

Elegant Resistance: Dermot Healy's *Fighting with Shadows*

Neil Murphy, Keith Hopper

Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (<camurphy@ntu.edu.sg>)
Kellogg College, Oxford (<keith.hopper@conted.ox.ac.uk>)

Abstract:

Dermot Healy's *Fighting with Shadows* (1984) features a broad array of technical innovations: the narrative focus shifts, temporal frames vary, and the inner and outer worlds of the characters frequently interchange, all generating a sense of a world that forever lies just out of sharp focus. Far from being a failure of observation, this registers a way of seeing that extends beyond merely linear modes of representation and is suggestive of a world that is not a neat, easily-observed set of phenomena. In this, Healy's first novel, a compelling interdependence between complex narrative experiment and deeply-felt social and political engagement with the Northern Troubles is already evident. Healy's work has always been firmly about resistance to received forms, political fixities, social malaise, and the limits of consciousness itself – and all in a richly-textured Irish landscape. This essay offers detailed analysis of how *Fighting with Shadows* exemplifies such acts of resistance while seeking to engage with Healy's provincial Irish context.

Keywords: Borderlands, Irish Landscape, Narrative, Provincial, Troubles

The truth always comes out in the end, because he has learned that the
truth is an even greater invention than lies.
(*Fighting with Shadows*, 321)

Initially published in 1984, *Fighting with Shadows* is set in the border county of Fermanagh, in the fictional village of Fanacross, and spans the 1970s

and the early years of the 1980s. The novel is thus reflective of a particular cultural and historical moment in provincial Ireland, when the Northern Troubles erupted in the Irish and European consciousness. The Allen family, around whom the narrative is woven, co-exist in perpetual uneasiness under a dull glare of violence, poverty, and sometimes bitter familial strife. In this uncertain world, lives end abruptly in the most violent of circumstances; migratory characters shift uneasily between different states of unbelonging, both north and south of the border; and the seductive allure of a new American culture fuels the emerging fantasies of the young. At one stage or another, the twin brothers Frank and George, and their older brother Tom, all live in the South; however, the Six Counties continue to exert a magnetic pull for the twins. Frank's son Joseph is also sent south to work in Manager Tom's hotel, in what appears to be a fictional version of Cavan town, and so the second half of the novel is largely situated amongst the hectic provincialism of the Irish midlands in the 1970s. The key oppositions throughout the text vacillate starkly between love and hate, longing and loss, and between a traumatic past and an oddly compelling present. Meanwhile, the literal movement across the Northern Irish border reads like a sequence of interwoven moments, or what Luke Maxted calls the "unrestful orbit of the Fermanagh border" (2016, 20). Ultimately, the physical border turns out to be less significant than the haunting inner battles that rage in the echo-chambers of the characters' minds, or in the distance that exists between family members and lovers.

Fighting with Shadows may well be one of the most profoundly unsettling of all Northern Irish Troubles novels precisely because Dermot Healy probes the grim, cavernous lives of the characters who lived in the fallout zone of political violence instead of training a direct narrative eye on that violence. As Joanne Hayden has argued, Healy "is far from apolitical but comes at weighty subjects – the North, colonialism, class – sideways, through the consciousness of his characters" (2015). This remark is largely accurate, although there are moments in the novel, as we shall see, when even the characters' perspectives are temporarily abandoned. The world one witnesses in *Fighting with Shadows* is a deeply unsettling place. Its focus on the violence is oblique, with the voice bordering on the effaced narration that one finds in Joyce's *Dubliners*, rendering, as a result, the brute realities of casual violence even more monstrous. The unexpected murder of Frank Allen, for example, is delivered in a disconnected form of reportage: "Things in the country had been bad for a while. Then he answered the door to a man with a gun who shot him three times in the head" (Healy 2015 [1984], 14). The act of violence is simply reported, not described, and Frank vanishes in the general flurry of living that proceeds unabated. Consequently, this essay will consider the manner in which *Fighting with Shadows* mediates its immediate socio-historical context through a highly complex narrative form – a form that both

confused its immediate reviewing public and simultaneously extended the modernist fictional tradition from which it emerged.

