, identity and a
sense of belonging form part of everyday life; where prejudice, injustice,
viooe and death exist outside one’s door; where life is all the more
precious for being uncertain and precarious; and where the soul is sharpened
more than in other places by a desire to understand, explain, explore,
describe, create. Although these issues do not dominate all the literature
being produced in the North, there is no doubt that the palpable tension, the
visible and the especially invisible violence, the fear hanging over the land
is a major factor, if not a modelling force for all the writers in the North.

One of the works of literature which portrays this dangerous territory of
dare and hatred and tries to tell us what it is like to live in a place like this is
_Chris in the Fields_, a trilogy formed of a short story (Cancer) and two
novellas (Heritage, and Victims) written by Eugene McCabe between 1977
and 1979, but published for the first time in one volume only in 1993. McCabe
is a farmer, novelist and playwright who was born in Glasgow in 1930
of Irish parents. He lives on the border between county Monaghan (Republic
of Ireland) and county Fermanagh (Northern Ireland). This location is
important firstly because much of the raw strength of McCabe’s writing
derives from the fact that his stories are set in the rural Irish Border counties,
places where feelings and emotions traditionally run higher than elsewhere,
and secondly because the stories are rooted in McCabe’s sure familiarity with
rural life, with nature, with animals and their ways.

The protagonists of _Christ in the Fields_ are the inhabitants of Inver, a
rural community situated just over the border between Fermanagh and
Monaghan. Beginning with Joady and Dinny McMahon, two old Catholic
brothers living in a small cottage near the border bridge in _Cancer_, moving
to the Protestant yeomanry of farmers in _Heritage_, and finishing with the
Anglo-Irish family of the Big House of Inver Hall, kidnapped in _Victims_ by
five IRA terrorists, McCabe portrays all the social classes of a Protestant-Catholic community divided by sectarian hatred and dominated by fear and
ancestral prejudice, a world from which there is no escape and which allows
no space or time for love, life or hope, a universe where the survivors are
always the strongest, and the more human and less animal-like are doomed.
Mc Cabe is a rural author. For Ulster writers, the countryside was traditionally the place where the universal values of love, friendship, family, honesty and respect for one another passed naturally from father to son; nature was seen as innocent, harmonious and peaceful, the Tir Na n’Og of the Celtic tradition, “The Land of Youth”, often linked to childhood or the memory of it, to a state of being where man could only be at his best, like Adam in the garden of Eden. The city, on the other hand, was seen as a negative, alien entity borne from the double betrayal of rural emigration, where the land betrays its children by being no longer able to support them, and these people — usually young men — betray the land by leaving their ancestral fields in search of the illusion of a better life in the city. In the novels from the North, the urban landscape is always a scenery of war, with derelict and abandoned houses, burnt-out buildings, broken windows, looted shops, streets divided by barricades and patrolled by soldiers. The city becomes a symbol of failure, a centre of negative energy often represented as a destructive feminine force, no longer mother and wife, but femme fatale or ugly prostitute. Being a place of violence, it is the privileged location for terrorists, their natural environment, the place where they feel at home and to which they belong; Nature, on the other hands, usually frightens them.

As for many other rural Irish writers, the link between Man and Nature for Mc Cabe is primeval, strong, deep and ineluctable. But Mc Cabe’s fields have lost all their Elysian qualities: they are “blind and bitter”, violent and brutal, and even when they are beautiful, their beauty seems to hide a promise of death. Nature is cruel, as one of the characters states at the beginning of Heritage, the human and the natural world are equally permeated with violence, and men and animals alike behave according to the same laws, or rather according to the only law that counts, that of the Jungle.

In Heritage, the most powerful story of the trilogy, the static vision of history (that haunting ghost of Irish literature), the inescapability of human destiny, the correspondence between the human and the animal in the name of violence, the hopeless despair of those who cannot accept or understand and are not allowed to love and live, are conveyed to the reader with compelling force. The novella narrates the events of a lovely sunny Sunday in July: the morning duties in a country farm, Sunday service, an otter hunt and a walk in the fields, a heifer calving ... a Sunday much like any other, except for the fact that it will be the last day in the life of young Eric O’Neill,
the protagonist of the story who, after a night of horror, death and fear, will choose death as the only possible solution.

