Introduction

Northern Ireland is a golden place for heroic stories of struggle and freedom. These stories retell for example the Battle of Boyne in which Protestant King William defeated the Catholic King James in 1690, and remind the people of the sagas of the IRA hunger strikers who made the ultimate sacrifice for Irish freedom in the 1980’s. The political purpose of these stories and narratives is to represent and restate the age old conflict in present day life and politics through various different historical antagonisms.

Contrary to many other political entities, Northern Ireland bottles up narratives that are conflicting with each other. The history is anything but a unitary grand story told, by and, to one Northern Irish “imagined community”. Instead politics, discussion and remembering are regimented into two imagined communities, whose understanding of the shared history is in stark conflict. These two narratives have become hegemonic among their respective communities; the nationalist/republican Catholics and the unionist/loyalist Protestants. These narratives provide a lens through which contemporary divisions are reinforced, and are very difficult to challenge, as their holiness is sanctified on every level of the Northern Irish society. Irish writer and critic Colm Tóibín has said, in a reference to the Irish nationalist history writing, “It was essential for our past to be
glorious if our present ... was to have any meaning” (Tóibín 1993, 1). This quote captures the importance of past in Ireland and Northern Ireland, and also hints to the potential of the past to create and sustain conflicts, whenever its illustriousness was questioned.

The constitutional aspect of Northern Irish narratives is that unionists hold it paramount that the constitutional status of Northern Ireland should kept as a part of the United Kingdom. Nationalists¹, on the other hand, dispute these premises and claim that only one legitimate state exists on the island of Ireland, which is the Republic of Ireland.

The problem I am putting forward in my paper is how these hegemonic narratives are dealt in works of literature that refer to the Northern Irish conflict. Is the hegemony of the two dominant stories so strong that it cannot be broken even in fiction, resulting to telling and retelling these same narratives, or does fiction provide a place in which challenging narratives could be born? I am tackling my question by reading three novels depicting the “Troubles²” era of Northern Ireland and analyzing their relation to the history and the past and to the constituting political strife of Northern Ireland. The novels are Cal by Bernard Mac Laverty (1983); Hidden Symptoms by Deirdre Madden (1986) and Eureka Street by Robert McLiam Wilson (1995).

My hypothesis is that a piece of literature can discuss and challenge the hegemonic narratives more easily than a more straightforwardly “daily political” text. I am understanding literature not as mere fiction, but as another form of political speech, which holds, in addition to its aesthetic value, also a possibility to present and future political action. I am contextualizing the reading of the three novels with the Northern Irish contested historiography, bringing forward the theme of how history is used for political purposes and how important a particular reading of history can be to a particular ideology. This way I am also able to reflect the revision in historiography with the Northern Irish literature and ask whether the same revision that has taken place in history writing has done so in art. Another context which I am utilizing is the debate of the relations between culture and politics in Northern Ireland. However, my point is not to investigate the response of these novels in Northern Ireland, or elsewhere.

¹ By nationalism and nationalists I refer in this paper to the Northern Irish strand of Irish nationalism and its supporters, which does not imply to any particular political party.
² The Troubles is a term used to describe the latest phase of the Northern Ireland political violence starting from the late 1960’s and ending with the 1998 Belfast Agreement.
Next a brief introduction to the storylines: *Cal* is a doomed loves story between a young Catholic man who is caught between the demands of Republican paramilitaries and his feelings towards a widow called Marcella. The novel is set in Northern Irish countryside. Cal had previously taken part to the political murder of Marcella’s husband who served as an officer in the Northern Irish police service (at the time the RUC). One theme of the novel is the difficulty to negotiate one’s subjectivity in an impossible situation, in which so much is decided on behalf of you. *Hidden Symptoms* is a story of a group of university students living in Belfast and deals with the problems of subjectivity, especially female subjectivity, and with the relation of arts and politics in Northern Ireland as well as with the whole political setting of the Northern Irish Troubles. The title of the novel refers to a depiction by one of the characters, stating that already before the Troubles Northern Ireland was sick with hidden symptoms (p. 13). *Eureka Street* is set in mid 1990’s Belfast and depicts the era of the IRA and loyalist ceasefire declarations and has the most positive vibe of the three novels. However, the presentation of political violence and the motivations behind it are in *Eureka Street* perhaps the grimmest of the three. The lead character of *Eureka Street* is Jake, who is a “lapsed” Catholic and who has lost his faith in politics on a theoretical level as well as on practical level. The central tension of the book is between Jake and Aoirghe a female supporter of the Republican movement. In all of the novels the main characters are Catholics, although none of them is a straightforward believer in the republican or nationalist agenda.

All of the novels can be approached simply by interpreting the naming of the characters. *Cal* presents already in its title the dualistic struggle of Northern Ireland as Cal is short, and Anglicanization, from a Gaelic name Cahal. To underwrite this the author puts the leader of the local IRA gang to refer to Cal always as Cahal, as the others, most importantly Marcella refer to him as Cal. Jake, the name of the leading character in *Eureka Streets*, expresses struggle (Jacob). Instead of an angel, Jake is wrestling internally between commitment and displacement, whether to engage and to believe in politics or whether to remain outside and cynical. The struggle that Jake’s name hints can of course be seen also as a metaphor to the whole Northern Irish conundrum. Another key character in *Eureka Street* is Aoirghe, a girl that Jake meets in a bar through his friends. The Gaelic name Aoirghe already betrays that the character is used as a caricature of Irish
cultural nationalism and political republicanism, especially a bright eyed middle class strand of both. Religion and crisis of belief play a central role in *Hidden Symptoms*, and it is no surprise that the leading character Theresa refers by name to a catholic intellectual saint (Theresa of the book being a bright student of literature).

