

# The fictive and the funerary: macabre and black humour in the contemporary Irish novel

---

*Roberta  
Gefter Wondrich*

---

*Università di Trieste*

“The Irishman’s house is his coffin” (J. Joyce, *Ulysses*)  
*Imagination dead imagine* (S. Beckett)

That death has always had a firm and abiding hold on Irish culture and the Irish literary imagination comes as no revelation; death and the macabre have figured prominently in Gaelic Irish, Anglo-Irish and modern Irish culture as a significant feature of that cultural complexity which stems from the hybridity and the duality of its colonial, “metrocolonial”/“semicolonial”<sup>1</sup> and postcolonial history. The unique brand of Irish culture’s absorption in death is marked in fact by a distinctive penchant for a combination between death as violence, the funerary and an amalgam of macabre and grotesque humour.

Jonathan Swift’s *Modest Proposal*, Sheridan Le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, Flann O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, Aidan Higgins’ *Langrishe Go Down*, Robert Mac Liam Wilson’s *Eureka Street* and many other “Troubles Thrillers” of the 1990s, John Banville’s *The Book of Evidence* and his Benjamin Black-authored series: it would suffice to think of only a very spare number among some of the most famous titles of Anglo-Irish and Irish literature since the early 18th century to identify this peculiar brand of the Irish macabre as one of the most successful and durable traits of Ireland’s literary modes. Significantly, as the

land of vampires, home to the creator of the uber-vampire, Dracula, Ireland holds a central place in the Gothic tradition in literature, conceived “as the name for one sinister corner of the modern Western imagination” (Baldick xi). In *Dracula*, myth, folklore and historical allegories of the Great Famine and the parasitic exploitation of the land by the ailing Anglo-Irish élite intertwine in one of the most enduring popular successes of all times, a “modern myth”, according to Elaine Showalter and Franco Moretti’s readings, self-spawning an artistic afterlife that spans all the genres.

Traditionally, the Irish concern with self representation, the Irish paramount-postcolonial preoccupation, discloses a scenario of brokenness, impotence, division and paralysis, with notable but few exceptions gesturing towards regeneration and renewal. This negative occlusion of vital forces in the representation and critique of Irish reality has largely prevailed until the 1980s; and a related dominant imaginary of deathlike, agonizing subjective and collective identity has been all-pervasive in the literary discourse.

More specifically, the obsession with death in Irish culture shows several features among which the funeral and the wake are dominant. As the blurb of Nina Witoszek and Patrick Sheeran’s book on Irish funerary traditions goes, “there are few traditions in which funerary motifs have been so ubiquitous in literature, popular rituals, folk representations, public rhetorics, even representations of place”.

Well unto the end of the 20th century, in their view, the funerary was still a core theme in the definition of Irish identity. The pervasiveness of this mortuary obsession, cast within the idiosyncratic postcoloniality of Ireland, reveals the identitarian value of funerary rites as politically charged, all the more so in a country whose history is one of divided loyalties in religion, ethnicity and politics with the conflictual coexistence of Catholics and Protestants, Irish, anglo-Irish and English. As Sheeran and Fitzpatrick put it,

Under colonial circumstances (...) funerary rites established themselves as rites of the powerless. Mourning became a sign of opposition to power, a reclamation of identity. If we further read this process in the light of Baudrillard’s theorizing, which holds that power and control are accrued by manipulating and legislating death, then funerary rites – especially the politically-informed, symbolic funerals of nineteenth-century-Ireland – can be seen as a major step in the recovery of power. Similarly wakes, viewed as folk spectacles that competed with church cer-

emonial for the control of death, may be interpreted as spasmodic acts of resistance to church hegemony (Sheeran and Witoszek 9).

The idea of resistance is central to many ritualizations of death – as well as to the use of grotesque humour – including those which can be performed and achieved through language and narrative. Considering that poetry is traditionally more concerned and more adequate as a genre with distilling figurations of death and circulating them in the cultural discourse, the richness and excellence of modern and contemporary Irish poetry comes to mind as a remarkable repository of the semantics of death. From Yeats’s great poems of the 1910s and 20s, imbued with civil passion and the transfiguring power bred by the “terrible beauty” of blood-soaked Easter Rising, up to Seamus Heaney’s famous and controversial “Bog Poems” of the 1970s, Irish poetry could be said to privilege, among many, the theme of the transfiguring power and nature of blood sacrifice (witness the Yeatsian mystique of the self-sacrifice of heroes like Connolly and Pearse, who achieved personal immortality through their irredentist agenda). The metamorphosing nature of phenomenological death thus emerges as a powerful metaphor of an identity wrestled from the aporias of history. Thus Heaney’s Grauballe man, “corpse” and “vivid cast” is the macabre organic inscription of an historical violence preserved to afford insights and revelations to the present through the sedimentation of the past:

But now he lies  
Perfected in my memory  
Down to the red horn, of his nails,

Hung in the scales  
With beauty and atrocity:  
With the dying Gaul  
Too strictly compassed

On his shield,  
With the actual weight  
Of each hooded victim,  
Slashed and dumped.

