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Scarred Tissues: Trauma, Desire, and Class Struggle in Tana French's *Dublin Murder Squad* Series

Mirt Komel

1. Introduction

Detective literature was—and to a certain degree still is—understood as a romance of an enlightened mind walking the path of reason and promising not only justice, but also the defeat of evil in the form of murder. Listing the most famous detective figures from classical detective fiction—from Auguste Dupin and Sherlock Holmes to Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple—seems a redundant point to the case. Nevertheless, all of these figures show in a nutshell that they rely on reason, methodical procedures, and rational thinking in order to heroically solve the crimes and discover the identity of the criminals, who are, conversely and in contrast, pictured as their egoistic, excessive, obsessive—in short, irrational and evil—counterparts.

If we look at the development of the genre we can see how the motives of the murderers significantly shape the structure of the detective story: in the classical detective story (Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie) the traumatic kernel is the crime itself, and the role of the detective is to discover the ratio behind the irrational excess of murder in order to put society back on track, while we as readers are put in the shoes of society through the assisting bystander figure that narrates the story. In the *hard-boiled* detective novel (Carroll John

Daly, Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, Raymond Chandler), we are immersed in the world of an obsessively irrational detective figure fighting a traumatically corrupted capitalist society, itself murderous at a systematic level. Finally, in the *crime novel* (Boileau-Narcejac, Patricia Highsmith), which is written either from the perspective of the victim or the criminal, the mystery is not in the *whodunit*, but rather in the *why?* and *how?* motivated by the "psychopathologies of everyday-life that are neither traumatic nor irrational, but rather plainly 'human, all too human'" (LeRoy et al. 2017, pp. 163–166).

This general development of the detective novel—where the structure of each sub-genre excludes the other and where the *classical* is incompatible with the *hard-boiled*, which in turn is incompatible with the *crime novel*—is, arguably, masterfully re-visited and re-incorporated into the classical *whodunit* detective novel form by Tana French with her *Dublin Murder Squad* series.

2. Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalysis and Marxism

In the present context, where we will discuss the detective genre in general and Tana French's series in particular through Lacanian and Marxist lens, it is first and foremost important to note that psychoanalysis and detective literature have not only a long and fruitful history of encounters, but also share—at least to a certain degree—the same method of analysis.[1]

Freud himself paralleled his interpretation of dreams to a rebus solving procedure—similar to the work of detection—where the analyst must decipher the latent meaning hidden behind the manifest content: "Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. [...] A dream is a picture-puzzle of this sort" (Freud

[1] For a detailed reading of the parallel between Freudian psychoanalysis and the detective fiction genre, see, for instance, Yang 2010, pp. 596-604.

2010, pp. 295–296). The investigation of the relation between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts Freud speaks of is structurally similar to the investigation of a murder, where the detective must look through the manifest evidence of the crime scene and find the hidden meaning that is known only to the perpetrator. Like, for instance, in Agatha Christie's *ABC Murders*, where Poirot must discover that the hidden agenda of the killer is actually to hide one specific target behind an irrational choice of killing by the alphabet.

Moreover, we have Freud's statement that Sophocles' *Oedipus*' search for the murder of his own father functions as a proto-detective story where the detective finds out that he is himself the killer.[2] This approach is recuperated by Lacan in his seminar on *Desire and Its Interpretation* while interpreting Hamlet's desire to investigate his father's murder in order to replace him (Lacan 2013). Or even more directly related to detective fiction we have Lacan's writings on Poe's short story *The Purloined Letter*, where Auguste Dupin scans the "crime scene"—the minister's apartment—not as a compact imaginary framework of clues, as the police would, but rather as a network of signifiers among which he finds the absent one in the form of the blackmail letter (Lacan 1999, pp. 11–61). And it is in the same vein that Slavoj Žižek demonstrates this thesis in *The Indivisible Remainder* through an interpretation of a classical detective story, Doyle's *Silver Blaze*, by making a detour into the Hegelian concept of determinate negation, that is "a Nothingness which none the less possesses a series of proprieties." Determinate negation functions in accordance with the "differential logic of the signifier in which the very absence of a feature can function as a positive feature, as in the well-known Sherlock

[2] For a detailed reading of Freud's theory of *Oedipus* as a detective story see especially the chapter entitled "*Oedipus* and Aristotle; Freud and *The Moonstone*" in *Detective Fiction and Literature* (Priestman 1991, pp. 16–35).

Holmes story in which the 'curious incident' with the dog consists in the fact that the dog *did not* bark" (Žižek 1996, p. 229). In short, the absence of a signifier is a signifier in itself, and this is one of the most distinctive features of the detective figure in literature: he, or she—in more modern times—can read not only the most evident evidence, but also the absence of it precisely because the murder scene is scanned as a network of signifiers.

The main Lacanian development of Freud's psychoanalysis is most definitely his definition of the "unconscious structured like a language": the subject is, due to the intervention of the symbolic, subdued to a fundamental ontological schism, a schism between his sensory apparatus and the language it is immersed in, or between the imaginary and the symbolic, where the third register, the real, binds both together and is at the same time the point where both can be torn apart.[3]

In terms of detective fiction one could say in this instance that not only the murderer's desire for killing but also the detective's own desire to solve the murder are intrinsically bound together through the chain of signifiers, and even more, that the two desires depend on each other: on the imaginary level the contrast between the detective and the murderer cannot be sharper. But nevertheless they are knotted together on the symbolic level: every murderer wants to be caught in the sense that he or she wants symbolic recognition (and that is why the murderer always leaves his or her idiosyncratic "signature" at the crime scene), and the detective is nothing without his counterpart and a murder to solve (Sherlock Holmes is, without a worthy opponent and any puzzle to solve, a mere eccentric drug addict).

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[3] Lacan developed the mathematical *RSI* model in order to describe how every human experience is structured through three registers: symbolic (language), imaginary (senses), and real (Lacan 2005, pp. 9–10). Lacan uses the famous Borromean knot in order to point out that human or social reality is not simply imaginary in the sense of fiction, but rather a reality interwoven with the symbolic texture in such a way that it is fundamentally inaccessible to the subject.

And it is also in this sense that a murder can be read not only as the traumatic real that risks to tear society apart, but also and at the same time as the element binding society together: until the murder is solved everybody is a suspect, because literally anybody could have done it, and society melts away in mutual suspicion and individual self-preservation, while the task of the detective, the only citizen above suspicion, is to find who really did it in order to reconstitute society—in short: everybody is guilty until one is found that can take the blame for everyone.

This social aspect of detective fiction leads us directly to Marxism, which has no apparent direct link to detective literature as psychoanalysis has, despite the fact of the curious historical coincidence of the beginnings of both.[4] Marxist theories of the genre (Žižek and Močnik 1982), as most prominently developed by Brecht and Bloch, dismissed it as "quintessential bourgeois literature," or worse, not even literature but "an entertaining mental exercise for the bourgeois class," etc. (Brecht 1967; Bloch 1961). However, while Marxism was, at least initially, dismissive of detective fiction, the genre itself managed, step-by-step, to incorporate critical social themes and topics in its own texture. Thus, the common ground where both the Marxist and the Detective can and do meet is the issue of violence in capitalist society.

Greeks and Romans never concealed the violent beginnings of their own civilizations, as poetic mythology from Homer to Vergil and historiography from Herodotus to Titus Livy explic-

[4] The publishing year of Poe's *Murders in the Rue Morgue*, which marks the beginning of the genre, featuring an orangutan as the murderer, curiously coincides with the year of Marx's doctoral dissertation on *The Difference Between the Democritean and Epicurean Philosophy of Nature;* the next year, 1842, Poe published *The Mystery of Marie Roget*, based on a real crime extensively covered by *The New York Times* and other American journals, while Marx published his *The Freedom of the Press;* finally, in 1844 when Poe published his *Purloined Letter* Marx wrote his famous *Paris Manuscripts*.

itly show. Medieval times, however, brought a decisive turn: the many theories of the social contract tried to demonstrate that society was founded by contract and through rational discourse in opposition to natural violence and irrational barbarism (Gough 1936). The theories of a nonviolent social contract were later on employed by the first theoreticians of political economy in order to develop the myth of the previous accumulation of capital, most prominently promoted by Adam Smith in his *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith 1987, pp. 142–151): the myth of the previous accumulation supposedly explains how it came to be that the few had accumulated wealth while the many ended up in poverty.[5] According to Marx the "previous accumulation plays in political economy about the same part as original sin in theology," for "its origin is supposed to be explained when it is told as an anecdote of the past" and this "insipid childishness is every day preached to us in the defense of property" (Marx 1877, p. 500). The story has its "moral," for the industriousness of one group is seen as morally superior to the laziness of the other, this opposition coinciding with the moral opposition between "good and evil."