Instead of dwelling on the names, although it is obvious that they are not accidental, I am not building my analysis on that. Instead, I am referring from time to time to James Phelan and especially to his idea of the character functions in a novel. Phelan calls these *mimetic*, *thematic* and *synthetic* functions. In their mimetic function the character represents a possible real life people, in their thematic functions they are representative of a larger groups and in their synthetic function characters work as an artful construction within a larger construct of the work. All of these character functions can be found in these novels and sometimes they are present also in a single character. (Phelan 2005)

Northern Irish conflict in culture and arts

The all-embracing constitutional question in Northern Ireland establishes a demarcation to unionism and nationalism, culminating especially during political crisis. The constitutional question constitutes the political and marginalizes those who do not fit into the friend and enemy division regimented by that particular constitution. The political debate in Northern Ireland is therefore very strongly constructed by the two hegemonic discourses of unionism and nationalism. These discourses also create and sustain the two competing narratives that are told of the Irish and Northern Irish history. Like historian Marianne Elliott puts it: “Throughout these hearings [of the so called Opsahl commission] core differences between Protestants and Catholics emerged time and time again: The centrality of religion to one, of Irish history, language and culture to the other” (Elliott 2002, 170) So, the divide between unionism and nationalism is present in historiography as well as in culture and arts. In terms of the cultural sphere, the question is what kind of culture is appropriate and encouraged and whether art should reflect the violent conflict or shy away from it. But let us start with the historiography.

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3 For a more elaborate reading of the Northern Irish politics following Carl Schmitt see Aughey 1997
The way how both nationalists and unionists see themselves are derived from their conflicting ways of reading and writing the histories of Ireland, Northern Ireland and the British Isles at large. Especially Roy Foster, who has been the leading figure among the so called revisionists, has demonstrated how central history has been in the creation and perseverance of Irish nationalism (e.g. Foster 1995). The use of Irish history especially in the Republic of Ireland has been a prime example of the use of history as a legitimator of action and to cement group cohesion with necessary stories of heroes and martyrs (Hobsbawn 1983, 12-13), as of the use of invented, and other, traditions that carry on the story of the glorious past (see e.g. Sulkunen 2007). Irish history writing had until the 1970’s, to aggravate a bit, followed eclectically the lines drawn by James Connolly in 1910 in his influential book *Labour in Irish History*, arguing for the paramount unity and sovereignty for the Irish people, and leaving out of the equation those parts that do not fit this imaginative construction. Obviously, this particular politicized reading of the Irish history has penetrated Northern Ireland as well.

Because of the importance of history in the grand narrative of Irishness, it is understandable that the revisionism of Irish history has caused ripples also outside the academic world. However, the revisionist “movement”, which can be seen originating from the 1970’s with historians such as Paul Bew, Henry Patterson and Peter Gibbon joined later by Roy Foster, Graham Walker and Alvin Jackson has succeeded in largely making the nationalist oriented history writing obsolete, leading Roy Foster to declare “We are all revisionists now” (Foster 1986). On the other hand, the critique that has followed has argued that perhaps the pendulum has swung too far, and the nationalist interpretation has just been replaced by a unionist one, with the same deficiencies in terms of objectivity as the first one. Counter arguments point out that this critique still stems from the “connollyan” conception that the main cause for present Irish troubles is the British influence, and which sees the unionist population in Northern Ireland as a British garrison put there to uphold the imperialist politics of the Crown. In this reading all the subsequent developments can be deducted from this imperative, with an addition of a collective guilt to the Protestant/unionist population. The revisionist history writing challenged this interpretation and implicitly gave intellectual ammunitions for the daily politics of unionism, and revisionist historians soon had to deal with the accusations of
politicized history writing. (For a good compilation of the Irish historiography debate, see Farrington 2003)

Representing the Troubles

Northern Ireland carries a dual failure: the failure of the British state building and the failure of the Irish nation building (O’Leary & Arthur, 1990). Northern Ireland as a state, or more accurately as a part of the British state, has failed to convince a significant part of the nationalist population. Also, a civil commitment that would be needed to create a proper, shared and functional imagined community of Northern Ireland or a type of Northern Irishness has not really been born. This is partly due to the Irish nationalism and of its parochial nature, but also the direct result of many lost opportunities by the unionist regime.

When the Irish imagined nation started to take its shape in the 19th century, together with the ideology of Irish nationalism, it was, typically to nationalisms, constructed in a way that excluded everything that was not Irish. Nationalism was very strictly defined through the Roman Catholic religion and invented Gaelic heritage, which together served as the main building blocks of a typical ethnic nation, in a sense described by Jürgen Habermas (Habermas 1998, 132).

This alliance of church, peasants and the land aristocracy was a huge success, and nationalism became the single political thought that succeeded in uniting the majority of the people in Ireland from the mid-19th century onwards, resulting, for example, to the failure of socialism and making Ireland quite unique (English 2006). Unionism on the other hand turned exclusive and isolationist in the early 20th century, when it became evident that Ireland would depart from the rest of the United Kingdom. Unionism as a political idea chose to make its case particularly Northern Irish, although unionism was at that point Irish unionism. A decision to concentrate to north transformed unionism to Northern Irish unionism, as this was believed to rescue unionism from the death that holding on to all Ireland unionism would have brought (Walker 2004).