On its most literal level the novel is a relatively realist fictional record of a specific time and place, since lost to the passage of the years and the partial resolution of the Northern Irish conflict. Provincial landscapes, which dominate most of Healy's fictions, frequently vanish from historical mappings which usually focus on metropolitan centres to inform their topographies of the past. *Fighting with Shadows* offers an artistically transposed insight into this lost world. In addition to the Troubles, which hum away, baritone-like, in the background for much of the novel, there is also the strange stirring of the 'New American Ireland', of the intoxicating interpenetration of external influences in still inward-looking towns and villages, of a faded yet exotic era of drugs, rock music, jazz, and localized Irish politics. The lounge of the Cove Hotel, where Joseph works, is haunted by the airs of American and English music, which sound potent notes of pathos, wonder, and longing in the closed, grim lives of the employees and casual punters. All of this is a telling footnote to the birth of modern Ireland, with its idiosyncratic medley of cultures and a provincial world that still very much exists (and to which Healy's last novel, *Long Time, No See*, bears extraordinary witness). The soulful (and always ironic) note of Dinah Washington crooning "What a Difference a Day Makes" (1959) to Irish farmers and labourers in Manager Tom's airless lounge strikes a deep chord, and contributes to an incomparable atmosphere – this was a world quite unlike any other, and Healy's powers of observation are powerfully evocative of the time. For all his stunning technical innovation, it is in such moments that the novel fixes the world in its unsettling fictions and retains some of its essence. And yet, for all its potency in the set-piece moments, in the capturing of nuanced phrasing in the home, the pub, and the marketplace, *Fighting with Shadows* is also far more complex than simply an effective record of the daily minutiae of provincial Ireland. The context is both a function and a cause of the innovative technical heights that Healy reached in the novel and, like all innovative art, the formal demands it initially made on its readers generated a recurring pattern of puzzlement in the early reviews it received in 1984. Furthermore, technical innovation was to become a key identifying characteristic in all Healy's fiction after *Fighting with Shadows*, and so this early novel is an important starting point for understanding the formal evolution of his later work.

Patrick McCabe considers Healy's fiction to be a "truly revolutionary work, and high literary art" (cited in O'Grady 2010, 21), while Aidan Higgins saw his work as belonging to an extended modernist tradition. In an essay entitled "The Hollow and the Bitter and the Mirthless in Irish Writing" (2008), Higgins bemoaned the general state of modern and contemporary Irish writing, allowing only for a few formally adventurous works, including Healy's short story collection, *Banished Misfortune*:

The modernist movement began and ended in Ireland, in full retreat before it had hardly begun, soon sunk out of light, making hardly a ripple. The old lies were merely being perpetuated and no great effort attempted to “make it new”. Some exceptions: *Sailing, Sailing Swiftly* (1933) by Jack B. Yeats; *Murphy* (1938) by Samuel Beckett; *The Ginger Man* (1955) by J.P. Donleavy; *Felo de Se* (1960) (my first story collection); *Night in Tunisia* (1976) by Neil Jordan; *In Night's City* (1982) by Dorothy Nelson; *Banished Misfortune* (1982) by D. Healy. (2008, 25)