Detective fiction, at least the classical tradition from Doyle to Christie, faithfully reproduced this moral binary distinction. Let's take a look, for instance, at the social structure in Christie's classic *Death on the Nile:* the main plot revolves around the murder of the rich, beautiful and successful Linnet Doyle, who inherited her fortune from her American grandfather and thus is morally innocent in terms of "previous accumulation," except that we learn how her family business ruined many a life. This fact provides a motive for a list of suspects, among which one can find Mr. Ferguson, a caricature of an outspoken communist. As Hercule Poirot,

[5] This part of Smith is satirically resumed by Marx as: "In times long gone by there were two sorts of people; one, the diligent, intelligent, and, above all, frugal elite; the other, lazy rascals, spending their substance, and more, in riotous living. […] Thus it came to pass that the former sort accumulated wealth, and the latter sort had at last nothing to sell except their own skins" (1877, p. 500).

the bourgeois *par excellence*, soon discovers, the murderers are a lazy, easy-going, pathologically lying, but most importantly a low-class couple: Jacqueline de Bellefort and her lover Simon Doyle, who both faked a break-up in order to allow him to marry Linnet, murder her and steal her money. From a Marxist perspective *Death on the Nile* could be thus read as *Death on Denial*, since the question of the "previous accumulation," as well as the "current" distribution of money, is never addressed.

In contrast to social contract theories and classical political economy, many philosophers (from Pascal to Kant and from Benjamin to Žižek) developed the concept of a "constitutional violence." After society is constituted, violence does not simply disappear, but must be monopolized by the state in order for society itself to survive, and that is why Walter Benjamin distinguishes between *law-keeping* [*rechtserhaltende*] and *law-giving* [*rechtsetzende*] violence (Benjamin 1996), retaining the more ambivalent German original term *Gewalt*, which—as Jacques Derrida interpreted—means power and violence at the same time (Derrida 1992, p. 44). Nowhere is this ambivalence of *Gewalt* more beautifully reflected than in the "hard-boiled" detective genre, emblematically embodied by Hammett and Chandler. On first sight it might seem that Hammett is more artistically elaborate than Chandler due to the fact that the former has a more wide cosmic view of evil, while Chandler locates it in the godless, corrupt, indifferent society itself (Cawelti 1977), but both authors do describe a developed capitalist society, when one murder through the logic of "follow the money" intrinsically links both "good" (politicians, businessmen, the police, etc.) and "evil" (the underground in form of criminals and criminal associations) parts of society together, so that murder, the "original sin," structurally reproduces the violent "previous accumulation."

Žižek exemplifies this point: the act of establishment of a given order of law is outside the law itself, for this fundamental act of violence must remain concealed as it is "the positive

condition of the functioning of law: it functions insofar as its subjects are deceived, insofar as they experience the authority of law as authentic and eternal" (Žižek 1991, p. 204). The structure of this concealment can be described in Lacanian terms as a fantasy, the "primordial form of narrative, which serves to occult some original deadlock" (Žižek, 1997, p. 10). The fantasy is—similar to the functioning of ideology—the imaginary deformation governing the relation between the subject and its trauma, or as in our case, the relation between a group of people and their collective trauma, be it the general violence of the "previous accumulation" that stratified society, or the particular murder that reproduces this stratification on the more theological or moral level as the fight between "good and evil."

3. Development of the Detective Genre

The detective story had its honorable predecessors in the earlier mystery, gothic, and crime stories, and even ancient tales.[6] In the list of the usual suspects one can thus find various authors and their work, from Sophocles' *King Oedipus* to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, none of them being detective stories properly speaking, but each anticipating certain trends that followed: *Oedipus* by providing the possibility that the murderer turns out to be the detective himself; *Hamlet* by enacting the detective not simply as a rational being, but rather as an irrational "madman"; *Crime and Punishment* by

[6] Richard Alewyn, in *Anatomie des Detektivromans*, even goes as far as the Biblical story of Cain and Abel in order to make a distinction between the more general *crime story* that can cover any story about a murder(er), and the *detective story* as a crime detection narrative: the tale about Cain and Abel is told as a *crime story*, but if told in reverse, starting with the corpse, listing the suspects and their motives, one can make a *whodunit* out of it (Alewyn 1968, pp. 52–72).

telling the story from the perspective of the murderer. *Oedipus*—the detective who discovers himself to be the murderer—necessarily implies *Crime and Punishment* as the story told from the murderer's perspective, but the latter does not necessarily imply the former, since the role of the murderer Rodion Raskolnikov—from the perspective of whom the story is told—differs from that of detective Porfiry Petrovich.[7]

In order to have a detective genre properly speaking, a proper detective had to arise in the modern age, which saw the development of natural sciences (biology, physics, chemistry), which was soon integrated in police work, from fingerprints to ballistics, blood types, and all the iron repertoire that led to present-day DNA analysis (Thorwald 1965; 1966). It is on this basis that modern detective fiction could be born, but, curiously enough, first as a philosophical exercise of speculative thinking.[8]

Classical detective fiction started with E.A. Poe's short mystery stories with Auguste Dupin as protagonist in the role of the amateur detective, or "analyst," as he was labelled in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue.* In *The Mystery of Marie Rogêt* Poe dealt with an actual case, rebaptizing the original case of Mary Rogers who was killed in New York and relocating the case to Paris. Dupin with his extraordinary speculative skills of deduction, which culminated in the "Purloined Letter," was then the model for the most famous detective of them all.

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[7] One of the possible solutions to the detective story puzzle, namely, that the murderer might be the detective himself, was, on the one hand forbidden by the most dogmatic representatives of the genre, like, for instance, S.S. Van Dine and in his *20 Rules* (1928), while on the other it was promoted as one possible emancipation of the genre in order to render a more faithful picture of the human condition inhabiting a world of contradictions (See Seeßlen 1981), as seen figuring prominently in the novel by Stanley Ellin, *The Eighth Circle* (1958), or later on in the movie *Angel Heart* (1987).

[8] For a brief recapitulation of the history of the detective novel, see Julian Symons' (1972) *Bloody Murder*; while for a most extensive study, see Peter Nusser's (1980) *Der Kriminalroman.*

Doyle's *Sherlock Holmes* combined speculative deductive abilities to work on hypotheses or "theories" (logical reasoning) with inductive skills employed to analyze empirical clues (forensic science), thus allowing him to "guess" from which part of the city a visitor came by observing the soil on his or her shoes, or even directly identifying someone by the type of tobacco smoked. Another important feature and genre-defining narrative strategy that Doyle took from Dupin was the figure of Watson, the protagonist's side-kick and the narrator of the story that allowed the reader to compete with the detective in solving the mystery: for the narrator the detective functions as the ultimate *subject supposed to know* (*sujet supposé savoir*), to which Lacan adds the function of transference that makes the whole relationship always marked with a certain eroticism.[9]

The adventures of Sherlock Holmes in turn became the springboard for a whole genre. It was developed further by Agatha Christie, who consolidated the distinctively "English" character of the genre by moving the murders from the city and its proletarian/bourgeois context into the aristocratic countryside where the most notable and respected parts of society are scrutinized by the elegant bourgeois Hercule Poirot (33 novels and 54 short stories) and Miss Marple (12 novels and 20 short stories) respectively.[10] The title "Queen of Crime" befits her

[9] Note the peculiar way in which Poe describes the narrator's relationship with Dupin, their living in a secluded way, or walking hand under hand, and similar, or the many homoerotic exchanges of words between Holmes and Watson, itself ironically reflected recently by the TV-series *Sherlock* (2010–), and rendered explicit in *Elementary* (2012–) since Watson is transformed into a woman (Lucy Liu) with whom Sherlock (Jonny Lee Miller) could now flirt free of puritan morals.

