

# *“Close Enough to One Another and Far Apart as Well”: The Intersection of Literature and History in Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark*

Fernando Aparecido Poiana

**Abstract:** *This article analyses the intersection of narrative and history in Seamus Deane’s Reading in the Dark (1996). It uses the Benjaminian notions of memory, narration and experience to investigate how this novel creates a self through a language characterized by the absence of what it refers to. The analysis will eventually demonstrate that the tension between recollection and obliteration makes Literature and History converge as products of a narrative act.*

**Keywords:** *Seamus Deane; Reading in the Dark; literature and history.*

“...I’d switch off the light, get back in bed, and lie there, the book still open, re-imagining all I had read, the various ways the plot might unravel, the novel opening into endless possibilities in the dark.” (Deane 20)

## **On autobiography and fiction**

Until quite recently literary theorists and critics would shiver at the mention of autobiographical fiction, in a world that was struggling to cope with the death of the author. Indeed, critics who advocated the literariness of anything autobiographical ran the risk of losing their credibility. “Prior to the mid-1950s autobiography was seen as little more than a special variety of biography and as a kind of stepchild of history and literature” (Olney xiv). Similarly, autobiography would often be an ancillary matter to disciplines like anthropology, sociology, psychology and religion. It was thus a kind of service literature, never being taken “... as a mode of writing with an interest of its own and demanding the sort of philosophical, rhetorical, and linguistic scrutiny that would be given to any other variety of literature” (Olney xiv).

Nevertheless, queries about the frontiers of actuality and verisimilitude have brought discredit to any identification of autobiography with self-written true-to-life

biography. As a consequence, autobiography has gradually come to be regarded as a "... distinct and distinguishable mode of literature with all sorts of complex ties to other, more traditional literary genres and with much to teach theorists concerned with both literary genres and literary history" (Olney xiv). This is so because autobiography employs "... all the devices a novel does: characters and the chronicle of a family, maxims and lyric passages, confessions and narrative" (Fowlie 166). Moreover, if we agree that "... no autobiographer is in possession of the full truth about his past" (Shumaker 36) it becomes evident that narratives about the self are ultimately "... a process of self-alteration [in which living] belongs to the past [whilst writing is in] the present" (Fowlie 165). It is this gap between the tale and the telling that eventually makes room for and justifies the scrutiny of the fictional elements imbricated in autobiographical prose.

The study of autobiographical writing proves particularly relevant in the context of Irish literature and culture. Despite the persistence of life writing in Ireland across four centuries, Liam Harte argues that, if "Irish literature can be said to have a Cinderella genre, then surely it is autobiography" (Harte 1). The analogy is thought-provoking, and addresses the imbalance between the massive amount of criticism on Irish drama, fiction and poetry, on the one hand, and the "remarkably slight, in quantity if not in quality" (Harte 1) criticism on autobiographical writing, on the other. Harte adds that "... this critical neglect seems all the more curious when one considers the preponderance of life writing in contemporary Irish culture" (Harte 1), especially during the brief period of Celtic Tiger Ireland.

Hence, the question about how private experience is articulated with social and cultural change remains somehow unanswered. Indeed, the recurrent bursting of dead past events and experiences into the living present fosters the awareness of "... buried, unfinished business yet awaiting definitive settlement [and] fuels the Irish habit of historical thought" (Leerssen 222-223). This bears considerable relevance in a context where the telling of personal stories has progressively traded confessional boxes for the pages of memoirs. In "... such a self-charged context, nation-building can be achieved by the simple expedient of writing one's autobiography: and autobiography in Ireland becomes, in effect, the autobiography of Ireland" (Kiberd 119).

These arguments imply that the indeterminacy of a writer's life is contiguous with the uncertainty of the nation's political future. Moreover, if we are to believe that "... every life is mysterious [to someone else] unless perhaps it is written about [and that] when it is being written about and then possibly read later, it turns into allegory [or some] form of figurative plausibility" (Fowlie 165), arguments such as Kiberd's are hard to refute. Yet if "... much of the past is beyond recall even for the autobiographer ... who must rely chiefly on his unaided memory" (Shumaker 38), and if it is also "... to be expected that autobiographies will contain distortions" (Shumaker 44), then the intimate association between self and nation will not be as easy to establish as Kiberd suggests.