In both Hidden Symptoms and Cal the grounds of the Northern Irish conflict are not questioned, but they are taken as given. The emphasis is in explaining their
consequences to the individual. In *Cal* the political conflict is framed with the description of painted kerbstones and fluttering Union Jacks that Cal comes across in the early pages of the book. In Northern Ireland painting of kerbstones following the colors of either the Union Jack or the Irish tricolor is one of the most basic manifestation of political loyalty to certain ideology as well as a marking of territory. As Cal approaches painted kerbstones, i.e. loyalist territory, he is described approaching a foreign and violent territory; “It was a dangerous sign that the Loyalists were getting angry” (p. 9). Cal’s family is described as living midst a loyalist population, refusing to follow other Catholics and moving out. This description serves both mimetic and thematic character functions as Cal can be seen as a representative of a larger group being intimidated by shows of hostility. In fact, as a representative of this particular group Cal can also be interpreted to reflect all those who have a similar tendency towards painted kerbstones, not only Catholics. In the scene nothing hints to the possibility that only loyalist kerbstones are intimidating, rather the scene is a thematic description of a person who is forced to enter a foreign, unknown and hostile territory. Nevertheless, it is Cal and his family who are described as being under siege and under attack, culminating in Cal’s beating by Protestant thugs and the house of his family being burnt down. However, this is not done to rationalize Cal’s antagonism or hatred towards loyalists or Protestants; on the contrary, it is to paint a Christ-like analogy of a person, who after every possible hardship still refuses to answer to it by violence. Cal’s answer is more than anything a disengagement from the conflict and remorse of his earlier commitment to it.

The same thematic is present also in *Eureka Street*, in which territoriality, exclusion and externality are illustrated through the book. One example of this the graffiti “OTG” that is found on walls around the city. As is told in the novel, Belfast is (was) a golden place for abbreviations, as the numerous paramilitary groups used to claim their territory with different abbreviations painted on the walls to mark the boundaries of different politicized places. The abbreviations were such as (P)(R)IRA, UVF, UDA, INLA etc. In the book a mysterious abbreviation OTG appears along with the known symbols and starts to puzzle the people and the officials so much that finally the Northern Ireland Secretary of State has to give an official statement of the OTG graffiti’s (p. 147). The appearance of something unexplainable raises the worries and concerns of the people,
who would be more in peace with the paramilitary tags they have grown to know. The OTG mystery is not uncovered in the book and is left to puzzle the mind of the reader.

Literary theorist Lisa Zunshine (2006) has suggested that the interest people have towards interpreting and explaining the motives and actions of fictional representations of minds, that is the characters in a novel, is partly due to the cognitive character of a human, who is constantly trying to figure out the motives and actions of other persons. In fiction this same process can be stimulated in a safe and non-harmful way, the point being that people ponder the political motives of also fictional characters, or as in this case the purpose of the OTG –graffiti’s to make sense of them. This partly answers to the question of why novels depicting political themes can have significant political responses. They are not in any sense mere fiction. The only explanation to the graffiti’s in the novel is given by the lead character Jake who figures that the symbol is put there so that everyone can interpret it the way one wants, to work as a liberating tool for the people to break away from the tribal and paramilitary mentalities, and also perhaps as an instruction to reclaim the streets. In that sense the OTG symbol works also as a symbol of Jake himself as they share the same ambiguity and desire to break free from the Northern Irish antagonisms.

The depiction of the loyalists, as also later of the republicans (p. 58), in Cal is like they would be forces of nature, something that the individual is forced to take into account, but without strength to fight back. However, signs of resistance do arise later when Cal refuses to take part in the paramilitary activities of the local IRA. He also begins to question the sacrifices that the political ideology of republicanism is demanding. Cal parallels Christianity and the suffering of Christ to the suffering demanded from the Irish for the cause of United Ireland: “To suffer for something which didn’t exist, that was like Ireland. People were dying every day, men and women were being crippled and turned into vegetables in the name of Ireland. An Ireland which never was and never would be” (p. 83). This is a total withdrawal from the grand narrative of Irish nationalism and republicanism. Especially the last sentence which abolishes the myth of the once (in history) united Gaelic Ireland as well as the myth of united Ireland to come, which was absolutely central for the legitimacy of the republican movement. Compared to the political thinking of republicanism and Irish nationalism of the 1980’s, this kind of
thinking was totally displaced. It can also be said to be in tune with revision in historiography, as Cal’s concept of Ireland “which never was and is never would be” is comment not only to the absence of legitimacy of the republican paramilitaries but also a comment of the never existing glorious past of the nationalist historian.

In *Eureka Street* the contested history and its perversity is a constant theme of the book, representing the changed political climate in which it was written. The struggle with the collapsing narratives of the old as well as politicized history are epitomized in an angry exchange of words in a pub when Aoírghhe comes clear about the premises of the Northern Irish Troubles: “This kind of thing [police brutality] will just go on and on until this whole country is united and we are one Ireland”; A classic republican line. This is continued by Aoírghes lecture to the entourage (and to a less educated reader) about the history of the conflict “from prehistory through the Dark Ages to the present day”. Aoírghes rundown is accompanied by narrator Jake who explains to the reader that there are basically three different versions of the Irish history: the Republican, the Loyalist and the British, but the character Jake of the novel, observing the rundown, does not react to Aoírghes lecture, as the additional commentary given by Jake the narrator is for the reader only (p. 93-98). In Phelan’s terms almost all of the characters in *Eureka Street* can be thought to have thematic function. Aoírgh starts the novel as a very stereotypical middle class educated Republican, but transforms later closer to the thematic representation of Jake, which is thematic figure trying to stand outside the Northern Irish dichotomy.