Eric is a 23 year old part-time soldier in the U. D. R. He is the son of John Willie O’Neill, an open-minded and well-liked Protestant farmer, and Sarah, an unhappy and bitter bigot whose excessive religiousness has long since estranged her from her husband (18 years earlier John had betrayed her with Mary Reilly, a Catholic housekeeper who gave him a handicapped son, Willie Reilly). Sarah’s fierce hostility towards Catholics has made her disown her elder son Sam for marrying Maisie, a Catholic girl (“I’d sooner he was dead”, she says to Eric). But Sarah’s bigotry is insignificant compared to that of her unmarried brother George Hawthorne, “blacksmith and small farmer”, proud Orangeman and part-time member of the U. D. R. George is the frightening demonstration of what man can become when the dark and powerful mechanisms of racial hatred are allowed to operate freely. His heart has become a distillery of hatred and violence and whatever other emotional or rational faculties he may have once possessed have been completely wiped out by his blind hostility towards Catholics.

Sarah and George, on the one hand, and John Willie on the other represent two extremes which Eric finds in himself and cannot reconcile: the destructive irrationality and prejudice of the first two pitched against the tolerant open-mindedness of his father. While listening to one of the daily fights that his parents have (John blames Sarah for pushing Eric into the U. D. R., and therefore exposing him to the bullets of the IRA), Eric feels this inner tension clearly:

His father was looking fixedly at a point in the kitchen floor, his face rigid. He said quiet and cold:

“You’ll live to know worse days, woman.”

“God forgive you.”

“And you.”

She was beginning to break. “The child is frightened.”

“I’m no child, Mother.”

“You didn’t know what you were doing.”

His father said blunt. “You did, George did. He signed, took the oath, money, what odds who’s wrong or right, we’ve been over this a hundred times.”

“You don’t care.”

“If one neighbour in ten thousand wants to kill me or mine, I’ll not hate them all for
that one, and I don’t hate someone I’ve never met.”

“Please, Da.”

“Maisie, your own daughter-in-law.”

“Please.”

He understood what his father was saying, he knew what his mother was feeling. (McCabe 30-31).

Like Hamlet, Eric cannot find the strength to choose because the choice is so difficult, complicated and extreme. Although McCabe does not tell us where the answer lies, and does not state explicitly who is right and who is wrong, he nonetheless provides the reader with some hints. In his novels, as in all the novels about the North, the sense of sight assumes a symbolic significance. The physical ability to see clearly, or not to see at all, is a signal to the reader of the mental ability to understand reality in all its different aspects, and make judgements. As if they were the direct cyclopian descendents of The Citizen — the nameless character in Ulysses who fights with Leopold Bloom about nationality, identity and nationalism — all the terrorists in the novels about the Troubles suffer from poor eyesight: Martin Leonard, the terrorist leader in Victims, has lost one eye; Manus, the IRA man in Jennifer Johnston’s The Railway Station Man, cannot drive because he cannot see well; Skeffington, the local IRA theorist in Bernard Mc Laverty’s Cal, wears very thick glasses which he keeps adjusting on the bridge of his nose by wrinkling his face; Billy Bonner, the charismatic Protestant leader in Maurice Leitch’s Silver’s City, has a nervous tic under his right eye; and one of the novels of Maurice Power’s Northern Irish trilogy, Children of the North, is entitled A Darkness in the Eye.

In the light of this, McCabe’s description of Eric’s father is significant:

His father moved to join him; taller, leaner, a lined face under the weatherhat, deepset eyes, a huntsman, farmer and tradesman who could read the time on the Post Office clock from the far end of the street in Fivemiletown. He looked now at Eric very directly (28).