With these considerations in mind, this article seeks to analyse how Seamus Deane's *Reading in the Dark* constitutes a fictional text that purposefully assumes the tropes of autobiography to make "... the events of an individual life ... fully compliant

with the demands of a political narrative” (Patten 68) in which the convergence of narrative and history via linguistic construction forge the narrator’s individual identity and connect him to the past and to the future of the community he belongs to. It also examines how “... the structure of the autobiographical *Bildungsroman* provides the terms in which [Deane’s narrative] finds [its] imaginative expression” (Patten 68) in the aesthetic reconstruction of individual experience. To enquire into the way fiction and experience are interwoven in Deane’s novel this study is based on the Benjaminian notions of memory, narration and experience, and will look into how the narrative self is created through a language predominantly characterized by the absence of what it refers to. Finally, the article analyses how the tension between recollection and obliteration causes Literature and History to converge in the act of story telling in the book. The examination of these aspects might demonstrate whether or not Deane’s novel merely exaggerates “... the tendency of Irish autobiographical fiction ... to refer, through the self, to a national or political metanarrative” (Patten 68)’, and reinforces the traditional “... cultural identification of self and nation” (Patten 68) in contemporary Irish literature.

### **Narrative and History in *Reading in the Dark***

The narrative of *Reading in the Dark* covers a period of twenty-six years, from 1945 until 1971, and it is initially presented from the perspective of a boy growing up in Derry. The narrator/protagonist finds himself immersed in a reality replete with Gothic and heroic stories, legends and folklore, all mingled with stories of family feuds and political assassination. In this context, the boy reveals his fascination for words and for the textual nature of the reality surrounding him. He hears, overhears, repeats and sometimes complements these stories, most of which he can capture only partially. This accentuates the metonymic character of his narrative, so that the landscape often becomes an extension of his feelings: “the town lay entranced by the great sleeping light of the river and the green beyond of the border. It woke now and then, like someone startled and shouting from a dream, in clamour at its abandonment” (Deane 36). In fact, the entire chapter from which this extract is drawn is replete with fragments of apparently disconnected memories. They create a kaleidoscopic scenario of riot and celebration which encapsulates the uneasy atmosphere of the book intensely. At the outset of “Fire, June 1949”, the narrator says that,

It was a city of bonfires. The Protestants had more than we had. They had the twelfth of July, when they celebrated the triumph of Protestant armies at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. ... We had only the fifteenth of August bonfires; it was a church festival but we made it into a political one as well, to answer the fires of the twelfth. But our celebrations were not official, like the Protestant ones. ... Fire was what I loved to hear of and to see. It transformed the grey air and streets, excited and exciting. (Deane 33)

thus stressing the political overtones of the Catholic-Protestant feud while at the same time retaining the narrator's naivety. In addition, passages such as,

We were told never to play in the park at night, for Daddy Watt's ghost haunted it, looking for revenge for the distillery fire that had ruined him. Those who saw him said he was just a black shape that moved like a shadow around the park, but that the shape had a mouth that opened and showed a red fire raging within. . . . Sometimes when passing [the ruins of the distillery], I would hear the terrified squealing of pigs from the slaughterhouse. They sounded so human I imagined they were going to break into words, screaming for mercy. And the noise would echo in the hollow distillery, wailing through the collapsed floors, clinging to the blackened brick inside. I had heard that people ran from their houses as the shooting started and the police cordon tightened. The crowd in the street, at the top of the Bogside, started singing rebel songs, but the police fired over their heads and the crowd scattered. (Deane 35)

reinforce the political overtones of the narrator's account and the predominantly oral aspect of his experiences, constituted largely by the stories he (over)hears and/or is told, often anonymously.