[10] Especially Miss Marple was an important influence on the further development on the genre, since the detectives were traditionally male, while women were victims. Case(s) in point: among the many heirs to Dupin and Holmes one can find mostly male detectives: inspector French, lord Peter Wimsey, dr. Gideon Fell, Albert Campion, inspector Alleyn, Nigel Strangeways, professor Gervas Fen, Roger Crammond, Nero Wolfe, dr. Martin Buell, Commisar Maigret, etc.

especially due to the classical structure she invented: a dead body is discovered, all the suspects are concealing secrets, and the detective proceeds to investigate. At the end she gathers the surviving suspects into one room, explains the deductive reasoning behind the solution, and reveals the culprit, who is usually the least suspected since the list includes children, policemen, narrators, already deceased individuals, sometimes even no known suspects (*And Then There Were None*) or all of the suspects at once (*Murder on the Orient Express*), and sometimes the question remains unresolved of whether formal justice will ever be delivered (*Five Little Pigs* and *Endless Night*).

By moving from Europe to the U.S. the classical detective novel became *hard-boiled*, meaning that it significantly changed its structure by transforming one of its main features, namely, a shift in the method employed by the detective from thinking to violence (Heissenbuttel 1963). To be sure, no clear cut can be made between thinking and violence: one can think of Sherlock Holmes's boxing and fencing skills, and even a soft-skinned detective such as Hercule Poirot wields a gun sometimes, while conversely no hard-boiled detective can solve the crime without thinking. Moreover, in this kind of detective novel—already bordering on the crime novel, as best exemplified, arguably, by the work of Raymond Chandler and his Philip Marlow or Dashiell Hammett's Samuel Spade and Nick Charles—we are immersed into a deeply corrupted capitalist society, against which the detective fights as one of the last standing fallen angels of justice: here the moment of class-struggle, which was latent in the classical detective novel, becomes predominant due to the role played by power and capital and the power of capital.

It is in this capitalist context that detective fiction retreats from an objectively "fucked-up" world into a subjective "fucked-up" psyche, thus transforming into the psychological *crime novel* with Boileau-Narcejac and Patricia Highsmith, and in present times most notably Donna Tart and Gillian Flynn.

Against the background of classical detective novels, where the characters were more or less flat and facile, and where the art of storytelling was reduced to its logical minimum in order to deliver the maximum impact of resolution of the murder mystery, here we can find psychologically refined characters, artfully depicted situations, and masterful story-telling. Moreover, the structural shift of the genre is enacted through a significant shift in perspective: the murder mystery is not insomuch in the *whodunit* anymore, but rather in the *why* and *how*, which regularly proves to be motivated by "everyday life psychopathologies" that are neither traumatic nor irrational, but rather just plain "human, all too human" motives.

Finally, the current trend set by "Nordic noir" literature (also known as "Scandinavian" or "Scandi noir") with writers such as Stieg Larsson, Henning Mankell, Maj Sowall, Per Wahlöö, and Jo Nesbø—not to mention their many emulators in other countries and languages—can be attributed to the fact that it manages to deliver a thorough social critique of an otherwise much too idealized Scandinavian society. This is achieved through a return to the *whodunit* structure, with stylistic minimum and moody maximum, featuring a realistic depiction of monotonous police work with no excessive deductions.

It is therefore at this point of the historical and structural development of the detective genre—as well as through the theoretical framework we laid down—that we will now analyze Tana French's *Dublin Murder Squad* Series as a creative re-elaboration of the detective genre.

4. The Dublin Murder Squad *Series*

Let's now start our own analytical investigation with a most general assumption that Vermont-born American-Irish actress-turned-author Tana French with her *Dublin Murder Squad* Series

took the lessons of Marxism and psychoanalysis seriously, as well as the history of the development of the detective fiction genre.

The three main characteristics of her work can be summed up as follows: first, in terms of genre she retained the classical structure of the "English" detective novel while at the same time incorporating the style and mannerism of its "American" *hard-boiled* counterpart, painting the whole on a "Scandi-noir" background in terms of coloring Dublin and its countryside; second, the context of each murder is a realistically depicted Dublin and/or its surrounding towns and countryside, ravaged by the traumatic collapse of the "Celtic Tiger" while at the same time always linking a most modern present with this or that past theme from Irish folklore and tradition; third, just as Ireland has its own trauma to deal with, so does the figure of the *garda* detective where the imperative desire to solve the murder is paralleled with an existential drive of searching for one's most intimate desires, thus shifting our interest from the *whodunit* mystery towards the more existentially oriented *whosolvedit*.

These three main characteristics are also, arguably, the reasons why Tana French was baptized as the "First Lady of Irish Crime" and compared to Agatha Christie on the one side and Patricia Highsmith on the other side of the Atlantic (Deignam 2012). Rightfully so, since if there is something distinctively "Frenchian" about her novels it is precisely this link, or rather, overlapping between the substantial, objective structure of classical detective fiction—together with its actual police work modernization—and its subjective, psychological, thrilling, dramatic counterpoint, where at the end, as Laura Miller elegantly put it, "the search for the killer becomes entangled in a search for self" (Miller 2016). Another additional distinctive feature that French employs is the relinquishing of the idealized central detective figure: each novel of the series presents not only a new murder to be solved, but also a new detective—from whose perspective the story is told—to redeem.

The stories are told from first-person perspective, thus enabling a vivid subjective immersion into the mind of a detective, who always works in a pair, not only to guarantee impartiality of the investigation (as real police work demands), but also to show the inter-subjective process of detection, since one can see everything but the blind spots of one's own idiosyncratic subjectivity that are discernible only for the other (as in real-life partnerships). Each novel features the by-standing sidekick from the previous one as the narrating protagonist, thus connecting the whole series in a subjective chain of otherwise unconnected murder cases. As for the murders themselves, they are generally structured as per classical detective *whodunit* rules. There is a limited list of suspects who are all known to the reader; a series of red-herring clues and allusions among which the key-ones are hidden; and most importantly, the reader has a fair amount of time to solve the crime before the end.

4.1 In the Woods *(2007)*

In the Woods (2007), Tana French's first and most original novel, the first of the *Dublin Murder Squad* series, provides us with what will become the structural framework within which each successive novel will offer its own twist while simultaneously consolidating the rules of the game.

The story of *In the Woods* opens with a prelude: a reminiscence of a summer in the life of three twelve-year-olds who got lost in an ancient forest near the town of Knocknaree: "They are running into legend, into sleepover stories and nightmares parents never hear" (French 2007, p. 3). Three kids get lost in the woods, but only one returns, without any memory of what happened. This kid turns out to be detective Adam "Rob" Ryan, the protagonist and narrator of the story, who describes his own relation to truth with what is perhaps one of the best openings in the history of detective fiction: "What I warn you to remember

is that I am a detective. Our relationship with truth is fundamental, but cracked, refracting confusingly like fragmented glass. It is the core of our careers, the endgame of every move we make, and we pursue it with strategies painstakingly constructed of lies and concealment and every variation on deception" (*ibid*., p. 5). The detective is here far from being the knight in shining armor who comes to save the day, but rather is presented as a skillful psychological manipulator, not unlike an actor—or writer, for that matter (both being professions that the author herself pursued): "Don't let me fool you into seeing us as a bunch of *parfit gentil* knights galloping off in doublets after Lady Truth on her white palfrey. What we do is crude, crass and nasty" (*ibid*.). But it is this metaphor that is most telling, since it foreshadows how this quest for truth, in the name of which every and all means are permitted, will eventually be Ryan's downfall: "Truth is the most desirable woman in the world and we are the most jealous lovers, reflexively denying anyone else the slightest glimpse of her. We betray her routinely, spending hours and days stupor-deep in lies, and then turn back to her holding out the lover's ultimate Mobius strip: But I only did it because I love you so much" (*ibid*.). The Mobius strip, embodying the detective's ultimate paradox—"I crave truth. And I lie."—was one of Lacan's favorite topological figures since it showed how two different surfaces ultimately merge into one, like, for instance, the conscious and the unconscious, which are not separated, but rather one in the subject. And the same goes for Ryan: his conscious activities in solving the murder at hand slowly merge with his unconscious trauma, resulting in a driving desire to know what happened long ago back in the woods. As if referring to the meta-scope of the detective novel itself that wants to disentangle from its own structure, Ryan says: "This is what I read in the file, the day after I made detective. I will come back to this story again and again, in any number of different ways. A poor thing, possibly, but mine own: this is the only story in the world that nobody but

me will ever be able to tell" (*ibid.*, p. 6). Murders happen all the time, as do *whodunit* puzzles for the readers of detective novels, but Ryan's story, this *whosolvedit* part is something unique, with its own logic, that parallels and runs now above and now below the case he will be dealing with, precisely as the ants on the Mobius strip as pictured by M. C. Escher in 1963.