*(Grauballe man)*

Along with the uninterrupted preoccupation of poetic discourse, cultural anthropology discloses the strong bond between the centrality of

death and the fictionalizing impulse: according to Sheeran and Fitzpatrick, the fictive and the funerary go hand in hand in Irish culture as the “Two fatal attractions in the Irish tradition – one to fiction and the other to death” (Introduction 1).

Such a statement reads as no less suggestive than dangerous in opening up to a very vast and complex arena of debate. Is it possible to imagine the macabre as a form of narrative, of distorted deconstruction superimposed to the unnarratable experience of death? Can macabre literary art, much like figurative art, have a performative and discursive value which amounts to one possible articulation of the sense of death as narrative and fable, imbued with jocularity, an apotropaic function and an attempt at extracting some kind of readability out of the mystery of “the undiscovered country”, or better to convert some of its unfathomable nature into the more graphic figurations which are constitutive of the macabre? Some Irish fictions of the past 150 years certainly display some such trait. To the purposes of the present survey, I will merely attempt to focus on some relevant examples and aspects of the distinctive brand of the Irish macabre in contemporary Irish fiction.

The Gothic – and neo gothic – strain of Irish literature, fascinating and durable as it has proved to be, is still not fully encompassing of yet another peculiar dimension of what I will refer to as “the Irish macabre” as a convenient formula, namely that very special blend of black humour and grotesque. This brings us to one of the seminal studies which explored the role of death, the macabre and the grotesque in Irish culture, Vivian Mercier’s *The Irish Comic Tradition* (1962).

Locating Ireland’s “thanatophilia” in the context of its comic heritage, in his “hypothesis” developed in chapter 3, Mercier identifies two types of humour as typical of the Irish comic tradition, along with the fantastic: the *macabre* and the *grotesque*, which both abound in medieval literature:

It is true that life is cruel and ugly, but the macabre and grotesque do not become humorous until they have portrayed life as even more cruel and ugly than it is; we laugh at their absurd exaggeration, simultaneously expressing our relief that life is, after all, not quite so unpleasant as it might be. (1)

Mercier’s distinction between the macabre and the grotesque well figures in the general – though elusive – taxonomy of the macabre that spans the centuries in the cultural imaginary, be it textual, iconic or performative:

*Whereas macabre humour in the least analysis is inseparable from terror and serves as a defence mechanism against the fear of death, grotesque humour is inseparable from awe and serves as a defence mechanism against the holy dread with which we face the mysteries of reproduction. Oversimplifying, I might say that these two types of humour help us to accept death and to belittle life.* (49, in italics)

More specifically, Mercier's thesis was that the historical matrix of the Irish propensity for macabre humour may easily be traced to the world-renowned Irish wakes, at which merriment alternates with or triumphs over mourning, in the very presence of the corpse." (49)

Finally, Mercier discusses the mythical and ritual origin of a distinctive attitude of modern and contemporary literature, and highlights "the sadistic nature of a certain kind of Irish humour" (67), which, before its crystallization in Beckett's oeuvre, had been shared by Swift, Somerville and Ross, Charles Lever and William Carleton, G.B. Shaw. Before Beckett – the leading figure in this sinister pool of Irish humourists – there had also been some great names of the Irish Literary Revival who had handled macabre-funerary motifs with comic/grotesque tones.

As the greatest Irish novelist – and possibly humourist – of all times, James Joyce proved no less outstanding in his plentiful treatment of death as a focal centre of his entire output, and that is why he deserves an adequate tribute in this scholarly context. A champion of that macabre humour which owes much to the sexophobic that enters the sphere of grotesque, his entire output, from *Dubliners* to *Finnegans Wake*, is rich in deathly, funerary, macabre and grotesque representations, and in many respects it constitutes a landmark and an inevitable term of comparison in the fictional imaginary. This is mainly due to the naturalness with which the idea of death is inbred, all pervasive, especially in *Ulysses*, as it ought to be in the daily life of the *homme moyen* in an age which, conversely, has turned death into a moral and psychological taboo: the "forbidden death" investigated by Philippe Ariès in his well known historical study of death in the Western world.