The narrative perspective is substantially altered throughout the novel as the narrator becomes more mature. This is first suggested by the references to months and years in the titles of each of the chapters/episodes that construct the plot. The chapters start in February 1945, and progress almost on a yearly basis until the penultimate one, dated June 1961. What follows then is a ten-year gap between that and the last chapter, dated July 1971. Along with this unequivocal chronological evidence of the narrator's growth, one can also detect traces of greater maturity in his tone. The different portraits of his relationship with his father, in two very distinct moments, "Father, February 1953" and "My Father, June 1961", are good examples of it. The naivety of "now, he said, he wished he could remember if this was the church they came to sometimes on a Sunday on those visits. He looked around as he said so, and so did we, as if some memory would return to us too" (Deane 133) is supplanted by a more detached account of his father's life and personality in:

He went upstairs. He never took a drink in his life. I've reconstructed his vigil behind the door in that noisy room a hundred times since, just as I reconstructed his life out of the remains of the stories about his dead parents, his vanished older brother, his own unknowing and, to me, beloved silence. Oh, father. The man behind the door, the boy weeping in the coal shed, the walk down that dusty road, the ruined rose bed, the confession in the church, his dead, betrayed brother – was that all? In a whole lifetime? How bitterly did he feel or was he saddened into quietness? How much did he know or not know? (Deane 133)

In the ending of the novel (which is not a “conclusion” in the traditional sense of a resolution to the conflicts presented), the narrator, drawn to the window by the sound of hooves (232-33) realizes that “... the present is not a place of hard facts, and as with the past it, too, is a site of potential ghosts and strange disconnected apparitions...” (Hand 248-249). Instead of being a moment of triumph in which both the narrator and the reader would celebrate the former’s discoveries and maturity, the ending reveals that for him “... gaining knowledge only results in driving a wedge between himself and both his parents” (Hand 251).

Even though Deane’s novel incorporates autobiographical tropes – notably the use of memory as its structural principle – it cannot be read as a mere true-to-life book, as the notion of autobiography advanced by Philippe Lejeune implies. For him, autobiography is “a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality” (Lejeune 11). Despite drawing heavily on individual experiences, there is no denying that the facts and events addressed in *Reading in the Dark* have been subject to intense artistic (re)construction. Indeed, the events narrated are more the result of aesthetic construction than an accurately retrospective account of what was or would have been. The opening lines, for example, set the tone of the fragmented narrative, and anticipate some of the central motifs of the plot: “on the stairs, there was a clear, plain silence” (Deane 5), the latter an allusion to the secrecy and reticence that will permeate the whole story. The narrator proceeds to describe a short staircase, “... fourteen steps in all, covered in lino from which the original pattern had been polished away to the point where it had the look of a faint memory” (Deane 5). Here, the resulting metonymic image interweaves individual and context as it advances the importance of those faint memories: they are at the heart of the episodic events shrouded in mystery that provide coherence to the fragmented plot. As Hand argues, what the narrator has to contend with “... is a constantly encroaching geographic world – real life experienced at street level – with various landmarks dotting the scene, looming large in the imagination, demanding to be negotiated” (Hand 248). Passages such as “it was a fierce winter, that year. The snow covered the air-raid shelters. At night, from the stair window, the field was a white paradise of loneliness” (Deane 9), and “... the water pierced the fire from behind. It expired in a plume of smoke and angry hissings. It was desolate” (Deane 9) lend support to Hand’s arguments. The emotional overtones of these images reverberate throughout the book, accentuating the narrator’s link with his community; at the same time he gradually becomes distant from it: “... my sorrow for myself was overwhelming ... I found myself on my own, and no one would talk to me, and it was in the church, only there, that I could be safe and it was there that I found myself able to talk” (Deane 111).