The novel presents the mystery of the woods first, and only after being gradually introduced to the Garda Síochána's murder squad that is fictitiously residing in Dublin Castle, and how Ryan became friends with Cassie Maddox ("because of her moped, a cream 1981 Vespa"), we move to the murder-case: "We caught the Devlin case"—the investigation to be baptized "operation Vestal" by the cops—"on a Wednesday morning in August. It was, according to my notes, 11.48, so everyone else was out getting coffee. Cassie and I were playing Worms on my computer" (*ibid.*, p. 27). O'Kelly, the superintendent of the murder squad, rushes in: "Bunch of archaeologists found a body. Who's up?" (*ibid.*). And since there is nobody else more experienced around, Ryan and Maddox take the case. The death of twelve-year-old Katy Devlin will lead us to an archaeological site that is blocking the construction of a new highway near Knocknaree: "The field was where the wood had been, twenty years ago. The strip of trees was what was left of it. I had lived in one of the houses beyond the wall" (*ibid.*, p. 30).

Various investigative lines are pursued, most of them red herrings. The first one is that the murder might be related to the deceased's father, Jonathan Devlin, himself the suspect of child abuse and murder (as a connection to a gang rape in 1984 suggests), and perhaps the target of revenge due to his opposition to the highway. The second line of inquiry pursues the mother, Margaret Devlin, who is suspected of making her daughter sick due to a "Munchausen by proxy" syndrome (a homage to *Sharp Objects* by Gillian Flynn). Another suspect is attested by the two other Devlin girls, Jessica and Rosalinda, namely, a mysterious

man in a tracksuit, the typical "outsider" figure who disrupts an apparently harmonious community (not unlike Bob from *Twin Peaks*). Since the body was found on an archaeological site, some of the archaeologists are also listed as suspects with possible motives, means, and occasions: Dr. Ian Hunt, the site director; Sean, who lost his trowel that turns out to be connected to the murder; Mel, the unassumingly attractive female of the group; and Mark Hanly, the idealist who camps in the wild, pours wine in rituals of worship, and protests against capitalism and the construction company. Last but not least, there is the line that only Ryan is able to track since it links the present-day murder with the past disappearance of his friends.

All these investigative lines and the related clues hidden within the red herrings eventually lead to the discovery that the psychopathic mastermind behind the murder, which was actually committed by the least suspicious of them all (let's put his name in brackets where he belongs: Damien)—an unoriginal "Agatha-Christian" element to hide the real culprit as the most innocent one in the midst of more viable candidates that French will be re-playing three more times in her sequels and that many readers will resent her for—was no one but Rosalind. She fakes tears in the rain when her sister Katy was found murdered. She wants to know everything regarding the investigation. She seduces Ryan with teenage charms in order to obtain the details and give him false clues. She publicly implores Ryan to find out who murdered her sister. She even lies about her age earlier in the story in order to make her final narcissistic confession to Cassie inadmissible: how it was actually her, and not her father or mother, abusing her sister by giving her medicine, and, when she stopped taking it, how she manipulated her boyfriend Damien into killing her, and made him think it was his own idea.

So, in short, the *whodunit* mystery is pretty complex but easily solvable, but it is nothing compared to the *whosolvedit* mystery pertaining to Ryan and his traumatic past that structured his main

blind spots regarding the investigation. Rob says at the very beginning while self-describing his tastes that he likes "girlie girls," a seemingly unimportant detail that nonetheless paves the way to the success of Rosalind's manipulations afterwards. More generally speaking, Rob likes "girlie girls" so that he could not fall in love and form such attachments as those formed in his youth, which he was so violently severed from in the woods. By contrast, what he likes about Cassie is something completely different: "I am usually well out of the loop, but the Cassie Maddox buzz was loud enough that even I picked up on it. [...] She wasn't my type [...] but there was something about her: maybe the way she stood, weight on one hip, straight and easy as a gymnast; maybe just the mystery" (French 2007, pp. 12–15). Since it is a mystery that defines who he is—he goes by "Rob" and not "Adam"—it is only logical that what he unconsciously desires is a mystery. But since he can fuck only women he does not respect, the exact reverse happens with Cassie when he breaks down while he tries to spend the night in the woods and remember what actually happened back then: at the point where he becomes most vulnerable, he sleeps with the one woman he has genuine feelings about, but, conversely, since she sleeps with him, she ultimately loses his respect. Instead of coming together or at least pretending nothing happened and continuing as friends and partners like before, he alienates her rudely while at the same time and at the very end seeing her as his only chance at a normal life (the last pathetic phone call).

As it turns out, however, Cassie has a lot of problems of her own, and not only those indirectly connected to the case since part of the intuition about the solution of the case was connected to an early experience with a psychopathic boyfriend that Rosalind reminded her of ("No conscience, no empathy, pathological liar, manipulative, charming, intuitive, attention-seeking, easily bored, narcissistic"). Ryan was, in contrast, without such experience and with his own biased view, unable to see what Cassie saw. In the same vein that Ryan's trauma biased his ability to

solve the case, Cassie's trauma functioned in the opposite direction since it allowed her to pursue an otherwise invisible line of investigation.

However, this intimate detail about detective Maddox's private life is perhaps a good point to stop and walk out of *In the Woods* to the next novelistic suspect of our own investigation, namely, *The Likeness.*

4.2 The Likeness *(2008)*

The Likeness opens—in a similar yet contrasting style to its predecessor—with an uncanny post festum epiphany of the protagonist's past experiences: "Some nights, if I'm sleeping on my own, I still dream about Whitethorn House [...]. The house is always empty [...]. The others aren't gone, I got it wrong somehow. They're only hiding; they're still here, for ever and ever," and as the house and its residents are introduced through foreshadowing, so is the novel's central motif: "The tip of a giggle, instantly muffled; a creak of wood. I leave wardrobe doors swinging open, I take steps three at a time, I swing round the newel post at the top and catch a flash of movement in the corner of my eye: the spotted old mirror at the end of the corridor, my face reflected in it, laughing" (French 2008, pp. 1–2).

The Likeness builds a mysterious story on top of the murder mystery—much as *In the Woods*—this time telling the tale from Cassie Maddox's perspective, who runs into a murder-victim by the name of Alexandra "Lexie" Madison, who is not only one of her previous undercover aliases, but also looks just like her. The question of *whosolvedit* is again at least as, if not even more, important than the *whodunit*, and, furthermore, this time it is intrinsically connected to the victim, since the detective and the victim were sharing a face as well as an alias.

At the end of the previous novel detective Maddox was stripped of her rank and dislodged to the domestic violence

department after the fiasco of "operation Vestal," but while her professional life suffered, her personal life prospered with Sam O'Neil, one of the side-characters from the previous novel who was investigating the case together with the two main protagonists (thus forming one of the echoes for Ryan reminiscing about his two childhood friends). However, conforming to the modernist tradition of protagonists who can't bear happiness, Cassie also decides to ruin her personal life in search of misfortunes that came knocking on her door in the form of her former undercover boss Frank Mackey. This takes her to a crime scene in the countryside of Dublin, to a cottage close to Glenskehy, a village housing Whitethorn House's servants for the aristocratic family that once occupied the mansion. The face of the dead girl resembles Maddox so closely that Mackey, who is introduced to us as a "tightrope artist with no net," devises a plan to revive the dead girl in order to investigate the residing suspects, under the name "Operation Mirror."

The *whosolvedit* is here doubled by the motif of the doppelgänger in the measure in which both Cassie and Lexie are linked, or rather, "sewed together": "This is Lexie Madison's story, not mine. I'd love to tell you one without getting into the other, but it doesn't work that way." (*ibid.*, p. 3) To be sure, the romantic motif of the double is as old as modern literature, and spans from E. T. A. Hoffman's *Die Elixiere des Teufels* (1815), Dostoevsky's *Dvoynik* (1846), and Poe's *William Wilson* (1839) up to the present artistic reworking of the apparently still extremely popular theme that keeps reappearing not only in literature, theatre, and opera, but also in cinema, TV-series, and video-games. Truth be told, what French does here is nothing new in terms of the development of the motif: the novelty of her detective novel lays rather in the way she sewed the motif of the double to the classic detective story.