At the beginning of the second chapter of Victims, the third part of the trilogy, George makes a brief appearance and the reader is forced to focus on his eyes. Eric is dead and buried by now, but the tragic events which brought about his nephew’s death, and in which, as we shall see, George played a
major role, have not changed him at all. He is about to ask Colonel Armstrong, the patron of the Inver cattle show on which the novella opens, to get rid of Aiden O’Donnell, the only Catholic from the Show committee. Again the reader’s attention is drawn to the important detail of George’s eyes.

George was serious. He had been questioned, the Colonel knew, by the RUC in connection with a double murder three miles from Inver. His nephew Eric O’Neill, a boy of twenty three and part time soldier in the UDR, had been accidentally shot at an Army checkpoint; suicide, it was rumoured. Glazed by grief and whiskey the eyes that stared from that anvil-grey face looked someway blind. The Colonel was prepared to listen briefly (104).

The violence which possesses George will explode with sheer animal ferocity at night, when the bodies of Eric’s friend and neighbour Joe Robinson, (his girlfriend Rachel’s brother) and of his father Tom are found, murdered by the IRA. On his way home from the Robinsons, George asks Eric, who is driving the van, to stop and let him out for a pee. He disappears in the darkness and when Eric, numbed with grief and horror, realizes what is about to happen, it is already too late. After a desperate run in the fields, Eric reaches the farm of Martin Cassidy — a Catholic farmer “a Civil Rights man; openly and manly, respected by both sides” — only in time to witness the slaughter being carried out by his uncle: George has already killed young Willie Reilly, Eric’s handicapped half-brother who was minding Cassidy’s cows, and is about to kill Cassidy himself. With a graip.

As he neared, with a sudden sick shock, he saw Willie Reilly humped across a bag of dairy nuts, sprawled as though copulating in an obscene posture of death, mouth and eyes open, tongue out. In the yard he saw George from the back, driving a graip into what looked like a dungheap; again and again and again.

“George!”

Under the 200 watt bulb his uncle’s face looked back in knotted fury, his mouth drooping. He flung the graip towards the middle of the yard. It spun bouncing and ringing off the concrete, blood in the prongs. Eric saw that it was a man’s body face down in the dungheap. George walked to meet him. Eric tried to say something, his voice made no sound.

“Your bastard brother’s in the entry, and that’s Cassidy... two for two and no shot fired, let them equal that and don’t stand there like a gom, the job’s done.”
Then George was walking out of the yard and down the dark laneway towards the padlock gate. The body on the dungheap twitched. Eric’s heart was thumping so fast he found it difficult to breath. He moved towards the body. Cassidy’s profile all right, bloody lacerations on his neck and back. He turned away, retching (79f).

Eric is shattered by what has happened. He knows that now more than ever he is an easy target for the I. R. A., which sends him threatening letters, yet he cannot bring himself to leave Inver and its “blind bitter fields” (33) because he loves them too much. Neither can he get out of the U. D. R. because of the pressure he is put under by his mother and especially by George (“Any man tries to slide out is no man”). But after the night of brutality which he has been made to witness, after seeing Joe’s devastated face, after having tried to stem Rachel’s despair and fear, after witnessing Willie’s copula with death and Cassidy’s body twitching on the dungheap, Eric cannot but choose.

After driving George home from Cassidy’s, he sits in the kitchen with him. The conversation which follows is dramatic, and while George’s mad fanaticism becomes steadily more out of control, bordering on insanity, Eric’s desperation reaches a point of no return. At the end George tells his nephew he wants to leave all his land and properties to him (the heritage which gives the title to the story), and Eric makes his choice and refuses.

“You are a coward, boy.”
“Yes.”
“You are...”
“Yes, all my life afraid of you, George, afraid to pick between my mother and father, afraid of God, afraid of Catholics, afraid of dark and dreams, afraid to hate or love... I’m tired of being afraid... but if you’re brave, George, then I’m a coward like my father and I’ll stay one.”
George stood suddenly. “Your father’s son. O’Neill treacherous bloody Irish at the back of it, begrudgers, traitors, turn your back when I need you most.”
George was whining now, mumbling drunk. Eric said:
“I dunno why I’m in this uniform, who I’m fighting, or what the fight’s about, and when it blows by I’ll be elsewhere, anywhere. I’ll do anything, but I’ll not go through another night like this, I’d as lief be dead” (84f).