Almost a similar scene takes place in *Hidden Symptoms*, although this time without the sarcastic voice of a narrator. In this scene Theresa gets angry with her friends Robert and Kathy for not taking the political divisions in Northern Ireland seriously enough. Theresa: “Do you feel like a second-class citizen, Robert? Do you feel that people hate you because you’re a Catholic? Well, you ought to, because they do. (p. 46)”. Overall the antagonism of Northern Ireland and the hegemonic division into two is not questioned in *Hidden Symptoms*. It is only represented. The novel, or the author, if one wishes, does not propose herself as a social engineer or a doctor, although, as mentioned above, the title of the book refers to the Northern Ireland being sick with hidden symptoms already well before the outbreak of the Troubles In contrast *Eureka Street*
written in a changed political context is much more outspoken in terms of the political problem solving.

Cal’s relation to the local IRA and his discussions with the leader of the group, a man called Skeffington, are particularly interesting as they are commenting the politics of the past in Ireland and Northern Ireland from the perspective of the republican movement, as well as commenting the ways in which remembering can be put in political use. Skeffington is continuously referring to Cal as Cahal as to underline his Irishness and to point Cal’s inescapabilty from commitment. The way Skeffington frames himself, the conflict and the relation between the two is very interesting. When Cal tries to pull away from the IRA’s activities Skeffington starts to convince Cal to stay committed by first reciting a republican poem “Mother” by Pádraig Pearse\(^4\). When the poem ends Cal comments by saying “But it is not like 1916” to which Skeffington answers “It wasn’t like 1916 in 1916” the point being that it is not important what actually happened in 1916, but how the 1916 is remembered, and the Easter Rebellion of 1916 definitely being among the key elements in building the glorious past of republican Ireland. The scene continuous, as Skeffington connects the Easter rebellion to the Bloody Sunday of Derry (1972), an event which he claims to have witnessed. However, the single thing that Skeffington describes from the Bloody Sunday is the image of a Catholic priest waving a handkerchief and coming to give last rites to one of the victims of the shooting. This particular image is by far the best known and the most reproduced image, painted for example in several different murals, especially in Derry\(^5\). The fact that Skeffington chooses this image to legitimize his own position, as well as to make an argument using politics of the past forces the reader to doubt the reliability of Skeffington and to think about the reasons behind the possible unreliability. The event itself is not as important as remembering it, and in this case, the key thing is how that memory can be put in political use. This is particularly straightforwardly presented as Skeffington is hoping “If only they would let the Paras loose in Derry again” (p. 66-67) as this would benefit the IRA in recruiting new members.

\(^4\) Pearse was a poet and a political activist as well as one of the leaders of the 1916 Easter Rebellion. Pearse was executed by the British after the failed uprising in May 1916.

\(^5\) One example: [http://www.cain.ulster.ac.uk/bogsideartists/mural3/](http://www.cain.ulster.ac.uk/bogsideartists/mural3/)
Skeffington does not make a single argument to legitimize a republican struggle based on the hardship that local Catholics or indeed Cal are facing. Instead the material he uses in his pep talk to Cal comes solely from the particular republican reading of the Irish and Northern Irish past. The way Skeffington links the Easter Rising of 1916 and Bloody Sunday of 1972, adding a wish that the British invader would repeat such an action, is a case of implying and creating a continuity with the past, which is central in inventing traditions and in politics of the past (Hobsbawn 1983). His remark of the wish to let the Paras loose again (referring to the Parachute regiment in Derry during the Bloody Sunday) represent the hope to re-enact the past to create yet another collective memory that could be harvested to serve a particular political interest.

As seen, the republican cause is not in anyway idealized in Cal as its supporters are portrayed as corrupted and as those who seek their personal benefit from the political conflict. This is analogical to the description that takes places in Eureka Street, although neither of the novels could be said, in my mind, judgmental.

Overall in Cal the use of images relating to the past is very stereotypical. Loyalists are presented as bigots who want to burn out the Catholics and Catholics/republicans as those who cherish the unreal memory of 1916 or 1971 or who in present time (early 1980’s) connect to the prisoners of “Long Kesh” (p. 58), the bottom line in all being “Ireland unfree shall never be at peace” (ibid.).

In Cal the main character takes part to a republican killing to which he seeks a Christ-like atonement for the rest of the story. The argument in this is not so much that the surroundings in which people live and which influence their action are criticized or questioned. The novel paints a tragedy, showing to what these premises can lead to from a perspective of a single individual. All three books have politically speaking a similar narrative. A very classic political position, argued through history, is presented and in a way of a bildungsroman a character presenting the original disposition grows away and distant to it. In Eureka Street this is done with the most veiling, as both of the leading characters Jake and Aoirghe experience a displacement from their original antagonistic positions towards the middle ground. But in Hidden Symptoms and in Cal the grand narrative behind the initial political position is not questioned as much as it is in Eureka.

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6Long Kesh is a nickname for a Northern Irish prison near Lisburn for paramilitary prisoners.
Nevertheless, the consequences of following on the path given by the grand narrative become unbearable to the characters in both *Cal* and *Hidden Symptoms*, and in both cases the characters have to abandon their primary believes and ideologies, whereas in *Eureka street* all political narratives in Northern Ireland are made equally ridiculous. Therefore *Eureka Street* can be considered as the most radical of the three.

