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The Fertility of the Supernatural: Stuart Neville's *The Ghosts of Belfast*

ABSTRACT
In *The Ghosts of Belfast* (2009), spectres of the victims of civil war in Northern Ireland haunt Gerry Fegan, a former "soldier" and assassin. Picking up the metaphorical cue from the epigraph to Neville's novel – "the place that lacks its ghosts is a barren place" – the article addresses the thriller's supernatural content. The meaning and role of the titular ghosts have been in part determined by Neville's debt to the Western traditions of making sense of the supernatural. However, they assume new roles within the narrative and possibly also in the author's vision of the peace process: i.e. in keeping Northern Ireland "fertile".
Keywords: fictional ghosts, supernatural, terrorism, Northern Ireland

1. Introduction

My goal in this article is to examine the uses of the supernatural in Stuart Neville's debut novel *The Ghosts of Belfast*.[1]

Ghosts have been a defining feature of the Gothic, even though many classic Gothic authors, representatives of the "Radcliffe school," have preferred to "explain ghosts away." Fictional ghosts are commonly regarded as metaphors for the manner in which suppressed past events linger in the present, disturbing its peaceful progression onwards. If a piece of fiction is to raise vital and relevant concerns with the aid of the supernatural – such as a need for reparations for crimes committed in the past – then critics of the Radcliffe school are right: an imaginary ghost would not do this kind of job properly.

[1] The novel was published in Britain in 2009 as *The Twelve*, an obviously much less marketable title. The Polish translation appeared under the "American" title: *Duchy Belfastu*, trans. Tomasz Konatkowski (2012,Warszawa: Wydawnictwo WAB).

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In Neville's novel the ghosts are real, and it is my goal here to make sense of this insistence on their reality and of how this feature combines with their presence and their use as vital metaphors. Through the example of *The Ghosts of Belfast* my propose to examine how a contemporary author of popular fiction engages the supernatural. This will allow us to see how the ghostly may be used to infuse a breath of freshness into fear literature. In particular we shall examine Neville's attempt, towards the end of his novel, to move beyond the logic of retributive justice which is an essential part of the literary inheritance characteristic of Gothic ghosts from *Hamlet* and *The Castle of Otranto* onwards.

2. The noir of Belfast

The title of Neville's novel cannot fail to attract attention. It suggests that Belfast is a spooky and a haunted place, answering to the city's representation in a collection of stories set in this city. *Belfast Noir*, published by Akashik Books in 2014, has been edited by Stuart Neville and Adrian McKinty, who write in their introduction: "Few European cities have had as disturbed and violent a history as Belfast over the last half-century" (McKinty & Neville, 2014, p. 13). The subtitle of their introduction calls Belfast "the noirest city on Earth," a close paraphrase of a statement by thriller author Lee Child.

In *The Ghosts of Belfast*, Neville consistently sustains this image of the city, which is especially vivid in passages which emphasise the contrast between the calm present and the bloody past. These images help readers readers to understand how the city's growing prosperity is making it oblivious to the terrors of the conflict:

> Designer boutiques, restaurants and wine bars passed on either side. Students and young professionals crossed at the lights.
> They think the city belongs to them now, Fegan thought. If the peace process meant they could buy overpriced coffee without fear, then perhaps they were right. A young woman in a business suit crossed in front of the Jaguar's bonnet, a mobile phone pressed to her ear. Fegan wondered if she was even born when they scraped the body parts off the streets with shovels. (Neville, 2009, p. 30)[2]

The reader will not overlook the fact that the mediating perspective in these passages is that of a former participant, an assassin, in whom – as we shall see presently – the memory is still excruciatingly alive.