In addition, *Reading in the Dark* is shot through with elements characteristic of literary genres other than the traditional autobiography and memoir. For Hand, Deane’s novel “... hovers elusively between numerous narrative genres – the ghost

story, detective fiction, the Gothic, and *Bildungsroman* – never finally settling on any single one” (247). Furthermore, both the childlike perspective and tone adopted in the account of the narrator’s formative years lay special emphasis on the mysterious aura this citation of these genres’ conventions eventually creates. “We were haunted!” (Deane 6), says the narrator in the opening episode. “We had a ghost, even in the middle of the afternoon. I heard her moving upstairs. The house was all cobweb tremors. No matter where I walked, it yielded before me and settled behind me” (Deane 6). What seems merely Gothic at first becomes a metaphor for the narrator’s own existential quest for knowledge and identity, and his progressive distancing from his family as he unveils the secrets that underlie their relationship. “My mother was increasingly distant from everyone [and her] anger stayed in her eyes when she was speaking, but when she was silent an empty panic took its place” (Deane 216), he says about the shroud of mystery hanging over his mother’s occasionally stoic figure. He also mentions that she disliked anyone “... standing with her [at the lobby window] to talk, most especially me. There she was with her ghosts. Now the haunting meant something new to me – now I had become the shadow. Everything bore down on her” (Deane 217). This progressively metaphorical language used in Deane’s book caters to a more “... generic subtlety, emotional profundity and authenticating power” (Harte 2) rather than to a mere retrospective account of what would have been his own actual life and/or ideas.

The book also features fantastic elements and motifs. They are incorporated into the plot through the stories the protagonist is told as a child, and that are imbricated in his memories. These are stories such as that of the great exorcism when “... the diocesan exorcist, Father Browne [whose black hair had turned white] in one night fighting the devil” (Deane 162) and that of Brigid, who, after going through several reportedly supernatural experiences while taking care of Francis and Frances, went completely strange in the head and stopped talking. “People used to bless themselves when she appeared and hurry away. ... Until the day she died she never spoke again, would never leave her room, would never have a mirror near her” (Deane 70). Besides, references to folklore as in “people with green eyes were close to the fairies, we were told; they were just there for a little while, looking for a human child they could take away” (Deane 7), and childish meditations on theological matters such as “hell was a deep place. You fell into it, turning over and over in mid-air until the blackness sucked you into a great whirlpool of flames and you disappeared forever” (Deane 7) stress the mystery and suspense in the plot, on the one hand, and the narrator’s struggle to unlock the secrets that haunt his family, on the other. As a result, “... the ghostly presences and haunting within the novel [suggest that] the past is never over and done with, [and also that] it necessarily lingers on to trouble the present” (Hand 250). In actual fact, these stories render his painful reality of betrayal, secrecy and uneasy silence palatable or at least communicable.

This wealth of narrative elements evinces that, despite its apparent genesis in lived experience, *Reading in the Dark* takes on the convention of the novel form rather than that of memoir or traditional autobiography. Hand has a point when he states that “an

integral element of [this book] at the level of meta-narrative is how it traces the struggle towards being a novel” (249). The apparently disconnected episodes are indeed limited and intimate sketches of the young boy’s life, which emerges out of the memories evoked by the telling of “... story upon story” (Deane 9). It is therefore safe to say that Deane’s novel is “... obviously self-consciously concerned with the act of storytelling itself, as it is with reading” (Hand 249), rather than with the self-portrait of its author as a young man alone. Indeed, the constant use of the passive voice (see pp. 150, 184, 225) reinforces the indeterminate origin of the stories that form the basis of the narrator’s memories and of his self too. Therefore, the ambiguities of a narrative whose objects of desire are “... knowledge and knowing [are amplified as the] unnamed narrator searches for the truth at the heart of the secret that troublingly haunts his family” (Hand 247). His family’s history, “... came to [him] in bits, from people who rarely recognised all they had told. Some of the things [he remembers], [he does not] really remember” (Deane 225). In other words, he had just been told about those things, and now he felt as if he remembered them, and wanted to, “... the more because it is so important for others to forget them” (Deane 225).