Still, a key narrative element of all the three books seems to be that the central characters are distancing themselves from the hegemonic division, which either they or other characters in the novel at first seemed to adopt. The tradition building of the hegemonic narrative is not questioned as such, but rather the conclusions that individuals draw from it are. For example in *Cal* the local IRA gang, as well as Cal himself, share a very traditional republican understanding of the history of Northern Ireland. Towards the end of the novel the members of the IRA are not seen to lose their faith, but Cal is.

The political

An integral question in relation to the politics of the past is how the political itself is understood. Especially the relation between the individual and the political as well as between the individual and past are paramount. In this sense all the three novels have a lot in common.

In *Eureka Street* Aoirghe implies that Jake is naïve in not understanding that his identity as a born West Belfastian would automatically and inescapably lock him into particular political commitment, and that refusing to do that would force him to live under a false consciousness. Aoirghes point in essence is that politics, at least in Northern Ireland, are something you could not escape, something that you were thrown into, and also that the premises of those politics do not change before the British presence in Northern Ireland ends. This argument presupposes a particular understanding of the past, an understanding that the British presence is the cause of the present Northern Irish dilemma and only its removal would solve it. In Aoirghes point the essential historicity of

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7 Jake is described as someone who has been raised in the Falls Road area of West Belfast, which is a historic stronghold of Roman Catholics and republicanism.
the Republican narrative is repeated. Core arguments are not building on the political of the day but on that of yesterday.

Politics in general is in *Eureka Street* something that none living in the social structure of Northern Ireland can escape from; the line of division and the constitution of the political cuts through everything. When Jake refuses to commit himself culturally and politically, he betrays not only his kind but also himself. The same inescapability is present in *Cal*, in which the local IRA leader states: “Not to act-you know- is to act” (p. 65-66) in reference to Cal reluctance to commit himself to the cause of armed struggle; “If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem” (ibid.). The other side of the inescapable commitment is the loss of subjectivity. An individual is not really free to do anything else but to choose between two alternatives. Even not choosing is automatically a choice for either or. This helplessness is discussed particularly in *Hidden Symptoms* in which none of the main characters have really committed them to any organized political movement, but who find themselves in situations in which the decision seems to be made for them by others. This is crystallized through two analogies, first with the holocaust and the helplessness of its victims (p. 19) and with the use of the abattoir metaphor in describing Northern Ireland (p. 30). In all cases, in the Holocaust, in abattoir and in Northern Ireland, resistance and winning back subjectivity is extremely difficult.

The political in all the three novels is very strongly the political of the division of Northern Ireland into two antagonistic discourses, but the polit-vocabulary has also nuances. For example in *Cal* the IRA figures see themselves as representing the real and glorious goal of the republican movement whereas the party political republicans are described as someone who only harvests the benefits gained through armed struggle (p. 24).

In *Eureka Street* the political conflict is introduced through a character of Aoirghe. A tension is created between Jake and Aoirghe as Jake is portrayed as someone with true Catholic and nationalist credentials, but who refuses to act accordingly. Jake is an ideal working class nationalist hero, someone that a middle class self conscious

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8 The abattoir metaphor is in use also in *Cal*, in which Cal refuses to work in abattoir. This refusal is analogous to Cal’s refusal to join the local IRA, making the argument behind the choice of metaphor quite clear.
republican like Aoighe would definitely look up to; “and I knew she wouldn’t be able to resist the lure of all those credentials of mine”. But as Jake is lapsed both in terms of religion and politics, he does not respond to Aoighes potential needs. This tension creates a strong antagonistic relation between the two throughout the book and in their first scene they are drawn into a duel in which Aoighe challenges Jake for betraying his class and kind, referring for example to Jake educating himself in London, instead of the Universities in Belfast (namely the Queen’s⁹). Aoighe: “What’s wrong with Irish universities?” Jake: “Well, Irish universities remind me of God. A lot of people seem to believe in them. I respect their faith but there’s no real proof”. The identity politics and the betraying markers that the people in Northern Ireland used to identify “us” and “them” is satirized when Aoighe, after hearing that Jake has his West Belfast credentials, snaps at him saying she was sure that Jake was a Protestant. Jake answers: “Why would you have thought that? The space between my eyes, the gapless front teeth, the fact that I’m wearing no green?” Jake ridicules the markers of identity, but he also makes fun of the division of the people into two, which is parallel to the shallowness of the physical marks of identity. Jake underlines that as the physical difference between the political identities in Northern Ireland are more or less coincidental the differences must be found from conflicting readings of history.

The hegemony of the two discourses in Northern Ireland, and their desire to keep up the status quo is explained in Eureka Street through a flashback, in which Max, an American friend of Aoighes, is remembering her father. Max’s father worked as a peace negotiator and was shot at the Belfast international airport, when he was about to enter Northern Ireland to negotiate peace, after succeeding in similar negotiations all over world. He is described being shot twenty minutes after he arrived in a co-coordinated assassination of the republican and loyalist paramilitaries. This story underlines the difficulty of breaking through and challenging the two narratives. An outsider with a strong merit of success was able to create such a fear that the two hegemonic factions chose it better to eliminate that threat, concretely. The argument is that the conflict always serves the interests of some people and when those interests are being threatened

⁹ The three main characters in Hidden Symptoms are all Catholics studying at Queen’s, although the university politics is not discussed in that novel.
those people are willing to take extreme measures. Although in the case of paramilitaries, assassination is not even an extreme measure, rather an act of business as usual, impersonal and banal, like the description of political violence throughout the book.