Summing up in a few paragraphs the violent chapter in Northern Ireland's recent history known as the Troubles (1960s-1990s), the editors of *Belfast Noir* emphasise its most painful aspect – the toll measured in the lives of those who were not directly involved: "Of course the majority of those killed were innocent

[2] Hereafter the quotations from *The Ghosts of Belfast* are marked by *GB* followed by page number.

civilians on both sides" (McKinty & Neville, 2014, p. 15). It is precisely this painful fact that Neville's novel brings to our attention with the assistance of the so-called supernatural machinery. Throughout the book, this heavy toll is kept obtrusively and eerily present in the shapes of the twelve ghosts who follow Gerry Fegan. Among these "followers" there is a woman with a baby in her arms, both victims of typical atrocity: a bomb attack on a shop. As we find out only towards the end of the novel, they died because a terrorist turned politician – Paul McGinty – needed the headlines for his career: "to make the [Republican] leadership notice me," "to make a name for [my]self" (*GB*, p. 353). These truths are more shocking and terrifying than the ghosts themselves. It is significant and comforting that the ghost woman and her child have been survived by two real-life counterparts, Marie and her daughter Ellen, the latter being the child of the mother's relationship with a police officer.[3]

3. The ghosts

The titular ghosts are introduced to the reader at the very beginning of the novel. Neville in other words chooses not to use the supernatural machinery in the typical way, i.e. step by step to produce in his reader the growing uneasiness characteristic of the classic ghost stories (see Mydla, 2017). Neville signals his interest in the supernatural as predominantly moral and political.

In the first scene we see Gerry Fegan, the hero-villain, sitting in a Belfast pub getting drunk, a habit he has developed since his release from the Maze prison. Soon we learn that Fegan is not alone, that in fact he is trying once more to drink himself into a state which would make him oblivious to the obtrusive presence of the ghosts of his twelve victims:

> Fegan looked at each of his companions in turn. Of the five soldiers three were Brits and two were Ulster Defence Regiment. Another of the followers was a cop, his Royal Ulster Constabulary uniform neat and stiff, and two more were Loyalists, both Ulster Freedom Fighters. The remaining four were civilians who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He remembered doing all of them, but it was the civilians whose memories screamed the loudest. (*GB*, p. 4)

This passage introduces a number of key points. First of all, we learn the essential fact about Gerry Fegan, namely that during the Troubles he was an assassin on the Republican side, "a soldier" and "a hero" in the eyes of his community and "a terrorist" for Loyalists. We are made to realise the toll of the conflict measured in violent deaths and the extent of Fegan's responsibility and guilt.

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[3] "Marie McKenna had scandalized her family by taking up with an officer of the hated Royal Ulster Constabulary. Even worse, he was a Catholic cop at a time when joining the police was still an act of treachery. […] A romance with a peeler cut her off from all but her mother" (*GB*, p. 57). The reader cannot help regarding as symbolic the fact that the Republican "soldier" Fegan now dedicates his life to the protection of Marie and her daughter.

Even if – in the opinion of Fegan and those who "commissioned" the killings – members of Royalist and Loyalist paramilitary groups and regular cops (or "peelers") "deserved" to die, there were also innocent victims. This toll from a certain angle defines the nature of the conflict, where the line separating military and civilian became indistinct. Two of Neville's major preoccupations are the mechanism of the conflict spilling from the military, and the moral fallout it has left in the spectral shape of disturbing memories.

The identification of memories with ghosts is one of the significant tropes in the novel. In fact, it is the ghost-perturbed and unbalanced memory of someone like Gerry Fegan which now is the site or ground for the living memory.[4] Neville emphasises the significance of memory for and in Fegan in passages such as these:

> Memory cursed him. (*GB*, p. 18)
> *I remember my sins*, thought Fegan. *They follow me everywhere*. (*GB*, p.117).