Despite that, one cannot say that *Reading in the Dark* is completely detached from the world out of which it is written. Actually, as Liam Harte plausibly claims, “there is no singular text of self, no autobiography that does not imbricate other narratives in its own [and that] the complex relationship between language and identity lies at the heart of this discursive problematic” (5). Indeed, it is perhaps best to think of Deane’s book as a novel that not only constitutes an aesthetic rethinking of individual experiences, of the Irish scene, of the economic, sectarian and cultural oppression of the Derry in the 1940s and 1950s, but also brings into “... sharp, pristine focus concerns with power and authority [that are central to it]” (Hand 248). The narrator categorically states that “... freedom. In this place. Never was, never would be” (Deane 47), and uneasily wonders “[what] was it, anyway? Freedom to do what you should, that was another. Close enough to one another and far apart as well” (Deane 47). This being close yet apart, knowing yet not being quite sure about it, leads to the idea that,

such intimations of fracture and insufficiency can also become sources of creativity; the story of the self is narrated, despite the treacheries of language. ... the vacillating self, poised between definition and dispersal, enunciation and erasure, affirmation and dissolution. Repeatedly, we come upon acts of self-portraiture that show subjects taking a paradoxical delight in doubleness and ambivalence, even as they strive for self-completion, suggesting that the Irish autobiographical self is most itself in the very process of becoming. (Harte 5)

Bearing that in mind, if the “... experience which is passed on from mouth to mouth is the source from which all storytellers have drawn” (Benjamin 84), and also if “... among those who have written down the tales, it is the great ones whose written version differs least from the speech of the many nameless storytellers” (Benjamin 84), then one can see the procedures which engender the narrative self in *Reading in the Dark*

from a particularly unique perspective. The nameless narrator/protagonist, woven, as the plot is, from myriad stories other anonymous voices tell him, renders this Benjaminian approach not only possible, but also valid. The narrator not only tells the story, but also listens to it. He gradually finds himself involved in "... a narrative stream [in which the stories he hears or overhears, his own history and History are mingled and remain open to] new proposals and common construction" (Gagnebin 11, *my translation*). This is suggested both in the metaphor engendered in the title of the novel and in the "... communion between life and word" (*ibid.* 10) this insertion implies: what initially appears as individual experience "... is always emerging out of and dispersed back into a collective apprehension" (Campbell and Harbord 12). Consequently, autobiography is not about the self as an isolated entity or project. Instead, it is about "... a self known or embedded within the network of social relations that confer identity and meaning [to it]" (Campbell and Harbord 12). In this sense, the subjective experience is never fixed or programmed; it is "... changed by encounters with the world, with cultural objects and artefacts, and with others" (Campbell and Harbord 12). The facts-of-life talk episode is a good example of such encounters:

[Father Nugent] lit the cigarette with a spill of paper, dropped himself into the armchair opposite me and nodded at me through the blue spiral of smoke. Then he switched on the lamp on the table beside him, even though it was a bright day. I was toasting on the side nearest the fire, so I moved the chair back as unobtrusively as I could by levering my heels gently against the thin carpet. The carpet rucked behind the chair. I was stuck. As he stared into the fire, brooding in a kind-hearted and embarrassed manner before the red coals, I rehearsed the sequence that others had told me to expect. First, the life-is-a-mystery bit. Then, the incarnation – spirit becoming flesh. Reference to Jesus. To His Mother. None to Joseph. Then to Our Own Parents, Adam and Eve. Then to the Fall. Then to our own parents at home. Then to it, the act itself. (Deane 149-150)

The narrative nature of his experiences blurs the distinction between memories and imagination: "I celebrated all the anniversaries ... in my head, year after year, until, to my pleasure and surprise, they began to become confused and muddled, and I wondered at times had I dreamed it all" (Deane 225): as Hand emphatically states, some of the parallel stories in *Reading in the Dark* "... deliberately obscure truth" (250) instead of leading to it. Additionally, the sequence of episodic and fragmented events of the plot "... sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller [in this case, the narrator/protagonist], in order to bring it out of him again" (Benjamin 91-92). The narrator's meditation on his English teacher's account of good writing as being that which just tells the truth alludes to this connection between fiction and experience:

I felt embarrassed because my own essay had been full of long or strange words I had found in the dictionary – 'cerulean', 'azure', 'phantasm' and 'implacable'