And few lines later Eric will say words that echo with a strange insistence throughout all the novels about the North.
"We’re both dead, George, when you’re sober, you’ll see that”.

After a short, tormented sleep full of visionary nightmares, Eric will lucidly choose death as the only escape. Early in the morning, when the sun is still “a dull red glow in the east” (91), Eric gets into the van, accelerates towards a military checkpoint and dies a liberating death under the shots of the British soldiers.

*Heritage* is a story full of violence and fear. Violence hovers over Eric, his family and Inver from the very first page and develops in a rising crescendo which will explode at night in the chain of murders and which will reach its visual climax in Eric’s horrific nightmare preceding his death. The very opening of the story is a scene of violence and death — a pigeon hunted by a hawk crashing against the dairy window of Eric’s father’s farm — which very clearly announces Eric’s suicide and which, in a sense, summarises the whole philosophy of the book:

He stepped back as the pigeon shattered through the dairy window. For an instant he saw the brown outstretched wings of the hawk, the yellow flouted eyes. It swerved sharply left with a screech, cutting under the archway, up over the beech copse in line with the orchard towards the border river. He was holding the dead pigeon as his mother and Maggie Reilly crossed from the porch, his mother’s mouth a question mark, Maggie’s face fat, flat and curious.

“There was a hawk after it” he said.
"God help it” his mother said with pitying eyes.
He left it on the dairy window.
“God made it.”
“Poor haunted cratur”, Maggie said (21).

It won’t take long to the reader to understand that the pigeon and Eric are in fact interchangeable entities, and by the end of the novella the analogy of images makes it obvious. Eric, a “poor haunted cratur” himself, is lying on the bed trying to keep his eyes open for fear of what his mind would see were he to let them close. Then he hears an army helicopter whirling silently “like a gigantic hawk over the beech copse” (89). Immediately after he falls asleep. He wakes up screaming from his nightmare only to encounter the memory of the previous night, the thought of his uncle George “lying in a stupor in the cocklift or maybe having his first whiskey to greet the coming..."
day” (90), and especially the knowledge that “it would always stay this way for a hundred years or more when he was gone and all forgotten” (91). He then goes out barefoot, careful not to wake his parents, takes the van, drives “past the beech copse”, accelerates and, in the manner of the pigeon which crushed itself against the dairy window, he hears the same “glass shattering” when the first bullet comes through the windscreen.

Now! He put his foot on the accelerator, saw them move apart, some go behind the Saracens, other falling on their stomachs. A flash came from the left ditch, glass shattering; pain, and the old Bedford skidding sideways before it lurched tumbling across the ditch, his lungs bursting, dying, yes, dying, blood in mouth and eyes, done, yes, over, and then as the Fermanagh uplands dimmed he heard Yorkshire voices far away, one saying:

“Christ knows, he’s Irish, mate; they’re all fucking mad over here; shoot first, ask after” (91).

This symbolic parallel between Eric and the haunted pigeon is also the first of a long series of analogies between human and animal world which, as we have already seen, is one of the most important features of Mc Cabe’s writing, and which in Heritage is asserted on every page in order to underline, among other things, the shared inevitable destiny of violence and death. The biblical passage chosen by the Rev. Plumm (one of the people kidnapped by the I. R. A. in Victims) for the Sunday Service makes the point very clearly.

I said in my heart concerning the sons of men, that God would prove them, and show them to be like beasts. Therefore the death of man, and of beasts is one; and the conditions of them both is equal; as a man dieth, so they also die, all things breathe alike; and a man hath nothing more than beast; all things are subject to vanity. All things go to one place; of earth they are made and into earth they return together (38).

A concept, this, which later echoes in Eric’s mind after he has helped the heifer to give birth to her calf.