The ghosts are reminders of the past, frozen in the moment of their deaths and repeating gestures which are meant to suggest to Fegan what he is supposed to do if he wants to lay them to rest and be rid of them. The militaristic pollution – as we might call the involvement of the innocent – is obvious from the moment we meet the ghosts. Here is the earliest passage of this kind:

> There was the butcher with his round face and bloody apron. Fagan dropped the package in his shop and held the door for the woman and her baby as she wheeled the pram in. They'd smiled at each other. He'd felt the heat of the blast as he jumped into the already moving car, the blast that should have come five minutes after they'd cleared the place. The other was the boy. Fegan still remembered the look in his eyes when he saw the pistol. Now the boy sat across the table, those same eyes boring into him. (*GB*, p. 4)

Already these two passages give us a hint at Neville's method in the novel as far as his use of the supernatural is concerned. On the one hand, essential are flashbacks in which Fegan and those who commissioned the killings – McGinty and others – relive the atrocities. On the other hand, the ghosts keep on urging Fegan to avenge them, miming the actions he ought to perform if he wants to be rid of them. The following passage shows clearly this combination of retrospection and anticipation. Still in the pub, Fegan is talking to the owner, Michael McKenna, another former terrorist starting a political career at Stormont (*GB*, p. 7). The ghost of a boy the two men tortured and killed together is hovering around:

[4] Some of the victims have no graves. Neville links the image of the notorious burial in a bog (*GB*, p. 322) with the still living mother of a boy Fegan and an associate tortured and killed. Now, hardly alive to the present, this woman is still looking for her son's grave (*GB*, p. 6).

> Fegan nodded and took another mouthful of stout. He held it on his tongue when he noticed the boy had risen from his place on the other side of the table. It took a moment to find him, shirtless and skinny as the day he died, creeping up behind McKenna.
> The boy pointed at the politician's head. He mimed firing, his hand thrown upwards by the recoil. His mouth made a plosive movement, but no sound came.
> Fegan swallowed the Guinness and stared at the boy. Something stirred in his mind, one memory trying to find another. The chill at his center pulsed with his heartbeat.
> "Do you remember that kid?" he asked. (*GB*, p. 5)

Memory thus plays a key role in the narrative, and we can say that the ghosts as it were jog the otherwise weakening collective memory. In some – as in the case of the young business woman, too young to remember the violent past – the memory is simply absent. In the case of the new-made politicians, the memory is a stain they need to cover up in order to be able to start a new and prosperous life.

Neville's preoccupation with the painful past ought not to be confused with a wholesale and undiscriminating rejection of the peaceful and opulent present. As Neville and McKinty explain in their "Introduction":

> It might seem a cynical observation, but the truth is, those comforts – the restaurants, the theatres, the cinemas, the shopping malls – are the things that probably guarantee that the peace will hold. Only the most hardened individuals would feel a return to the grey desolation of the '70s and '80s is a sacrifice worth making for whatever political ideals they're too embittered to let go of. (McKinty & Neville, 2014, p. 17)

And yet a novel such as *The Ghosts of Belfast* does offer its readers a return to the past and the possibility of experiencing some of the most distressing moments in the city's recent history. Indeed, this possibility is represented as a necessity – Neville's protagonist has no choice but to wade again through the blood he has spilled and make the guilty pay for their sins. The rationale seems to be clear: the present is a sham as long as a thorough reckoning with the past has not been made. The ghosts are there to make sure that this reckoning is what is going to happen. They are the guardians of the notion that truth is a fertiliser which will ensure a genuinely prosperous future, a future which is not built on lies and silences. In the course of the story, the reader realises that Fegan's mind is a vehicle for the moral message of the book, as summed up, metaphorically, in the epigraph from John Hewitt:[5] "The place that lacks its ghosts is a barren place."

As we have mentioned at the outset, Neville makes Fegan insist that the ghosts are real; and indeed they need to be more substantial than mere products

[5] The epigraph comes from John Hewitt's dramatic poem "The Bloody Brae." In the poem the line is spoken by a female character whose name is Mary, like the name of Neville's main female protagonist.

of a diseased and troubled mind. Otherwise people like McGinty will easily brush them aside as mere "figments" of a drunk's "imagination" (*GB*, p. 353). Typical of ghostly narratives, the author introduces an element of scepticism and thus indirectly emphasises the reality of the "followers" who pester Fegan. The diagnosis of the shrink in the Maze is a case in point:

> He [Fegan] told one of the prison psychologists about it. Dr. Brady said it was guilt. A manifestation, he called it. Fegan wondered why people seldom called things by their real names. (*GB*, p. 8)