Without the element of the doppelgänger, combined with the mysterious appeal of Whitethorn house and its strange, yet

lovable inhabitants, the detective story alone would lose much of its appeal, as a short glance at its plot and resolution shows. After an intensive *Schnellkurs* under her former boss's guidance and against her lover's disapproval, Cassie now becomes Lexie, a graduate student at Trinity College, and moves into Whitethorn House. Her four former roommates apparently accept her story, namely, that she survived the encounter with the murderer only by paying the price of losing her memory of that evening. However, the otherwise cynical, tough and much guarded detective, who was orphaned at an early age and recently detached herself from her lover due to this case, finds an unforeseen sense of belonging to this group and their most intimate, weird, and academically ideal way of life. Despite this going native, the investigation proceeds and a list of suspects slowly builds up, including the four inhabitants of the house: Daniel March, the alpha leader of the pack; Raphael Hyland, the handsome and passionate beta; Justin Mannering, the emotional drama-queen gama; and Abigail Stone, the only other girl in the house. Other suspects include, again, the figure of the "outsider" (the man with whom Lexie secretly met in order to make a deal regarding the house), and one step short of nothing less than the whole town of Glenskehy (which seems to harbor a historical hatred for the house and its aristocratic inhabitants, past and present). During the investigation Cassie slowly starts to question herself by sliding into the Lexie her former tenant was playing, and due to her own childhood trauma of abandonment she responds with a desire to belong to the group of students. Eventually, it is precisely this genuine attachment, incarnated in the kiss she gave to Daniel, that blows her cover (since the Lexie he and they knew was more superficial and liked to flirt without consequences). Moreover, the original Lexie planned to abandon them and sell her share in the house, and this was why all four of them somehow participated in her murder during a drunken frenzy, making the one actually holding the knife, discovered by Frank at

the end, a quite irrelevant discovery (it was, if you really want to know, again the least suspicious one: Justin). The architect of the masterfully conceived cover-up operation? Daniel, who made them play cards and drink for the whole evening while carefully checking the clock in order to make the elaborate collective alibi more plausible (as Cassie puts it: "The guy was wasted on academia").

However, the existential crisis Cassie undergoes due to her specular, narcissistic, obsessive identification with Lexie, and the desires motivated by her early childhood trauma tying her to the group, are only half of the story that makes *The Likeness* so interesting. The other half is linked to the group of students themselves, who wanted nothing more than to live in an idealistically constructed academic utopia of pure *scholé*, which is itself reminiscent of Donna Tartt's first novel, *The Secret History*. The same anti-capitalist moment of an academic ideal of life dedicated to the "unproductive" and "unprofitable" study of humanities ("How many jobs do you think there are for students of literature?") that inspired Richard Papen to join the closed study group gravitating around professor Julian Morrow in the inverted murder mystery of *The Secret History* is here transposed from New England to Ireland, from one colonized country to another ("The English came and transformed the Irish from owners to tenants"). Through the history of Whitethorn House and its current state of affairs, we see the birth of capitalism from feudalism as if in a shadow theatre, where the relation of the former servants from Glenskehy towards the old non-working, pleasure-seeking aristocracy, is now replaced by the inherited antipathy of the proletarian-class townspeople towards the non-working, pleasure-seeking academic group living in the same house. The question of property ownership is the very material basis and link between both past and present aristocracies (since the moment of exploitation is obviously missing in the current relation of the students towards the townsfolk). Moreover, the

shared property of the house, besides providing a motive for the murder, was directed against capitalist society and its demands that they so profoundly despise, since their decision to live apart and build a future that is free from the constrains of labor and capital was implicitly guided by the communist ideal of collective property. This is apparent in Daniel's lengthy lecture on "Take what you want and pay for it" when he stated his reason for sharing the house ownership (*ibid.*, pp. 396–401): "You asked me what I wanted. I spent a lot of time asking myself the same thing. By a year or two ago, I had come to the conclusion that I truly wanted only two things in this world: the company of my friends, and the opportunity for unfettered thought" (*ibid.*, p. 399). Looking at the same detective story from this point of view one could say that their communist ideal got shattered not simply by Lexie's death when they found out she wanted to sell her share, but also by the very capitalist structure that does not allow such ideals.

In short, *The Likeness* has a very strong connection to *In the Woods* in terms of its *whosolvedit* existential search for one's own self that is interwoven with the main *whodunit* detective story (both demonstrating, in a way, how a traumatic past, if left unresolved, governs our future). But at the same time, it has an even stronger connection to the next suspect in line, *Faithful Place*, which adds even more Marxist undertones, thus continuing and developing the class-struggle moment towards which its immediate predecessor leant.

4.3. Faithful Place *(2010)*

Faithful Place is atypical in terms of detective novels and is more of a murder mystery in the style of its predecessor, especially because the protagonist is now undercover detective Frank Mackey, who makes this novel the most "Irish" of the series alongside other characters and their idiomatic speech, and also due to the

insight we get into a poor working-class area inside the Liberties in Dublin.

In *The Likeness* we got used to Frank as the cynical, badass, sharp-tongued, bullet-proof head of "Operation Mirror," which got former agent Maddox involved to such a degree that we see her most intimate fears and desires. In *Faithful Place* the same happens to Frank. In the Prologue we learn about how when he was nineteen—"old enough to take on the world and young enough to be a dozen kinds of stupid"—he slid one night out of his home, a den of toxic relations, to leave everything behind and go over to England. Rosie, the love of his life, had the tickets and should have been waiting for him, but instead he found a note in the abandoned house Number 16: "I didn't take the note with me. By the time I left Number 16 I knew it by heart, and I had the rest of my life to try to believe it. I left it where it was and went back to the end of the road," and by the end of the night "I was still waiting for Rosie Daly at the top of Faithful Place" (French 2010, p. 2). And as we soon see, she did not let him wait in vain for all those 22 years when a phone call reaches him in his chic "Twin Peaks" apartment in the Quays.

This is the psychological center of the novel, the defining trauma that made that romantic runaway teenager become "Frank Mackey": first the decision that Rosie was the one thing he was willing to die for ("If you don't know that…what are you worth? Nothing. You are no man at all," said his father to him when he was thirteen); and second, the conviction that she left without him, which broke his heart and made him the suspicious, distrustful, cynical undercover agent that manipulates others and fabricates lies for a living (the ultimate embodiment of Ryan's philosophy of truth from the opening paragraph of *In the Woods*). However, there is a third step in the development of the protagonist's trauma: when they find Rosie's suitcase with her clothes, birth-certificate, and the ferry-tickets, the body is not far from discovery either, and the realization that she had

not left him but was murdered performs a sudden twist in all his convictions that shakes him down to the bone:

> Here's the real risk in Undercover, in the field and out: you create illusions for long enough, you start thinking you're in control. [...] No matter how good you are, this world is always going to be better at this game. It's more cunning than you are, it's faster and it's a whole lot more ruthless. All you can do is try to keep up, know your weak spots and never stop expecting the sucker punch. (*Ibid*., p. 5)

The problem being, of course, that a sucker punch is by definition something that you cannot prepare for, and even when you prepare for the worst, it manages to slip past your defenses as an even worse one that makes a Möbius strip out of your intestines: in Frank's case the worst being that Rosie abandoned him, the sucker punch coming in the form of the even worse scenario that she was killed, which gives, somehow, at least a certain resolution for his trauma, since she did not abandon him after all. The desire to solve the murder thus drives him from this traumatic triple sucker-punch.

As we learn at the very beginning of the novel, Frank has other cracks in his armor apart from Rosie, like his ex-wife Olivia (a few social steps higher than his own humble origins), his young daughter Holly (who we will re-meet later on in her teenage years), and his ex-family, which he managed to keep at a distance until the case takes him back to "the bubbling cauldron of crazy that is the Mackeys at their finest." The Mackeys include the abusive alcoholic "da," the manipulatively hysterical "ma," his three siblings (his younger brother Kevin; the "dark and wiry and restless" Shay; and their sister Jackie), and the extended community of family and friends that attends the wake, when Frank realizes that the murderer is among them.