Then the heifer was on her feet, spilling afterbirth. He sat on stone, and watchted the calf nosing round till it found the warm udder, a tet to suckle. He wiped his hands with dockleaves. Birthsmell, rich warm and milky mixed with rank odour of nettles; and a man hath nothing more than beasts. All things go to one place: of earth they are made; to earth they return together (68f).
Again for Eric the IRA terrorists watching and spying on him are like rats:

He felt again a hatred for these hidden killers, the hatred he felt for rats; everywhere watching, waiting, in walls and ditches, dung, heaps and gullies, following old ruts, half blind, grubbing on filth, smelling out the weak, the crippled and cowardly. Trap, cage, shoot or poison, hunt them with terriers, ferrets or starving cats, and a month later they were back, scraping, clawing, gorging, no ridding the world of them.

“Thinking like George, now”, he thought. “Beginning to hate them, all of them’. Maggie? Sam’s wife Maisie? (27).

The faithful pouring out of the Catholic church at the other side of the border river are bees for Joe Robinson, wasps for Eric, while Eric’s father describes Colonel Armstrong’s posh friends bathing in the lake as “squealing like cut pigs” (37), and Rachel’s eyes, full of grief and terror after her father and brother’s killing, are “frightened animal eyes” (75). But the most unsettling fusion between the human and the bestial in the name of the most horrifying violence comes in the nightmare in which all of Eric’s fears and horrors materialize.

Birds in outline perched in stuffed stillness on black branches. The pelts of badger, fox and otter, batten to trunks. Soldiers and masked men moved in shadows outside the copse. The searchlight moved to the centre of the clearing. From a gibbet over a huge stone hung a cage full of men and women, fear and hatred in their faces. Beside the stone, the Rev. John Plumm read soundlessly, solemnly from the Bible. Below him Maggie Reilly, sow-like, confessed to the anus of a curate listening to her leering between her legs, his father behind Maggie on all fours about to mount. The helicopter ascended slowly, the beam of searchlight widen. Then Cassidy came into the clearing with a Civil Rights banner carrying a statue of Christ with a bleeding heart, Willie Reilly walking behind him in his blue knitted cap. George, crouching behind the stone altar with a long narrow root scooped out as a collection box flailed at Cassidy, smashing his skull, driving the other end of the shaft through Willie’s heart. A young British soldier walked into the clearing with a girl. The girl had rosary beads around her neck. They lay down. The soldier began kissing between her legs. She took a Webley from her handbag and shot him three times in the head. Paratroopers directed by a tall British officer ran from skeletal bushes into the clearing. One of them opened the cage hanging from the gibbet. As the men and women came out they were machine-gunned, bodies falling, screaming, coughing, spluttering blood. Rachel in nurse’s uniform watched a hand on her groin, her face blank and crying. Sam and Maisie followed by small children approached
his mother. His mother's face was white with hatred. She ripped opened Maisie's stomach with a bread knife, pulled out a bloody child and smashed its head against the lectern, screaming 'Papist murderers... bastards'. Then a great noise of birds, animals and humans, a noise like gathering storm, and Eric shouting (89f).

The constant parallel between human and beast indicates clearly that both are divided into two basic categories, the hunters and the hunted, the predators and the prey, and since in McCabe's world there is no choice and no space for compromise, one either belongs to the first or is doomed to belong to the other. This is why Heritage, and Christ in the Fields in general, abounds with images of hunts, of animals hunting smaller animals, playing with or feeding on other animals's carcasses. When Eric leaves the dairy to collect the milk cans, he looks back and sees:

Blister, his father's mongrel hound, appeared from somewhere and ran from the yard, the pigeon in his mouth.

"Nature's cruel too," Maggie said. (21).

While Eric and George are driving to work at night, they meet Willie Reilly and Cassidy on the road bringing the cows back from the field. After the encounter, George immediately starts raving about Catholics and the way to beat them. It is then that a scaldcrow is seen on the side of the road.

"Murder money; they're diggin' graves for us night and day and we're standin' lookin' at them like the Klews in Europe; the've got their scores to settle and they mean to settle once and for all; if we let them."

A scaldcrow feeding on the carcass of a run-over dog flapped away as they passed in th growing dark.