Turning to the more recent and interesting fiction published in Ireland over the latest decades, this cultural and anthropological matrix of the Irish macabre resurfaces in a sort of end-of-the-century- postmodern and fabulatory version of the "Irish Wake" in Patrick McCabe's novels of the 1990s. In particular, two novels which consecrated him as one of the

leading writers of the New Irish Fiction, *The Butcher Boy* (1992) and *The Dead School* (1995) are built on the inexorable doom of a sinisterly humorous human catastrophe in which, literally, figure the definitions of macabre as “une impression où se mélangent le funèbre et le grotesque” and “une amalgame singulier de burlesque et de tragique” (Cuddon 2042).

McCabe’s characters offer a series of variations on the theme of the outcast, in a grotesque and obsessive version of some topoi of the Irish Bildungsroman which have been practiced by generations of writers to date. Scarred by solitary childhoods, victimized by alcoholic violent fathers and ineffectual mothers, abused by perverted priests, rejected by the provincial community and attracted by the dangerous lure of the city, they are propelled into desperate violence by their altered imagination and ultimately become murderers, thus embodying the most tragic face of the deep disintegration which affected Irish society with the onset of modernization.

*The Butcher Boy* tells the story of an orphaned child, Francie Brady, who ends up in a reformatory, and then, hired as apprentice at the local abattoir, roams the street of his small town collecting garbage from the local people, a human waste himself, until he savagely kills – with the butcher’s tools – a middle-class woman he holds responsible for all his misfortunes. The killing is accomplished in a delirious self-identification with the much hated image of the pig – he is called and calls himself Francie pig –, touches on the *grand-guignol* and swerves back to the darkest and most desperate humour. The macabre tone and powerful visionary quality of the novel is fuelled by a polymorphism and metamorphism which is at once linguistic and anthropological, as in McCabe’s later fiction (*Breakfast on Pluto*), and generates a quite shocking impact on the reader.

The following novel published by McCabe in 1993, *The Dead School*, set in a time span comprised between 1913 and the early 1980s, contrasts two conflicting cultural conceptions embodied by the two main characters and allegorizes the devastating impact that the transformation of Irish society had on both generations, one committed to decolonizing, nationalist Ireland, the other who came of age during the Sixties and Seventies. Raphael Bell, dean of a renowned public school in Dublin, is a pillar of faith – religious, nationalist and ethical – until he is unexpectedly overcome by the “filthy modern tide” of modernization and pop culture in the Sixties, which is slowly but surely bound to undermine the Irish educational system, and further shocked by the outburst of the IRA attacks

and the Troubles in the North, and by the revolutionary change of mores that has affected the local community. After the death of his wife he thus ends up his last years surrounded by his private ghosts in his imaginary “Dead School”, another macabre version of the Butcher Boy’s “Pig School”, a decrepit sanctuary where he commits suicide. The novel hinges on the parallel dying of the two protagonists, with the former’s physical demise matched by the emotional and mental fading out of the younger character. Born in the 1950s, a mediocre provincial boy fed on naïve dreams and pop culture, Malachy Dudgeon is hired by the co-protagonist as a teacher in the School and soon becomes his scapegoat, unfit to the role and responsible for the decline of the institution. Sacked and destitute, he seeks shelter in London and drugs, followed by rehab and a sad homecoming as his disabled mother’s carer.

The narrative pattern of the novel stages a deterministic fateful encounter between two men who are bound to destroy each other in a struggle for survival leading to their mutual undoing. It is, in fact, the deathly embrace between two human wrecks in their descent to hell, pictured in the absurd synchronicity of the climactic episode in which Malachy, straight out of the asylum, goes to seek Raphael, whom he holds responsible for his disgrace, only to find him hanged in his lugubrious “Dead School”, the filthy and crumbling simulacrum of a failed idealized construct.