The official investigation is led by superstar detective Mick "Scorcher" Kennedy, whom Frank defines as a "pompous, rule-bound, boring git," and his sidekick junior detective Stephen

Moran, in whom Frank sees someone that can be easily manipulated into working with him on his own private "undercover" investigation. Interviews follow, theories pop-up, and as the events turn out, one evening Kevin unsuccessfully calls Frank several times, and the next morning turns up dead at the same abandoned Number 16 where Rosie's body was found. Frank doesn't give an inch to the theory that his little brother killed himself out of guilt over having killed Rosie, and is convinced that he was killed by the same person who killed his girlfriend. Led by intuition more than evidence, he suspects Shay, but has no proof and therefore visits his family one more time, taking his daughter Holly with him, thus breaking his own rule that she should not have contact with the Mackeys. A final showdown ensues in which Shay takes Holly to his room upstairs where Frank overhears the conversation between the two indicating that Holly had seen a note that made her deduce that her own uncle was the killer. After Frank enters the room and confronts his brother, Shay confesses, convinced that the evidence won't hold up in a court of law—miscalculating Holly's testimony that eventually nails him down.

The immediate motive of the murder was Shay's resentment towards Frank when he found out that he wanted to leave him with his poor family, burdening him even more with an alcoholic, abusive father, and a broken-down, manipulative mother. When Shay confronted Rosie, trying desperately to make her change their plans, he killed her in a wave of rage. However, such a family condition cannot be attributed merely to personal psychological characteristics (abusiveness, manipulativeness, resentment), but must also take into account the wider social context of capitalism and the specific economic conditions that the Mackeys, as all the other families of the poor neighborhood, live in. Thus, the reason for the motive itself is motivated not only by personal, psychological elements, but also by social, economic factors that define and at the same time escape the

subject, the true unconscious content being not any repressed desire for violence, but rather the violent socio-economic conditions themselves. One important lesson of psychoanalysis is that it always already takes social reality not as something on the outside, but rather something that is an integral part of the subject's psyche, which is itself the subjective bearer of objective social relations (like the infamous "Oedipus complex" demonstrates). Thus, Rosie's murder can be seen not only as personal revenge motivated by resentment and enacted in rage, but also as a symptom of class-struggle and capitalism that the family as a whole is subject to: "Nobody in the world can make you crazy like your family can," says Frank. Nobody but society, I add.

And it is from this same perspective of class-struggle in a capitalist society that another symptomatic link between social- and psychopathologies must be mentioned before proceeding: at the crucial moment of Shay's confession, Frank does not pull the trigger but rather calls in the detective. But it is not lead-detective Scorcher, the protagonist of *Broken Harbour* (the next novel here in line for inspection), but rather the over-ambitious junior detective Moran, who takes the credit for the arrest (as promised by Frank), thus going behind his boss's back in order to make a name for himself—a shadow that will follow him as the protagonist of *The Secret Place* (in which he is followed by Holly too), and as the side-kick in *The Trespasser* (the very last novel of the series).

4.4 Broken Harbour *(2012)*

Broken Harbour moves away from the traumatic subjective perspective of the first three books and explicitly develops the class-struggle substance that was implicit in its predecessors—especially in *Faithful Place*—to its limit.

It is, from this perspective, a telling fact that this novel is the only one in the whole series that does not begin with a prologue recalling any past events (reminiscences come later on as they

should, piece by piece, fragmented, and not as a completely furnished narrative), but rather *in medias res* with the protagonist telling us directly: "Let's get one thing straight: I was the perfect man for this case. You'd be amazed how many of the lads would have run a mile, given the choice—and I had a choice, at least at the start" (French 2012, p. 1). Michael "Scorcher" Kennedy is a narcissistic, self-aggrandizing, careerist, fame-seeking, proto-capitalist subject who is able to get things done regardless of the situation, victims, choices, or costs: "Because let's get another thing clear, while we're at it: I am bloody good at my job. I still believe that. I've been on the murder squad for ten years, and for seven of those, ever since I found my feet, I've had the highest solve rate in the place" (*ibid.*). And the second the case "hit the floor, I knew it was a big one"—meaning it will attract a lot of media attention: "It's one of those new places; up the coast, past Balbriggan. Used to be called Broken Bay, something. 'Broken Harbour' I said. 'Yeah. I know Broken Harbour.' 'It's Brianstown now. And by tonight the whole country will have heard of it" (*ibid.*, p. 3). The case itself consists of a family found dead at their new home: "The victims were Patrick Spain, his wife Jennifer, and their kids, Emma and Jack. [...] It's a family. Father, mother and two kids. The wife might make it. The rest are gone" (*ibid.*, pp. 5, 9). Regardless of the fact that the parents were stabbed with a knife and the children found smothered in their beds, he states his "Rule Number One, and you write this down: no emotions on scene. Count to ten, say the rosary, make sick jokes, do whatever you need to do" (*ibid.*, p. 9). Scorcher immediately wants it in his hands, confident that he can solve it in a blink: "Here's what I'm trying to tell you: this case should have gone like clockwork. It should have ended up in the textbooks as a shining example of how to get everything right. By every rule in the book, this should have been the dream case" (*ibid.*, p. 2). However, what eventually ruins the case are elements that intrude into this clock-like mechanism that is his *modus operandi* not from the outside, but rather from the inside-out.

Superstar detective "Scorcher" Kennedy gets a whole team for this operation, together with Richie Curran, a "rookie on probation," but this does not initially concern Scorcher a lot: "He'll do fine. I'll make sure he does." (*Ibid.*, p. 5.) Ocean View is a housing estate in Brianstown built during the height of the boom years when real estate appeared as the surest capitalist bet, now turned into a half-finished, semi-inhabited ghost-town, decaying, morbid, horrific in its broken-dream atmosphere. An allegory of post-capitalism and its end-of-the-world aesthetics, Ocean View is a character in itself: "At first glance, Ocean View looked pretty tasty: big detached houses that gave you something substantial for your money [...]. Second glance, the grass needed weeding and there were gaps in the footpaths. Third glance, something was wrong."(*Ibid.*, p. 15.) Inside one of these houses lived the Spains; their living quarters were impeccable from top to bottom, from bedrooms to kitchen, except for one horrific detail: its walls are full of baby monitors and mysterious holes that are the object of various speculations—from plain irrational craziness to a drug-deal gone wrong—before we learn the truth that helps unravel the whole crime. A creature that is at the same time symbolic, imaginary, and real (much like in Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles*) invaded the lives of this picture-perfect family and nested inside the very walls of their home. After investigating the home in detail—patiently, slowly, voyeuristically—the creature, supposedly a mink, was not the only one invading the family's privacy, we learn. The neighbors were listening to the Spains via their radio, and in an unfinished building they find an improvised camp set up by a stranger who turns out to be not the "outsider" (a now already traditional suspect of the series), but rather an old friend of the Spains who gradually became over-concerned with their post-capitalist fate. Now, the solution to this murder mystery is that Patrick, the *pater familias* who lost his job due to the crisis, became so obsessed with getting rid of the creature in order to make everything

perfect again that he drove his wife Jennifer crazy to the point where she saw no other option than to kill her own children, husband, and herself—only that the next day she awoke in the hospital alive, forced to bear her unbearable life, and eventually confessing to the crime.

The intersubjective trauma of the Spains is mirrored by the detective's own trauma, which indirectly affects the whole investigation. Already before the two detectives arrive at their destination we learn that Scorcher has a personal link to Broken Harbour (not unlike Ryan to the woods of the first novel): as we learn from the man himself "Broken" derives from the Gaelic word for dawn, *breacadh*, and at the dawn of society as Kennedy remembers it, as well as at the dawn of his own subjectivity, everything was sunny and perfect. The place was his family's seaside resort where they spent some weeks every summer; but, as the economic boom, followed by the crisis, first modernized and then transformed "Broken Harbour" into "Brianstown," so Broken Harbour broke the subject—it was there that his mother committed suicide, driving his sister Dina crazy to the point that she invades the story when learning that her brother is investigating the traumatic locus. The detective's trauma is here not so much subjectively constitutive, but rather intersubjectively deconstructive, in the sense that it is more his sister's trauma than his own. Caring for her as she relapses into her worst state of mind takes him away from the investigation, but never too near his own traumatic past that he could not perform his duty, and only the unhappiest of coincidences (his sister's sleeping with his partner and taking a piece of evidence on the way out), combined with his co-detective's sloppiness (withholding the same piece of evidence from him due to his own ambition), ultimately obstructs the investigation, but does not prove to be conclusive in itself.