"We bate them before: we'll bate them again" (72).

The appearance of this particular bird is not at all accidental, since when we first meet George, in the church before Sunday service, he is portrayed as a scaldcrow, white, grey and black.

He was waiting now at the stile in a dark suit topped by a white face and grey hair, uneasy, his head at an angle, a restive scaldcrow (36).
And like the scaldcrow with the dog, a couple of pages later he will be feeding his hatred over the bodies of poor Willie Reilly and Martin Cassidy.

The entertainment for the day, the long central scene of the novella, is again a hunt, an otter hunt organized by Colonel Armstrong, landlord and owner of Inver Hall, and attended by all the local farmers. This hunt, like any other hunt in the book, has a symbolic meaning which throws a light on the dilemma tormenting Eric and which explains why in the end the young protagonist will have to succumb. Eric and Rachel, in fact, take part in the hunt, but keep well away from the hunters, the hounds and the guns. While they walk through the fields and along the river, they make it quite clear that the logic of the hunt does not belong to their world, while they naturally identify themselves with the prey rather than with the predators.

“I hope it’s at Lough Erne”, Rachel whispered and asked: “Why do they hunt them?”
““They eat trout.”
““So do we. Have you seen one ever?”
““Twice.”
““Killed?”
““No.”
““What are they like?”
““Big water squirrels, brown fluffy fellows, whiskery, with bit tails.”
““They sound nice.”
““They are.”
““Timid?”
““They’ll fight if they have to, a whole pack, so they say.” (57f).

This is why, just a few minutes later, when they see the otter’s head in the water, they will instinctively save the little animal. In McCabe’s ruthless vision of the world, this suggests that both Eric and Rachel are doomed to become victims.

With a sudden heart stop Eric saw a small brown head emerge in the sedge on the left bank. He was about to shout. Instead he nudged Rachel and pointed with a jerk of his head. Her mouth opened in wonder and pity; she whispered:
““Don’t, Eric! Don’t! Let it live, let it live.”

As they watched the brown head submerged again. No one else noticed (59).
Mc Cabe’s world is a jungle, and this is exactly the word Joe Robinson uses to describe the surrounding countryside when, straight after the Sunday Service, he sits outside the church and talks with Eric about the helpless feeling he has of being constantly watched by hidden Catholic terrorists (42). Eric feels the same hostility in the land at the beginning of the story, when, on coming back to the dairy after collecting the milk cans for Maggie Reilly, he sees the hawk again, perched “in a rigid silence”. He then claps his hands to scare the bird away and follows its flight, and the world his eyes meet is as hard, thorny and raw as the rough language, full of consonants, that Mc Cabe uses to describe it.

He followed its flight towards Shannock and Carn Rock, a dim, hidden country, crooked scrub ditches of whin and thorns, stunted in sour putty land; bare, spade-ribbed filed, surted tin-roofed cabins, housing a stony faced people living from rangy cattle and Welfare handouts. From their gaunt lands they looked down on the green border country below watching, waiting. To them a hundred years was yesterday, two hundred the day before (22).

Nature is hostile even when it is beautiful, and the natural landscape is thus denied that consoling effect that it retained in the novels of Ulster writers like Micheal Mac Laverty or Benedict Kiely, where the sight of the green fields, a clear sky, or of the shining waters of a lake could still warm up a tired heart and comfort it with the message of innocence and hope that it retained. In Mc Cabe, on the other hand, natural beauty seems almost to make desperation more acute rather than to cure it, as if the impossibility to reconcile beauty and violence, so evident in Nature, symbolized an impossibility to understand life and hence to live. Both Rachel and Eric feel this way when, away from the group of hunters, they stop to contemplate nature around them and see, again a symbolic image, two beautiful swans.

They stopped at Foster’s well, a clean arched well, white washed with a glitter of gravel in the bottom, so clear they could see spiders and tiny creatures walking in the surface. As they were about to drink, they paused and turned to look. From half a mile they could hear the great wing beats. Two swans came down the river from Inver, flying low over the mill, heads craned for Lough Erne. They stared as though they had never seen swans before.