Unlike the shrink, those who share the responsibility for Fegan's actions have a moral stake in disproving the reality of the ghosts. Father Coulter's reaction is telling. When Fegan confesses to having recently killed two of his former companions, the priest asks him for a reason. Fegan explains that he simply had to "give" these men "to the ghosts" as retribution for the loss of innocent lives. On hearing this, the priest calls it "madness" (*GB*, p. 153), and tells him to go with the words "your burden […] is your penance" (*GB*, p. 154). But the readers understand that just as it is not possible for the priest to accept the reality of the ghosts, it is not possible for him to absolve Fegan properly. What's more, the ghosts of three young British soldiers urge Fegan to kill the priest in order to avenge their deaths. A flashback takes us back in time to a situation in which the priest was given a chance to save the lives of the men, but did not find enough courage in himself to risk his own life by opposing Republican leaders.

Fegan's friend at the Maze prison, Ronnie Lennox, seems to have had more understanding of ghost seeing than anyone else. In a flashback recounted in Chapter 22, we see Fegan speaking openly to Ronnie about his bizarre gift:

> "When I was small, before my father died, I used to see things. People. I used to talk to them." He listened for some response, some dismissal. When none came, he said, "I never told anyone that. Not even Dr. Brady." (*GB*, p. 159)

Somewhat paradoxically, Ronnie, a dying man, seems to have more belief in the reality of ghosts than the Catholic priest. He says:

> "You're talking about the dead," he said. […] "Don't talk to me about the dead. The stuff's eating away at me, the asbestos, eating me from inside. You'll be out of here in a few weeks, but I might not make it that far. […] Don't talk to me about the dead, Gerry. […] I'll meet them soon enough." (*GB*, p. 159)

Typical of the Protestant disinclination to discuss the afterlife, Ronnie refuses "to talk about the dead," but we also sense a genuine moral concern in his fearful anticipation of the hereafter. Like Fegan, he is painfully aware of the reality of his guilt, of the fact that he has taken another person's life. Explains Fegan: "'He slit

a man's throat,' […]. 'A Catholic who walked into the wrong bar. Ronnie cried when he told me'" (*GB*, p. 139).

While the novel's real ghosts represent mute commentaries on the moral obligations that the past holds for the present, the memory that Fegan has of his prison friend Ronnie is positive, as this friendship enabled Fegan to find a kindred spirit with whom to share the sense of guilt. As we have seen, it was possible for Fegan to find in Ronnie a person who understood his supernatural gift. Another powerful presence in Fegan's life – similarly spectral – has been his mother, who, however, unlike Rennie, was unwavering in her condemnation of her son's terrorist activity and who regarded manifestations of his gift as "devilment" (*GB*, p. 44).

4. From retribution to mercy

The task of finding a working reconciliation has been the greatest challenge Northern Ireland has faced in its history and the 1998 Agreement is proof that the country has passed a difficult test. Or is it? Clearly some people have doubts and believe that in the new order and era symbolized by Stormont there linger moral debts which still need to be paid. As long as there are mothers looking for the graves of their sons, ghosts of the past will "follow" and trouble the living. As the novel says: "The old ways were dead and gone, but still their ghosts come to haunt the political process" (*GB*, pp. 244-245).

A propulsion towards closure is present in the gene pool of the thriller genre which *The Ghosts of Belfast* represents. Moreover, closure is to be expected in any novel which, like *The Ghosts of Belfast*, reawakens the conflict. Through this reawakening, with the strong emphasis on the past rendered vivid through retrospections, closure becomes an aesthetic and a moral necessity.

The need for closure is inscribed in the novel's structure as expressed in the chapter headings, which count down from twelve to zero. In moral terms, this countdown is to a restoration of equilibrium, when the ghosts' thirst for the blood of their murderers has been quenched and the avenger – Fegan – has attained peace of mind.

However, the painful lesson taught by the history of this and similar conflicts is that the shedding of blood leads to more shedding of blood. In other words, for viable moral closure there has be a logic higher – more effective – than that of retribution.