However, in the political history of the Troubles, outside interventions and peace makers have seldom been targeted, so for an educated reader the assassination scheme and the murder pact behind it are not completely believable. Therefore, one can ponder, whether the best explanation for its existence in the novel is that it is used, once again, to underline the rigid discursive space in Northern Ireland, where everything coming outside “the two traditions” can be quelled. In a nutshell this is the problem of the novel itself: How to say something worth listening to, and escape the labeling to either nationalist or unionist tradition.

Politics and Culture

If culture is political, should the culture in Northern Ireland should be Irish nationalist, Protestant, British or what? The latter option refers to cosmopolitanism, without anchoring arts and culture to either Protestant unionism or Catholic nationalism. This is often seen as the choice of celebrating multicultural and liberal Britishness, in contrast to something more easily definable, such as Irish culture. Making these choices and categorizing art is both easy and impossible. The celebration of the Irish language and the traditional markers of Irish nationalist culture can be easier to recognize as political compared to similar manifestations on the protestant side, as I am now referring to the elusive concept of Britishness, and not to the marches and lambeg drums as the “true” signifiers of Protestant culture.

Some agents in the cultural sphere have devoted themselves in describing the “Troubles” without “objectivity”, understood in a sense of political non-commitment, but with vigor of someone who wants to make a point. One example is Field Day Theatre Company, which is inclined to see Northern Irish question from a colonialist perspective frame, although the Company is not afraid to give the platform to totally antagonistic
views as well. Field Day was born in early 1980’s and is concentrated in Derry/Londonderry and has served as an interesting counter force to professional academics, namely historians, who, from the late 1960’s have started to break from the old previously hegemonic understanding of the “Irish question”, which was largely build on the synthesis of nationalism and Marxism. This interpretation portrayed the history of Ireland as a more or less a direct result of its colonial relationship to England. This was challenged by professional historians representing revisionism in the Irish history writing. Field Day was one of those who did not welcome this change, but propagated for a more traditional reading of the conflict. So, it marks a kind of refugee place for those who wish to maintain a more nationalist reading of the history of Ireland. This said, The Field Day Company has articulated as its purpose to surpass the Northern Irish dichotomy, but perhaps as a sign of the struggles facing one trying to do this, it has most often been categorized as a nationalist project. The idea of a political play conceived to serve a politically committed purpose is also discussed in *Hidden Symptoms*, in which this idea is however cast away (p. 22-23).

Although in the 1990’s the traditional way to interpret the Northern Irish question from the post colonial perspective had suffered a defeat among the academics, the post colonial explanation was still hegemonic among those who wanted to see the Northern Irish nationalist culture as a manifestation of the struggle between the oppressed Irish and the Protestants/Unionists duped by their colonial masters to live under false consciousness (e.g. Miller 1997). The argument was that this defining struggle should be more present in art, and even that without political aspect art was not worthy. In essence, the all-embracing hegemony of the two discourses should be reflected in art, as it is the defining character of the society. In addition of celebrating the union of culture and politics, when it suited the nationalist political goals, this line of argument attacked heavily on anything that could be termed as Protestant culture (Bennett 1997, 206-210). Sometimes, as in the case of Ronan Bennett, this produces a striking paradox as when art describing the plight of the Irish and cherishing the goals of republicanism is seen worth celebrating, while the Protestant culture is by foundation described as worthless and

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10 Field Day Company published a very anti-nationalist pamphlet from harbinger of the so called” New Unionist” movement Robert McCartney in 1985.
“defined by sectarianism” in a same article (Bennett 1997, 210). The prime example that is used when speaking of the Protestant culture in this sense is the parade tradition of Orange Order and similar organizations. These celebrations epitomize the idea of Protestant culture and its heavy inclination towards the politics of the past.

The parades peak around the 12th of July when the victory of Protestant King William over the soldiers of Catholic King James is celebrated. Parades can be understood positively as acts of collective self expression of cultural and religious freedom, and the prevention of parading as an act violating those freedoms. This has been the central unionist argument of why Protestant parades should not be prohibited or re-routed. Obviously the parades have their negative aspect as well. In a territorial conflict parades manifest superiority. Parades marching through Roman Catholic neighborhoods remind of the battles taken place centuries ago representing the past in the present. As the territory in Northern Ireland is limited and the parties of the conflict live physically near each other, there is lots of use of territorially manifested superiority. The Orange Order argues of being a religious organization without political motives, but in the Northern Irish conflict this does not have much value and the Order can be taken as an example of inability or unwillingness to separate cultural from the political. One must, however, remember that parading is not accepted by all Protestants and unionists and that the role of the Orange Order has always been under critique inside unionism. Still, the parading tradition represents for unionists, partly contra historical evidence, tradition and continuity supporting the conservative core of unionist politics. (Of parades, see e.g. Bryan 2000)

In Hidden Symptoms the parades are generalized to represent the whole of the Protestant psyche, while the one’s parading are the ones who show their hatred in public, the rest keep their hatred “hidden in their hearts” (p. 47). In Cal the intimidating (from the perspective of a Catholic) Protestant ceremonies are described already at the beginning of the novel (p. 9), thus framing the political as well as its relation to the past.

Are parades a case of genuine folk culture or an act of communal hostility? This question is also been posed in both Cal and in Hidden Symptoms in a debate among Catholic students (p. 45). In this debate, yet again, the choicelessness of a person is highlighted as Theresa does no understand why his friend Robert does no equate Orange
Order with National Front or the Ku Klux Klan. Theresa’s argument is that as a Catholic Robert should not tolerate the kind of communal hatred, which organizations like that manifest. Robert’s reply that he is not a religious Catholic does not help, as for Theresa this does not matter, since Theresa’s concept of Catholicism is not limited to religion or cultural identity but extends to one political identity as well. To be a Catholic in Northern Ireland presupposes a certain political commitment which, it seems, cannot be escaped from.

