



Costello-Sullivan, Kathleen, *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First Century Irish Novel*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2018.

Trauma is a word which carries within itself a negative valence. Cathy Caruth, for instance, has famously described it as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events” (11) in which the response to the event will occur belatedly, and in several forms. In her recent publication, *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First Century Irish Novel*, Kathleen Costello-Sullivan has taken up this and other definitions of the traumatic experience, whose focus is not only on the individual, but has been broadened to encompass trauma at a collective level. *Trauma and Recovery* is divided into a theoretical Introduction and 6 chapters, each dealing with one novel and with its writer.

Costello-Sullivan begins her introduction by providing a panorama to memory and trauma studies in terms of the Irish historical context moving on to the issue of representation and the twentieth-century Irish canon. Finally, she touches on the central point of her research, which is the way in which Irish literary representation has shifted since the turn of the century, “from just recognizing traumatic experiences toward also exploring and representing the process of healing and recovery” (3)

What can be highlighted is her use of Guy Beiner’s view of “social memory” to explain memory not as an individual event, but as a communal experience. Beiner claims that communities and their self-understanding contribute to establish “social memory”, which “does not merely reflect the sum of individual memories in a community at a given time, but is grounded in a set of frames of reference by which individuals can locate and reinterpret their own recollections. As a metaconstruct, social memory assumes collective characteristics.” (9) Costello-Sullivan explains that the Irish society became gradually aware of the notions of collective trauma memory as a result of the scandal of the Magdalene laundries and other forms of institutional abuse, between the 1980s and 1990s, and, thus, felt a need to “confront a painful history of silence, suffering and abuse – a legacy of its colonial past” (1).

As regards the curative potential of the twenty-first century Irish novel, Costello-Sullivan is interested in what way literary representation can emulate cathartic testimony, and how it can identify and reflect patterns and emotional consequences as well as possibilities for healing. She claims there is a shift at the turn of the century, when the Irish novel began to represent not only personal and cultural trauma, but also, the curative power of such representation. To Costello-Sullivan, by embedding trauma into the narrative, boundaries between structure and content collapse, as trauma becomes the subject and material object. This process would mimic the healing function of testimony, as an awareness of the process of telling empowers the trauma victim to narrate his/her own story, catalysing a move toward recovery. Moreover, Costello-Sullivan asserts that the novels in this study share an underlying hope that it is possible to forge a new reality.

However, I believe it is somewhat farfetched to affirm both that “The authors in this way recognize that the act of representation is potentially curative” (5) and that “all of the authors in this study are engaged with wider social, literary and political forces that make trauma a relevant category of analysis” (21), for although issues of trauma and recovery are present, authors’ de facto recognition and engagement may not be so easy to prove. In spite of this, Costello-Sullivan’s book reveals extensive research and a thorough close reading of the literary texts.

The first literary text dealt with in the opening chapter is John Banville’s *The Sea*, which takes into consideration “founding traumas”. After the death of the protagonist Max Morden’s wife from cancer, he heads to the coast to visit his estranged daughter. By re-visiting this space, he is obliged to confront a traumatic experience he had suffered as a child, of witnessing the drowning of the Grace family’s twins, with whom he used to play during holidays. Costello-Sullivan points out that even though a painful act of narrative engagement takes place, this process becomes recuperative, for Morden is able to reassess the disruptions of memory caused by trauma.

The celebrated novel *The Gathering*, by Anne Enright is the focus of the second chapter, whereby the female protagonist, Veronica Hegarty, processes the trauma of the suicide of her brother, Liam, through narrative (re)construction. According to Costello-Sullivan, Veronica effects a gendered intervention into the experience of trauma, as she traces the historical suffering of her family through a matrilineal narrative. This narrative is told through, what Costello-Sullivan calls “aggressive bodily imagery”, and located in the domestic sphere. Veronica’s grandmother’s house is the site of the original trauma, where Liam suffered sexual abuse by the landlord, and to which she needs to return to understand, and cope with, his death. Finally, Costello-Sullivan takes this individual traumatic experience to a collective level, as issues of rape and abuse are read allegorically, as revealing the consequences of national neglect of the Irish society’s most valuable and vulnerable: its women and its children.