Raphael ends his life in a material and metaphoric decay, and this narrative use of the macabre is quite effective, in that McCabe literally stages the moral and mental disintegration of these characters, representative of their generations, as a sort of life-in death progress, a tragic dance of death which recalls precisely the *danse macabre* motif, followed by the funerary cortège of the hanged suicide, which symbolically terminates his generation’s parable. The topos of decay, which had figured largely in the Gothic strain of Anglo-Irish literature and especially of the Big House novel, witness the two most important late twentieth century revivals of this genre (*Langrishe Go-Down* by Aidan Higgins, 1966) and *Birchwood* by John Banville, 1973) is here metaphorized on a sociological and generational level, in relation to the divided self of the disintegrating (post-colonial) psyche. The emblematic quality of this funerary and macabre dénouement is further enhanced by the fact that both Malachy and Raphael, ghostly anti-heroes, and their relatives, are named after heroes of Gaelic mythology. When “disorder” – a twentieth century cultural key-

word – turns to malady, it leads to complete decomposition. Thus Rapheal feels that “disorder had struck, and there seemed to be no way out” (McCabe, *Dead School* 167).

He knew that the disease, now that it had one day rotted, would soon begin to spread rapidly to all the other days they had ever known. (247)

Furthermore, this fiction seems to metaphorically enact – in the context of Ireland’s problematic transition to modernity – the theme of decomposition as a token of man’s failure against that social necessity of happiness which makes the acceptance of death somehow “forbidden”, a phenomenon which characterizes the contemporary attitude to death, born in the United States at the beginning of the twentieth century (Ariès 74-5).

The fundamentally humorous and grotesque connotation of the macabre (and funerary) imaginary of Irish literary culture at the turn of the past century thus finds in Patrick McCabe’s work a remarkable specimen, particularly on the sociological level, as McCabe’s own definition of “social fantastic” tellingly indicates. The sadistic nature of Irish humour resounds in his novels in the cacophony of that “laughter of disaster” (a coinage by Carson McCullers borrowed by McCabe), which in *The Dead School* is performed by the heterodiegetic voice of an omniscient narrator acting as a tragicomic dramatic choir.

Many other important Irish authors and texts of the latest decades ought to figure in the present survey to vouch for the pervasiveness of the macabre imagination at a time when almost all artistic media are utterly saturated with a necrophilia which is but another articulation of our obsession with “forbidden” death. Among them, I am thinking of William Trevor’s beautifully sinister and melancholic *Felicia’s Journey* (1994), Neil Jordan’s *Shade* (2004), which employs a Billy Wilder’s *Sunset Boulevard* post-mortem first-person narrative, of John Banville’s many titles, only to mention a very narrow selection.

Banville could be considered as the most important contemporary Irish writer to have privileged the “other” side of the macabre imagination, the paradigm of the eroticization of death, of the link between aestheticism and death, along the lines of his stylized cultural allusiveness and exquisite self-referentiality. *Birchwood* (1973), perhaps his most important novel to employ macabre modes and tropes to date, still ranks among his best



works *tout court*: it is a seminal, ground-breaking rewriting of the Big House novel which, with a typically postmodern anachronism, conflates the horrors of the Great Famine and the contemporary drama of the Troubles in the North, thus addressing two major national traumas of the Irish nation.

Overall, though, his entire oeuvre is imbued with an ubiquitous sense of death and the transience of life and things, with a radical existential displacement and epistemological crisis. But it is in his anatomist's eye, in his piercing scrutiny of detail – be it bodily, material, organic – that a real aesthetics of macabre, aloof and despairing at the same time, resides. Significantly, Banville's macabre is often evoked or expressed *in absentia*, or metonymically, through a masterly depiction of illness and decrepitude which are ultimately death-masks, especially with regard to the male characters (witness the human carcass of Axel Vander, the protagonist of *Shroud*). Conversely, the feminine is often represented through an unexpected combination of attractiveness, beauty and subtly revolting details, so that the macabre element is ultimately lurking in the recurrent dehumanizing objectification of the female body. Banville's fiction is disseminated with a bodily imagery that displays a penchant for frailty, deformity, organic and baroque similes, ghastly illuminated by a male gaze that often seems to seek for the grotesque. It is a fiction which is also saturated with the immanence of death in the world of the living, the world of his "phantasmally peopled solitude" (*Ghosts*), the purgatorial in-betweenness which is the hallmark of many of his novels, from *Mephisto* to *Ghosts* and *Shroud*.

His most interesting dark narratives, replete with macabre nuances, however, are the novels which form the so-called Trilogy of Art; *The Book of Evidence* (1989), *Ghosts* (1993), *Athena* (1995), along, with the later *Eclipse* (2000), *Shroud* (2003), *The Sea* (2005), *The Infinities* (2009), all of which revolve around death, as a triggering or impending event. The Trilogy of Art begins with the savage murder of a maid by the protagonist, prey to an aesthetic dazzlement (the protagonist kills the girl who surprised him while stealing a late sixteenth century Dutch painting), and continues in the other two novels with a symbolic attempt at atonement, the desire to restore that life by reincarnating it in a young woman. Thus Banville implicitly subverts the proto-decadent macabre-erotic topic codified by E.A. Poe that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetic topic in the world": in his fictional sequence the original

dead body, the victim's, is by far the least interesting one of a long series.