Structurally speaking, looking at the novel as a whole, the subjective element of trauma, and the desire that follows it as a

shadow running after shadows—for Kennedy "murder is chaos," while the detective "stands against that, for order," a desire that sprang from the early childhood trauma of his mother's suicide, foreshadowing another mother's homicide and attempted suicide at the same location—is not as constitutive as the much more substantial element of class-struggle in an objectively traumatic post-crash capitalist society. Regardless of the fact that it was Jennifer who did it, one still has the feeling that a murder out of compassion for her children due to Patrick's craziness begs the question of *whodunit* not towards *whosolvedit* (as the first two books of the series do) but rather towards *whatcausedit* (as the third book did), thus re-asking the question of who or what is really responsible for driving the Spains crazy. The immediate answer—the creature inside the walls—is of course far too short: the creature is itself just the symptom of the shattered desires of the Spains for a normal, successful, happy life as promoted by capitalist ideology and as materialized in their pretty house. If there is a true cause for the murder it must be identified with the whole structural chain of signifiers that links the Spain's home, understood materially as real estate, with the imaginary capitalist desire for a happy life, drilled through and through by the crash, which left a void in this very desire (in much the same vein that the house was full of holes due to the strange creature that thus metaphorically embodies the whole trauma and its desire).

And it is in this sense that *capitalism and schizophrenia*, the subtitle of *A Thousand Plateaus*, could perhaps most emblematically be applied precisely to the solution of this murder mystery that is *Broken Harbour*.

4.5 The Secret Place *(2014)*

The Secret Place is a very singular installment of the series for various reasons that I will deal with in detail, but in broad strokes could be defined as a double movement of moving away from

the class-struggle perspective while at the same time exploring it further, focusing on the constitutive moment of trauma.

The novel begins with a reminiscence of Holly Mackey, and her friends from the elite St. Kilda boarding school for girls, before the murder of 16-year-old Chris Harper, from the equally elite Colm school for boys. The narrative follows-up this side of the story through in-between flash-back chapters, mainly following the teenage feud for survival and domination between two rival girl-gang groups. On the one hand, the roommates composed of Holly, who takes the initiative in solving the murder; Julia, the leader of the group who keeps the girls together; Becca, the sweet, naive, and over-emotional girl of the group; Selina, the beautiful and introverted one, who dated Chris before the murder and sees his ghost afterwards. On the other hand, there is their nemesis Joanne, the dominant alpha female of the "Daleks" pack of she-wolves, who also dated Chris; Gemma, her coquettish beta side-kick; Alison, the timid and easily frightened gamma; and Orla, the not-so-smart omega of the pack.

The novel proper begins years after the unsolved murder, when Holly brings a photo of Chris together with a note stating "I know who killed him," found at the eponymous "Secret Place" (a noticeboard where the girls can anonymously pin their innermost secrets), to Stephen Moran, now in Cold Cases (due to the back-stabbing of detective Kennedy, and due to Mackey putting in a good word for him):

> She came looking for me [...] I didn't recognize her [...] I don't know if she recognized me. Maybe not. It had been six years, she'd been just a little kid [...] She let our admin say, "Detective Moran, there's someone to see you," pen pointing at the sofa, "Miss Holly Mackey." […] A teenage girl, you watch yourself. A detective's kid, you watch twice as hard. But Holly Mackey: bring someone she doesn't want, and you're done for the day. (French 2014, pp. 5–6)

Moran knows, of course, that she is Frank's daughter from the past investigation at "Faithful Place." What he doesn't know (yet) is that he will intervene later in this one too in his distinctive style: "I know Holly's da, a bit. Frank Mackey, Undercover. You go at him straight, he'll dodge and come in sideways; you go at him sideways, he'll charge head down" (*ibid.*, p. 9). Moran, the persistent, career-oriented, social-ladder climber, sees in Holly's card a gift straight from heaven, and smells the possibility of moving forward ("Cold Cases is good. Murder is better"): "One thing about me: I've got plans. First thing I did, once I'd waved bye-bye to Holly and the social worker, I looked up the Harper case on the system. Lead detective Antoinette Conway" (*ibid.*, p. 13). Skillfully navigating his way by presenting the card and himself as a potential break-through in this cold-case now gone warm, Moran teams up with the abrasive detective Conway, both embarking on an intense investigation that will last one full day—every breath taken, word uttered, bone unearthed and ghost appearing described in detail.

The two detectives pick the most appropriate car for the job and drive to St. Kilda. There they first visit the head teacher Miss McKenna, who thought the whole thing that did so much damage to her elite bastion of education in the past was over, but now finds herself compelled to allow a series of interviews through which we get two-times-four suspects from both girl cliques that mutually accuse each other. Through these interviews that are a mix of detection and deception, and especially the flashbacks from the past that give us an insight into the rooms, the groove, the field, and the mall where the teens of both schools hang out—combined with hearing the girls talk their teen-speak, learning all the aspects of their mutual relationships, discovering their most intimate problems—it becomes apparent that French takes seriously Freud's scandalous lesson that childhood is far from innocent.

So, who is at the end discovered to be the killer among the list of eight suspects (plus the obligatory "outsider" figure)? Well,

this is, arguably, the weakest part of the novel since the author repeats the standard solution of picking the least obvious suspect (making it, again, the most obvious choice): namely, Becca, motivated by her friend Selina's suffering (Chris is messing with her heart and head), her other friend Julia's sexual sacrifice (she sleeps with Chris to steer him away from Selina), empowered by the magic power they discovered together (allowing them to manipulate electricity and make things flow), and armed with a sickle (stolen from the gardening storeroom). The process of detection that leads to the discovery is also somehow flawed, and in comparison to the other novels of the series, is not linked to any of the detective's trauma or even personal story, but rather enabled by the girls themselves where most of the traumas reside.

Still, the most interesting part is the contrast between the two detectives, both of humble working-class origins and each struggling in their own way, and the two groups of girls attending the elite boarding school. This aspect is not only beautifully depicted through the different styles pertaining to the main detective-story narrative and the teenage flashbacks into the past, respectively, but also conceptually well-crafted in terms of trauma, desire, and class-struggle. Conway, struggling with her career as a bad-ass feminist who does not conform to the patriarchic rules of the game yet still desiring recognition from the men she so deeply despises, and Moran, the ideal, capitalistic, careerist male who is prepared to do anything in order to obtain everything he desires, both eventually collide. Or almost do, when astute Frank intervenes in order to save his daughter Holly from the two detectives by trying to play one against the other—warning Conway about Moran's ambitions (as his past with detective Kennedy clearly demonstrates), and, vice versa, warning Moran about Conway's precarious status in the murder squad's boy's club. Eventually, they both decide not to throw the other under the bus to save themselves, and what both Conway and Moran experience as genuine adult dilemmas is also most

intensely present in the background of the two groups of girls and their somehow solipsistic and yet very much real problems: not only issues of first loves, emerging sexuality, questions of loyalty, popularity, and friendship, but also the over-arching fact that they are at school in order to become part of this grown-up world that seems so distant, unreachable, and alien to their own most intimate feelings and convictions. However, cause and effect should switch place here: it is not that the girls are alienated from the world because they are so self-absorbed, but rather that they are so self-absorbed because the world itself is so alien to them. The two groups take two opposite strategies to deal with it: the first one by secluding themselves from the outside world through forming a strong bond of closed-circle friendship that leads them together even to the practice of magic, the other group by swimming with the superficial mainstream that drags them deep into the catatonic, consumerist, cut-throat capital ideology.

The logic of alienation from social reality is embodied in Seline, one of the novel's most lovable characters. Experiencing the traumatic death of her beloved Chris—for whom she betrays the sacred bond of friendship—she gradually closes herself off not only from the outside world, but also from her friends, until Holly decides to take action by anonymously posting the card that she herself eventually takes to detective Moran (the last twist of the novel, which ends at the precise moment it begins with). And her bet is correct: discovering the killer not only solves Selena's subjective trauma, but also closes the case in objective social reality, where it also helps Moran's career and consolidates Conway's position in the murder squad.