"Sooner or later, everybody pays" – Fegan keeps repeating (e.g. *GB*, p. 337). And Neville seems to be aware that he cannot let his protagonist off. Also, because institutional religion cannot guarantee peace of mind – as the case of the corrupt and compromised priest has shown – Fegan himself has no right to be pardoned. No wonder, then, that in the final section of the novel, entitled "One," the one remaining ghost, that of the mother, makes it clear to Fegan that he now has to take his own life:

> "Please." He looked up to the woman. "I can have a life."
> She stepped forward and returned her fingers to his forehead. Fegan reached up and took her hand in his. A thought flashed in his mind: he had never reached out and touched her before. She had touched him, but he had never touched her. He wrapped his fingers around hers. He looked up into her hard eyes.
> "I can have a life. I can be a real person, a whole person. I know I can't be with Marie and Ellen, but I can be clean. Please let me have a life."
> Her eyes wavered, something soft moving behind them.
> "Mercy," Fegan said, the word catching in his throat. He squeezed her hand in his, feeling her slender bones. "Have mercy."
> Something flickered across her face, just for a moment, and then it went slack. She pulled her hand away, formed the shape of a gun once more, and placed her fingers at the center of his forehead. There was no anger or hate in the lines of her face now, only sadness. (*GB*, p. 366)

The ghost's sadness is saying to Fegan that his plea for mercy cannot be heeded, that it is groundless. The ghost expects Fegan to complete his scheme of righting past wrongs. The logical next and final step is suicide; Fegan may not have been the only person responsible for the deaths of the twelve victims of the conflict, but the bare fact is that he personally killed those people.

As we have suggested, the logic that neatly corresponds to the retributive idea of justice may not in this case satisfy the reader's expectation of a morally compelling closure. Aware of this, Neville "makes use" of Ellen in the scene in which – as we have seen – Fegan is making a desperate plea for his life with the ghost woman. The entry of Ellen breaks the deadlock, as suggested by the way in which Fegan conceals the gun with which he was going to blow his brains out: "He let the gun hang inside the bath, away from her pretty eyes" (*GB*, p. 367).

We immediately realise that Ellen is mercy personified: "She slipped between his knees and propped herself on his quivering thigh. Her fingers were soft and warm as she touched his tears and felt the stubble on his chin" (*GB*, p. 367). Moreover, to Fegan's astonishment, Ellen is also a ghost seer; she is concerned with the fact that the ghost woman is now alone, her "baby" having "gone to Heaven." In a moment of symbolic reconciliation which goes beyond the patterns of militaristic and Gothic retribution, the ghost first turns to Ellen, upon whom she bestows a silent blessing: "She lowered herself to her knees as her lip trembled. Her fingertips brushed the loose strands of Ellen's hair, smoothing them." Then she turns to Fegan, gives him "the softest, faintest, saddest of smiles," and departs "into the morning light beyond" with the word "Mercy" on her lips.

The fact that it falls to the female characters, both "real" and "supernatural," to bring closure to a mayhem unleashed and sustained by men is telling, and requires no elucidation. It is equally obvious why it is Ellen who features prominently in Fegan's vision of the country's future fertility:

> Students gathered in huddles on the grass on one side, and on the concrete steps on the other. Young, pretty people Fegan would never know. It occurred to him that most of these children had never been torn from sleep by a bomb blast in the night hammering their windows like a thousand fists, freezing their hearts in their chests. For a moment he might have resented them for it, but then he felt Ellen's fingers adjust their grip on his, and he was glad for them. He thought of Ellen as a young woman, and how she would never comprehend the awful, constant fear that had smothered this place for more than thirty years. (*GB*, p. 139)

This image takes us back to the young woman in a business suit crossing the street in one of Belfast's prosperous areas, mobile phone pressed to her ear. In Neville's vision of the future, this woman could be carrying a copy of *The Ghosts of Belfast* in her bag.

But then one thinks that perhaps Ellen would not need to read Neville's book. She herself, like Fegan, is a ghost-seer.

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