The demand to understand where one belongs to highlights the parochial aspect of culture, and the problems of all inclusive cultural politics in Northern Ireland. In *Cal* the main character is reading the diaries of his lover Marcella in secret and discovers a paragraph in which Marcella is remembering a holiday trip with her later deceased husband to the Northern Irish countryside. Marcella describes the striking contrast between the beauty of the countryside and the isolated and drunken atmosphere in a Protestant pub they visit afterwards, in which “no conversation takes place”. What makes this paragraph interesting is that Marcella is Catholic and her late husband Protestant. That is why Marcella is able to get an insiders glance to the Protestant way of life and contrast it to her own likening. Marcella is described as a lover of Italy, which of course carries a not so subtle hint to Roman Catholicism. Marcella and Cal both share a certain judgment when it comes to the Protestant culture, although their relation to the political conflict is, overall speaking, rather ambiguous.

The relationship of culture and politics in Northern Ireland is related also to the discussion about identity, especially about Protestant or Unionist identity or more accurately to the lack of it, the problem being the element of artificiality of the British identity and the political connotations that come with an Irish identity. Whether this is a sign of profound collective confusion or the onion likeness of one’s identity is under debate (one of the best compilations of this, see Aughey 1989, 12-20).

The classic nationalist understanding of the role of culture in Northern Ireland argues that the Irish literature of the early 1900\textsuperscript{th} century was largely born to discuss the colonial experience and to overcome oppression with something native and original (Dean 1990, 3). From this perspective, the Northern Irish culture should be discussing and dissecting the remnants of that colonial relation. This kind of strict definition of the
role and purpose of literature or culture obviously leaves no space for art that wants to bypass the political realities or to interpret it from less nationalist perspective. As one can see in all of the three novels, there is an analogy of inescapability between the relations of culture and politics as well as politics and subjectivity.

This central theme in the Northern Irish cultural and political debates is described in *Hidden symptoms* in a lengthy discussion (p. 104-106) with Theresa and Robert. This debate follows Phelan’s categorization to character functions quite well as the arguments of Theresa are those of people believing that the nationalist struggle should be what the nationalist Northern Irish culture should represent. At the end of the debate Theresa is demanding Robert, who is a writer, to write politically about the Troubles to which Robert refuses on the grounds that he does not believe that art should be political or moral. To Theresa this is a talk of a spineless liberal, who “haven’t the guts to be partial”. Theresa’s reaction is therefore very close to the tension between Jake and Aoirghe in *Eureka Street*. Although the particular discussion in *Hidden Symptoms* follows the contrasting arguments that people have of the role of culture in Northern Ireland, as well as of the relation of culture and politics in general, this debate represents also Theresa’s struggle to hold on to her beliefs in the political ideas of Irish republicanism and to Roman Catholicism amidst her personal crisis of. Similar development takes place also in *Cal* in which the lead character ends up tragically regretting his commitment and hopes for a kind of atonement.

As we can see, culture in Northern Ireland is another contested concept and denotes to the question of what kind of cultural manifestations are appropriate. Are the murals depicting the historical battles or representing contemporary traumas pieces of legitimate cultural manifestations or are they upholding and reproducing the communal conflict? Also, could one imagine that a person could be both Irish and British, loving a pint of Guinness and taking his holidays in Galway and still keeping Britishness as his political identity? This is basically the problem of the Protestant/Unionist community, which has troubles denying the obvious parts of Irishness in its culture. This can be interpreted as the complex duality, or the onion structure of a person’s cultural identity, or as profound confusion of the person at hand. These interpretations are both extremely political bringing back the unionist/nationalist dichotomy.
One context that is necessary to consider in relation to the mid-1990’s discussions of arts, culture and politics is the symmetrical withdrawal of the middle classes from active politics and the fear for subsequent polarization of the politics, when it would be left to the extremes. This evoked criticism among the ranks of unionists (Coulter 1997) as well as nationalists (Bennett 1997), who both criticized this as a collective and money fuelled withdrawal from the difficult questions in the society. One of the questions that the three novels discussed is whether this withdrawal and closing one’s eyes is possible.

Especially in *Eureka Street* one can interpret the leading character Jake to be a thematic character of the educated middle classes who want to distance themselves from the conflict and to remain uncommitted, no matter what their personal history or background would be. No such character is really present in *Cal* or *Hidden Symptoms*, which underlines the changed political context of the early 1980’s and the mid 1990’s. In *Cal* and *Hidden Symptoms* the thematic characterization is much more antagonistic following the distinction between Protestant and Catholic, unionist and nationalist.

Irish cultural nationalism has obviously being criticized by unionist commentators such as Conor Cruise O’Brien (e.g. O’Brien 1988) or Arthur Aughey, the latter going as far as labeling the actions of Irish cultural nationalists as “Irish Kulturkampf” (Aughey, 1995). The relation of culture, nationalism and politics was an immensely debated issue in the early and mid 1990’s Northern Ireland. It must be noted that something balancing the Irish cultural nationalism that could be termed as Northern Irish, or unionist, cultural nationalism is difficult to locate. Would this mean leaning towards English or British cultural spheres, embracing Shakespeare, like the Belfast born Kenneth Branagh or what? The attempt to construct a figure of an Ulsterman did take place in the early 20th century, when it was connected to the failed project of creating an Ulster or Ulster-Scot political and cultural identity to counter the similar but more successful project by the Irish nationalists (Walker 2004, 32-33). However, the debate of the 1990’s was predominately about the Irish cultural nationalism and its possible perils, not touching similar structures on the Protestant/unionist side. Especially *Eureka Street* is an intervention to that debate as well.