An unlikely happy ending that never happened before in the series? Perhaps. Moran and Conway, who became partners for this cold case gone warm and from there to hot and burning, also star as colleagues in the last novel of the series, *The Trespasser*, which this time gives us a detailed insight into our thin red line

sewing together trauma, desire, and class-struggle at work in the Dublin murder squad itself.

4.6 The Trespasser *(2016)*

The Trespasser returns to the style of the previous novels of the series, thus consolidating the relation between trauma, desire, and class-struggle that figure prominently in this last instalment of the series.

The novel begins like most of them begin, with fragmented reminiscences from the past detective Conway left behind, although not without consequences, since her father left and her mother "used to tell me stories about my da" (French 2016, p. 1)— invented stories, that is—thus making her wary of humans in general and males in particular. The characteristic of acute wariness towards fellow human beings, together with fearlessness in face of danger and a big mouth in front of authority, definitely makes Conway the "female Mackey" of the series. She stands in sharp contrast to her partner Moran, whom we already got used to as the guy who would do anything for his career, and who found himself in the middle of the murder squad trying to make a good impression: "At first I didn't like him—everyone else did, and I don't trust people who everyone likes, plus he smiled too much—but that changed fast" (*ibid.*, p. 10). The two detectives both joined the squad from different units—Conway from Missing Persons ahead of Moran from Cold Cases. Despite different stances toward a masculine, power-play working environment, and despite the fact that they had been partners for only four months when the murder case of *The Trespasser* hits them, they start to grow fond of each other, as partners in crime-solving often do.

Since they are both class-struggling in the murder squad, regarded by both as the highest career point one can reach (none of French's characters fail to remind us that "Murder is where you

want to be"; "Give me murder any time", etc.), they take whatever they can: "There is no other murder squad to transfer to; this is the one and only. If you want it, and both of us do, you take whatever it throws at you" (*ibid.*, p. 4). And when this case came in, the two of them took it without knowing that it was meant for them in a more profound and planned way than it seemed at first. Namely, what at first looked like a simple case of domestic violence—a girl named Aisslin found with her head smashed either by someone or by accident at the fireplace in her apartment, where dinner was set for two and the boyfriend was on his way—turns out to be connected to the murder squad itself, and that is why the superintendent O'Kelly, who in this novel demonstrates why he is the boss, gave the case to the least popular pair—precisely because he suspected a possible cover-up.

Everything about this case starts to stink, starting with Conway's closet at the station into which one of her dick-headed colleagues pissed, apparently to have some sophomoric fun, only one of the many indecent incidents that Conway had to endure because she didn't want to "play ball" (at the very first day on the squad someone grabbed her by the ass for fun but got his arm broken instead). Then there is the imposing figure of detective Breslin, who is attached to them as senior supervisor and is overly zealous to nail the very first suspect that is thrown at them, Aisslin's boyfriend and bookstore owner Rory Fallon. As it turns out, there are no gangsters involved, but rather another boyfriend Aisslin was dating before meeting Rory, namely detective McCann, who once upon a time made the wrong call at the right turn of events. Conway and Aisslin shared the same trauma, since the victim's dad was also missing and suspected dead for some time, when eventually McCann located him settled happily with another woman and decided not to tell his former wife or their daughter about what really happened out of a misplaced feeling of compassion. Aisslin, whom Conway at a certain point remembers from her own time at Missing Persons,

and who unlike herself did persist in the search of her father through the years until the point that she remade herself as a naive Barbie Doll in order to seduce detective McCann and get to the truth about her father. Which she eventually did and started to plan her *vendetta* against the man who decided to withhold the truth from her, the problem now being that at a certain point while working the clueless detective she met this great guy from the bookstore, Rory, whom she started dating and who genuinely liked her. But McCann was not only sexually seduced, but also fell in love with the beautiful girl that so admired him and his work, even to the point of leaving his wife and children—at which point Aisslin would have dumped him in order to get her revenge. In the end McCann sobs out in his confession during an interview led by O'Kelly, who takes the reins of the case from Conway and Moran. The night she was planning to have dinner with Rory, and already gave up her plan of ruining McCann's life, McCann shows up at her door, learns that she is leaving him, begs for an explanation, saying "I cannot live without knowing why," the irony of which makes her burst into laughter, lost on the poor wannabe lover, who smashes her head.

Conceptually speaking, we can see how Conway's paternal trauma links her to the victim in a very personal way—although the two of them had two very distinctive ways of dealing with this trauma. Conway was already working at missing persons, where Aisslin kept returning in search of an answer—thus motivating further the desire to finish the investigation, as well as preventing her from seeing the solution of the murder mystery until the very end. The main detective's gaze on the murder victim and the case functions as what in Lacanian psychoanalysis is known as *méconnaissance,* which in French denotes two different things: both ignorance (as if saying for something that you weren't able to see: "I missed that!") and knowledge (like, for example, when you exclaim in surprise: "I get it now!"). Conway's moment of *méconnaissance* is precisely the moment when

she realizes how much alike the two of them were, and at the same time with two very different Oedipal stories to tell. The subject's desire of (re-)meeting the missing father—whose disappearance functions as trauma—which motivates Aisslin's camouflage into the spitting image of her mother in order to seduce the surrogate father-figure of detective McCann, is enacted as fantasy when Conway herself is visited by her longtime missing father. What happens? Reconciliation? No, nothing of the sort: Conway politely listens to what he has to say, and then chases him out never to see him again, thus repeating the trauma—only that this time she is in control of the traumatic event.

As for the resolution of the class-struggle part of this feminist story, it is noteworthy that it is also connected to Conway's patriarchal trauma, only that this time the fantasy is a complete change of the toxic environment that is the murder squad in which the female detective is completely surrounded by male enemies. However, in one of the final un-twists of the story, Moran turns out to be the moron that Conway always suspected him to be: instead of telling her that it was only one guy who pissed in her locker and some other similarly childish acts—and not the whole squad as she thought in her paranoid mind—he decided to keep it silent, apparently to motivate her to leave an environment she hated anyway, but in fact making room for himself, who was a lesser detective, yes, but still "a boy in a boy's club." The patriarchal fantasy that she created can now be put to rest too—at least subjectively for her own peace of mind, if not in a socially objective way that would, however, need much more than a single struggling subject.

As we have seen, the *Trespasser*'s distinctive feature is that it manages to merge both aspects we were dealing with thus far through the other novels of the series: through a feminist critique of patriarchal society, it directly linked the subjective trauma on the one hand and the social one on the other, thus demonstrating that psychoanalysis and Marxism in the final analysis address

the same issue of inequality from two different perspectives—and precisely from the perspective of both one cannot doubt the other side of inequality, namely, the quality of equality.

5. Conclusion

If there is one sentence that sums up the whole *Dublin Murder Squad* series, then it is this one from *In the Woods*: "It was these arcana I craved, these near-invisible textures like Braille, legible only to the initiated" (French 2007, pp. 11–12). Indeed, after reading all six books one becomes initiated into the near-invisible textures that French's novels employ in order to crawl under our skins, where they stay at least until the moment when one is able to discern the reccurring structural elements that the whole series builds around. As we have seen, the central element is that of trauma: the past and present, collective traumas of Irish society, from its fairy and feudal Celtic tradition to the class-struggle pertinent to the modern Celtic Tiger, as well as the individual traumas of the detectives, which motivate their subjective, personal desire to solve the murders while at the same time preventing them from seeing the solution to the case—or at least not without a dialectical, intersubjective relation with their partners in crime-solving. Each murder—violent, traumatic, but also aestheticized, well-crafted—thus functions in the novels not merely as the enigma driving the narrative forward, but also as a structural intersection between the many levels of the individual, intersubjective, and collective. The murders also stand in meta-textual relation to the reader, who is the only one able to connect all the dots. However, what was fresh and novel, especially early in the series, becomes obsolete through repetition. As if the author herself noticed that as she tried to cut the knot of the series by writing two stand-alone novels—*The Witch Elm* (2018) and, most recently, *The Searcher* (2020)—in

which she re-employed the same structural elements used before in order to create something new outside the milieu of the Dublin's murder squad. However, what both novels did was merely a deconstruction of the texture with which the whole series was interwoven—which will, perhaps in the future, allow for something new to happen in detective fiction—thus confirming the old Beckettian adage: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."

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