His dead are so present, so close, so intermingling, and yet so evanescent, so exquisitely postmodern in their being phantoms, fakes, replicas, frauds, anagrams of the self. Thus Banville figures at the opposite spectrum of the Irish propensity for the materiality of the macabre, the essential, ineradicable, compelling physicality of a distorted representation or narrativization of death. While on the one hand he is simply extraordinary at rendering the appalling reality of decrepitude and approaching death, he ultimately dissolves its urgency by a rather crowded host of phantoms of the mind.

It is not the dead that interest me now, no matter how piteously they may howl in the chambers of the night? Who then, the living? No, No, something in between; some third thing (*Ghosts* 29).

It is as if much of his fiction were attempting to capture the essence of the inevitable confrontation between the living and the dead by turning to a fictive in-betweenness, albeit one not unscathed by the misery of both.



- 1 The term *metrocolonial* was coined by Joseph Valente in a study of Joyce's *Dubliners*, then further developed in his *Dracula's Crypt* (2002), but also analyzed by Declan Kiberd in *Inventing Ireland* (1994), as he specifies in *DC*, n. 9, page 147. It refers to the unique conditions and characters of the colonial and postcolonial history of Ireland, which, "with the act of Union in 1800 (...) ceased to be a distinct if colonized geopolitical entity and assumed the unique and contradictory position of a domestic or 'metropolitan' colony (...). (*DC* 3). The metrocolonial condition, of which he considers Bram Stoker's "an exemplary case", "names an un easy social and psychic space between authority, agency, and legitimacy on one side and abjection, heteronomy, and hybridity on the other" (*DC* 4).
- 2 Cuddon's *Dictionary of literary terms and literary theory* does not provide the original source for these quotes, one of which can be traced as such in the on-line Reverso, Dictionnaire de français "Littre": "Amalgame singulier de burlesque et de tragique ! voyez-vous ces deux figures macabres" [Louis XIII et Richelieu, malades et mourants] plongées dans leurs coussins et chuchotant [au sujet de la conspiration de Cinq-Mars] ; la mort déjà les tire par les pieds". [Henri Blaze de Bury, *Rev. des Deux-Mondes*, 15 août 1876, p. 940]. website [dhttp://littre.reverso.net/dictionnaire-francais/definition/macabre/45414ine](http://littre.reverso.net/dictionnaire-francais/definition/macabre/45414ine).



---

*Opere citate, Œuvres citées,*  
*Zitierte Literatur, Works Cited*

---



- Ariès, Philippe. *Storia della morte in Occidente*. Milano: Rizzoli, 1998. Ed. Originale: *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident du moyen age à nos jours*. Paris: Seuil, 1975.
- Baldick, Chris, ed. *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*. Introduction. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Banville, John. *Birchwood*. London: Minerva 1992 (1973).
- . *Mephisto*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1986.
- . *The Book of Evidence*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1989.
- . *Ghosts*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1993.
- . *Athena*. London: Secker and Warburg, 1995.
- . *The Untouchable*. London: Picador, 1997.
- . *Eclipse*. London: Picador, 2000.
- . *Shroud*. London: Picador, 2002.
- . *The Sea*. London: Picador, 2005.
- . *The Infinities*. London: Picador, 2009.
- Cuddon, John Anthony. Preston, Claire. *A dictionary of literary terms and literary theory*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1998.
- Heaney, Seamus. "The Grauballe Man". In *New Selected Poems 1966-1987*. London: Faber, 1988.
- Higgins, Aidan. *Langrishe, Go Down*. London: Minerva (1966) 1993.
- Jordan, Neil. *Shade*. London: John Murray, 2004.
- McCabe, Patrick. *The Butcher Boy*. London: Picador, 1992.
- . *The Dead School*. London: Picador, 1993.
- . *Breakfast on Pluto*. London: Picador, 1998.
- Mercier, Vivian. *The Irish Comic Tradition*. Oxford, Clarendon, 1991 (1962).
- Trevor, William. *Felicia's Journey*. London: Viking, 1994.
- Valente, Joseph. *Dracula's Crypt. Bram Stoker, Irishness and the Question of Blood*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002.
- Witoszeck, Nina and Sheeran, Patrick. *Talking to the Dead. A study of Irish funerary traditions*. Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1998.