In *Eureka Street* the problems of culture and politics are epitomized in the figure of Shague Ghintoss “a vaguely anti-English Catholic from Tyrone”, who probably is a
Ghintoss is a grossly exaggerated caricature 11. Ghintoss bends to all directions to please his republican anti-English audiences and the English, who offer him fame and financial benefits that the Irish republicans could not. In essence Ghintoss is described as someone who, without shame, reaps the benefits of the cultural and political strife without taking any responsibility of his actions, by for example writing and presenting a fierce violent and republican poem “Poem to a British Soldier About to Die”. In the end of the novel Ghintoss end up receiving decorations from the political wing of the IRA, the “Just Us” party –another mimetic character- in the novel, as well as from the British government as a gesture of ecumenical good will. In some sense the figure of Ghintoss is shown as parallel to the republican and loyalist paramilitaries who do not want the conflict to end as it would risk their personal gains. In the novel the lead character –or the hero- Jake makes fun of the literary style of Ghintoss describing his naturalistic poems: “It was clear, in addition, that these were all nationalist hedges, republican berries, unProtestant flowers and extremely Irish spades”. This can be taken as a comment of the absurdity of a politically committed art.

Conclusion

The problem of the rigid and limited space for discussion is clearly present in all of novels analyzed. The difficulty one faces when forced into a situation where one has to choose between two hegemonic narratives is not an easy one. The challenges that the Northern Irish bipolarity bring to one’s subjectivity is an overarching theme in the three novels. It would be easy to make a hypothesis that this thematic is likely to be present in literature that is born in societies that are deeply divided.

The strategies to present and comment the hegemonic narratives of Northern Ireland and their relations to the politics of the past differ. Whereas in Cal and in Hidden

11Eureka Street includes several mimetic characters, as many of the key political figures, such as Gerry Adams and Ian Paisley, are imitated and parodied.
Symptoms the narratives were introduced as inevitable as forces of nature, in *Eureka Street* they were ridiculed with the use of heavy irony and parody. On one part this is because of different literature genres, but the changed and more relaxed political atmosphere of the mid 1990’s is more likely to be the biggest reason. In early and mid 1980 when *Cal* and *Hidden Symptoms* were written, it would have been too bold to attack against the paramount political forces in Northern Ireland with such intensity. This it was not straightforwardly easy in 1996 either, as one critic hinted *Eureka Street* being “not art but propaganda” (Bennett 1998, 203).

In any case, to the prime question I posed at the start of this paper, whether Northern Irish fiction reinforces the hegemonic narratives or challenges them, there is, I believe, a straight answer. Based on the three novels here, it is easy to say that none of them fall into the category that would have as its essential element the purpose to reinforce or to retell either republican, nationalist, unionist or loyalist version of the Northern Irish Troubles, or indeed of the historical reasons for those troubles. That kind of work would, in my mind, constitute such propaganda to which Ronan Bennett refers above. Resistance to hegemonic narratives took place first of all in the critical presentation of beliefs and actions that characters working as thematic presentations of those narratives took. The members of the local IRA in *Cal* or the various supporters of different political movements in *Eureka Street* were such thematic presentations. In *Hidden Symptoms* and in *Cal* the main character of the novel was described to evolve from at least an ambiguous supporter or a fellow traveler of a particular hegemonic political ideologue to an agnostic to it. In *Hidden Symptoms* this was underlined with the parallel withdrawal of the main character, Theresa, from her Roman Catholic faith. In *Eureka Street*, on the other hand, the main character, Jake, started as someone who had totally withdrawn from the social and political questions of Northern Ireland after having gone through a personal crisis of belief in reference to the idea that politics could solve the problems amongst the people. In the end Jake regains his hope and ability to commit.

The same tendency goes with the presentation and discussion of the politics of the past in the novels. In this case, politics of the past commented was primarily the republican history writing and the republican images that were criticized. In all of the novels Irish history as a heroic struggle for freedom was questioned, and especially the
ways that this history had been put to use in the rhetoric of the republican movement was judged. In *Eureka Street* the same treatment was given to the unionist or loyalist history, but as said above, in terms of unionist or British history writing the target is much more elusive. It is safe to say that in regards to this thematic all the novels follow the revision that has been taken place in Irish and Northern Irish history writing.
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The Troubles, violent conflict from about 1968 to 1998 in Northern Ireland between the overwhelmingly Protestant unionists (loyalists), who desired the province to remain part of the U.K., and the overwhelmingly Roman Catholic nationalists (republicans), who wanted Northern Ireland to become part of Ireland. Our editors will review what you’ve submitted and determine whether to revise the article. Join Britannica’s Publishing Partner Program and our community of experts to gain a global audience for your work! Share.

Omagh bombing
Aftermath of the bombing attack by the Real Irish Republican Army in Omagh, Northern Ireland, August 15, 1998.


Tropy konfliktu. Retoryka pamięci kulturowej we współczesnej powieści północnoirlandzkiej [Troping the Troubles: The Rhetoric of Cultural Memory in Recent Northern Irish Fiction] (Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu śląskiego, Katowice 2019) Troping the Troubles (published in Polish) shows how recent Northern Irish fiction remembers the past. The focus of this work is on recent history and contested narratives of the past; it seeks to illustrate the significance of cultural representations of the Troubles in shaping collective memory.