The distortion and attempt of recovery of traumatic memory are the main issues of the third chapter, which revolves around Sebastian Barry’s *The Secret Scripture*. Costello-Sullivan’s analysis is centred on the protagonist Roseanne McNulty’s uncertain recollection of her past, reflecting the fragmented nature of traumatic memory. In fact, the accuracy of the story is secondary, for what matters is the healing process of telling it. However, the fact that there is no closure to Roseanne’s story, may be indicative of the impossibility of attaining a redemptive ending, which can be a metaphor to the fact that a happy resolution to Ireland’s past is yet to be attained by the compilation of individual narratives.

The concepts of truth and the way in which stories are told to adapt to changing situations are the central point of the fourth chapter, on Emma Donoghue’s *Room*. The analysis is focused on the novel’s representation of the imaginative recourse available to victims of trauma to show that the narrative structuration employed by the traumatized is a flawed coping mechanism. I find particularly interesting the way in which Costello-Sullivan employs George Orwell’s concept of “doublethink”, from *1984*, which allows Ma, Jack’s mother, to construct an alternate world, “Room”, which represents reality, whereas “Outside” is both unreal and unachievable. Once the boundary between these two spaces is crossed, Ma needs to cope with her own traumatic past(s) – before and after *Room* – and “unlie”, that is, clearly expose to Jack that they had been victims of false imprisonment. Thus, Costello-Sullivan concludes that Room

examines the need to narrativize a traumatic past and to integrate that past into one's personal narrative.

The fifth chapter focuses on recovery of the individual and the solace community in Colum McCann's *Let the Great World Spin*, in which "structural parallels" are constructed throughout the novel to ground a recuperative narrative of suffering and recovery. Empathy is an important element, both in the novel and in Costello-Sullivan's approach, for, as she quotes McCann: "The greatest thing about fiction is that we become alive in bodies not our own. If it isn't about empathy, then I don't know what it's about" (110). As regards storytelling there is no need for borders, nor boundaries, nor wealth; everyone has a story and a need to tell it. Although McCann's novel suggests that narrativizing trauma can be challenging, "the simple act of telling one's story to a willing listener might constitute a redemptive act". This is the case with the 9/11 collapse of the Twin Towers in Manhattan, which is not tackled directly in *Let the Great World Spin*, but, as Richard Gray (qtd in Costello-Sullivan) describes, in a slant, circuitous way.

McCann rejects tackling the story of the major catastrophe of 9/11. Instead, he gives equal voice to minor characters, implying the interconnectedness of traumatic experiences. Stories, according to McCann, "are the most democratic thing we have. . . . They cross all sorts of borders . . . They make us whole" (124)

The focus of the final chapter is on Colm Tóibín's latest novel, *Nora Webster*, whereby intertextual references are employed to highlight the constructed and subjective nature of trauma and recovery enacting a recuperative narrative for the widowed character, who needs to learn how to live and manage her life on her own. Costello-Sullivan has chosen *Nora Webster* to conclude her study for she argues that it marks an evolution from Tóibín's earlier representations of traumatic loss. With empathy, and the help of her family, Nora is finally able to part with her husband's clothes and move on with her life. Furthermore, by focussing on the grieving perspective of a failing parent, Tóibín humanizes the figure of the flawed mother more than any of the author's previous works. The twist in Sullivan-Costello's work is that at the same time she focuses on *Nora Webster*, she relates to female mother figures from Tóibín's previous works. Nora's flaws and weaknesses become contextualized, evoking, instead of negative judgement, sympathy, due to the reader's recognition of her flawed humanity.

To conclude, *Trauma and Recovery in the Twenty-First Century Irish Novel*, by Kathleen Costello-Sullivan, is a welcoming addition to other publications on the field of cultural trauma applied to Irish contemporary literature, with one main difference. The book is focused not only on trauma, but on recovery, and on the paths the male and female characters that inhabit the works she focusses on will need to tread in order to reach it: resignification, storytelling, empathy and community.

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Works Cited

Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996.