– all of them describing skies and seas I had seen only with the Ann of the novel. I'd never thought such stuff was worth writing about. It was ordinary life – no rebellions or love affairs or dangerous flights across the hills at night. And yet I kept remembering that mother and son waiting in the Dutch interior of that essay, with the jug of milk and the butter on the table, while behind and above them were those wispy, shawly figures from the rebellion, sibilant above the great fire and below the aching, high wind. (Deane 21)

The articulation of theory and text reveals that the self in Deane's novel is constituted from a combination of memory and fantasy, from tracks of experience "... frequently evident in his narratives, if not as those of the one who experienced it, then as those of the one who reports it" (Benjamin 92). Jeanne Marie Gagnebin states that the importance of narration for the constitution of the subject – and one could say of the self too – has always been thought to be that of "... recollection, of the redeeming of the past by words which, without that, would fade into silence and obliteration" (Gagnebin 3). She adds that,

If we can then read the stories that humanity tells itself as the stream that constitutes memory, and therefore, its identity, it does not mean that the very narrative movement is not permeated, often surreptitiously, by forgetfulness, which would not be a mere flaw, a "blank" in memory, but also an activity that obliterates, renounces, disentangles, holds the boundlessness of memory against the necessary frontiers of death and inscribes it at the heart of the narrative. (Gagnebin 3)

In other words, memory can "... absorb the course of events on the one hand and, with the passing of these, make its peace with the power of death on the other" (Benjamin 97). Due to that, memory – "... the epic faculty *par excellence*" (*ibidem*) – becomes the means to fictionalize affective, familial, political and historical experiences. As Hand states,

In this novel there is a powerful and significant confluence between art and the act of interpretation, so that the kind of power struggles inherent in all acts of saying and writing are interrogated and deconstructed. What becomes clear is that all acts of writing and saying might be thought of as disguised acts of memoir, as are all acts of reading: innocent detachment is never fully possible. (Hand 251)

Taking this into consideration, it is possible to enquire into the double-bind of this "... retentive yet oblivious word [that] constitutes the subject [and the self through a] language in which the 'things' are there just because they are not there as such, but said in the absence" (Gagnebin 5). This existing dialectic between recollection and obliteration finds its ideal aesthetic expression in the autobiographical *Bildungsroman*,

which "... does not deviate in any way from the basic structure of the novel [despite bestowing the most frangible justification on the order integrating the social process with the development of a person]" (Benjamin 98). The autobiographical *Bildungsroman* operates on the thin line between invention and memory, fiction and reality, literature and history. Due to that, this genre proves particularly relevant in the Irish context. Linden Peach comments that the novel, as a genre, and its features "... appear to lend themselves to the 'in-between' intellectual, cultural and emotional spaces in which writers dealing with subject matter that has been hidden or eschewed altogether find themselves" (3). He adds that contemporary Irish fiction "... has offered new interpretations of Irish history" (Peach 7) and that the contemporary novel "... has given a voice to what was previously unarticulated" (Peach 7). Considering this, one can say that the narrative self in *Reading in the Dark* encapsulates two major questions that permeate Benjaminian philosophy and concern contemporary literature and history: "... what is it to tell a story? What is it to tell history?" (Gagnebin 2). The narrator's story – the main storyteller in the book – , is "... merely one human story among many possible human stories" (Hand 252-253) and, along with Irish history, "... is not fixed, finished or complete; there are always more stories to be told and more stories to be read" (Hand 252-253).

In conclusion, one can join Hand saying that Seamus Deane is capable in *Reading in the Dark* of "... interrogating himself and his own artistic and critical processes, [truly opening up] his version of the modern Irish hero to critique ... in a manner that complicates rather than liberates the individual" (Hand 252). As a result, his novel trades heroic and ideological identification between self and nation for an aesthetic and historical (re)construction of both instances. This reconfiguration of experiences in the in-between of memory and fantasy accentuates their indefinite aspect, causing Literature and History to converge as the result of anonymous narrative acts.

## Note

- 1 Passages such as these offer a good account of this: "That was long before the feud, as my mother called it. The feud. The word had a grandeur about it that I savoured, although it occurred to me that maybe there was more to be told" (Deane 51)

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