“So beautiful,” Rachel said, then added, “but so ugly... the world.”

“You are not.”
“How I feel is... the haunt, and that little man, a thing like that, I get sick with hate, fear or both.” (64f).

And the same painful awareness of the almost unbearable clash between the beauty and the ugliness of the world is expressed at the very end of *Victims*, by Harriet Armstrong, the sensible, intelligent unhappy wife of the Colonel, a woman killed with kindness by her husband’s cold and polite contempt and rejection. After having spent 24 hours as a hostage in the hands of five IRA terrorists, having lost her best friend and ex-lover Alex Boyd Crawford to their bullets and witnessed a lot of pain and suffering even among the terrorists themselves, once freed by the army, Harriet finds herself suddenly speaking into the microphone of a journalist who wants to know what are her feelings now. Harriet is stunned and does not know how to answer.

She paused, apparently unable to go on. The officer shook his head motioning the reporter to cut the interview.

“No, no I can answer... my feeling at the moment is one of... desolation... of utterable despair... that is my feeling now... despair... but look around you.”

Harriet looked out over the massive shapes of war and the uniforms below, to the long lake, the great forest beyond and up into the August sun, the blinding sky.

“Look about you.”

Her face fell apart as she said: “The world is still beautiful.”

She nodded trying to smile and said again:

“Beautiful.” (198).

These are also the words with which the writer chose to close his trilogy. They seem to try to convey a faint twinkle of hope, as if Mc Cabe, in spite of himself, refuses to resign himself to the utter despair which Harriet is feeling and wants to find the possibility of a better future for his land, however remote that might be. The dedication of the book seems to confirm this: “For all who have suffered through the old trouble, this book is dedicated both in sorrow and hope”. But the reader is left with a very different feeling, much closer to Harriet’s despair than to any form of hope. The stories of *Christ in the Fields* have a powerful intensity that shocks us into a new awareness of the irrevocable and inevitability of human life. Mc Cabe does not take any political stand, nor does he take sides; indeed the principal characters in
Cancer are Catholics, in Heritage, Protestants, and in Victims both Catholics (the kidnappers) and Protestants (the kidnapped). Mc Cabe’s ability to universalize from the immediate particular is a rare gift: writing about the troubled province of Northern Ireland, he is never provincial. He manages to make old troubles new and surprising, and forces the reader to realize that the “blind bitter fields” of Northern Ireland are, in the end, a metaphor for the world and for the human condition.

Note, Notes, Anmerkungen

1) While James II was controlling the whole island, the Protestants, fierce supporters of William (King Billy, as they affectionately call him) poured into Derry from all over Ulster to resist the “Papist” forces. They held out for 105 days before the English could come to their help. James II was defeated by William of Orange at the Battle of the Boyne, in July 1690.

2) To the names of those first poets others, such as Tom Paulin, Paul Muldoon, Ciaran Carson, Meadh Mc Guckian, were little by little to be added.

3) With the plays of Brian Friel (b. 1929), in 1992 winner of the Tony Award with Philadelphia Here I Come, of Graham Reid (b. 1945), Frank Mc Guinness (b.1954) and Stewart Parker (1941-1988).

4) Sam Hanna Bell (1909-1990), Michael Mc Laverty (1907-1993); Benedict Kiely (b. 1919), Jennifer Johnston (b. 1930), Eugene Mc Cabe (b.1930), Maurice Leitch (b.1933); Bernard Mac Laverty (b. 1942), Ronan Bennett (Daniel Morrin b.1956); and more recently Glenn Patterson (b. 1961), Brieg Duffaud, Eoin Mac Namee (1961), Kathleen Ferguson, Robert Mc Liam Wilson (b. 1964).

5) See poems such as The Deserted Village, by Goldsmith and the emphasis on the rural West of Ireland in the writers of Celtic Revival. The loss of the land, the effects of the loss upon the city-dwellers and the infernal vision of the city as a place of violence, unhappiness and selfishness is a major theme of Ulster fiction.