Higgins also claimed of Healy's work that “few [other] Irish writers in the generation that came after me have profited from *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*” (cited in O'Grady 2010, 26). More specifically, Healy, like Joyce in all of his novels, explicitly foregrounded the complex problem of locating suitable fictive forms that might adequately express the complexity of lived experience, and in the case of several of his later protagonists, that lived experience is even more complex being infused with alcoholism (Jack Ferris, *A Goat's Song* [1994]), mental instability (Ollie Ewing, *Sudden Times*, 1999), and trauma (Philip Feeney, *Long Time, No See*, 2011). And lived experience is enormously complex in Healy: reality shape-shifts, small-town life is explosively layered with its own particular energy, and all of this is represented in a way that may render it quite alien to metropolitan imaginations. Several of the critics who respond to the material realities of the plot in Healy's work, particularly *A Goat's Song*, exhibit an awareness of the complex narrative shape that contains and shapes its subject matter. Kim Wallace, for example, focuses on the political difficulties of identity formation but also acknowledges the complex implications of how reality is subjectivised in the novel: “It transfigures the world of Ireland, but also examines the problematic of remaking ‘reality’, exploring the dialectic between the ‘world of action’ and the ‘world of the text’ ” (2004, 122). Ultimately, however, the material ‘reality’ of Irish politics is Wallace's primary consideration. Healy's work is undoubtedly rooted in its largely Irish contexts but, as with Joyce, the material reality with which the work is engaged is only ultimately accessible via the forms of art. In all of Healy's novels we witness a perpetual negotiation between the complex unfolding of the characters' lives and an artistic desire to coherently speak of the richness of these lives. In the first novel, *Fighting with Shadows*, the formulation of his immediate experience into a complex, multi-layered narrative – specifically in order to offer due testament to the very complexity of that experience – initially resulted in a certain degree of miscomprehension from earlier reviewers about Healy's focus. The immediate reception to *Fighting with Shadows*, in the 1980s, offers an insight into certain historical-specific contextual obsessions, as well as to the literary-critical expectations of the reviewing industry at the time. The immediacy of the Northern conflict in 1984 – especially in the emotive aftermath of the IRA Hunger Strikes – is frequently evident in the recurring critical focus on the novel's significance for the political situation. Similarly,

the novel's significance as a potential political statement appears more important to some reviewers than perhaps it would be nowadays, with Peter Brooke, for instance, suggesting that the novel was symptomatic of "a collapse of Irish Catholic Nationalist self-confidence" and strongly objected to its apparent "self-enclosed introspection." In a somewhat bizarre review, Brooke dismissed the novel in terms that reveal how fundamentally different the reviewing culture was at the time: "[Healy] is unable to believe in the superiority of Catholic Irish culture over British culture and so is left, like Milton's vision of the fate of Evil after the Last Judgement, self-consuming and self-consumed" (1984-1985, 19).

Perhaps of more genuine importance is the clear confusion expressed by many reviewers, particularly with respect to the form of the novel, who appear to yearn for a more linear narrative approach (Sommerville-Large 1984, 14; Hazeldine 1986, 88). The benefit of hindsight, of course, offers greater contextual distance and, in this case, the luxury of thirty years of critical distillation. Furthermore, a consideration of Healy's formal innovation in the novels that followed *Fighting with Shadows* – perhaps unparalleled in post-1980s fiction in terms of its technical range and achievement – allows us to return to the first novel with an informed sense of how complex an aesthetic innovator Healy really was. Rather than simply producing what Hazeldine suggested was "an aimless quality" (*ibidem*, 88) in its narrative, *Fighting with Shadows* was instead simply refusing a clear didactic centre in an effort to suggest that all sides in the simmering conflict were equally, and variously, damaged, and none more so than those on the peripheries of the violence, scarred as much by the harsh economic impact, and resultant familial separation, as by bullets and bombs. Far from being a failure of political observation, this registers a way of seeing that extends beyond merely linear modes of representation, and is suggestive of a world that is not a neat, easily-observed set of phenomena. Healy's artistic act of resistance gestures against easy-delineated narrative models and, in turn, gestures towards the complex problems of living in the midst of conflict, both political and personal.

The subtlety and range of Healy's technical ability was to be repeatedly confirmed in the years ahead. In *A Goat's Song* (1994), for example, Jack Ferris's invented narrative of his love affair with Catherine, and of her life (and that of her family) before they met, operates within an embedded, framed narrative that runs parallel to Jack's actual existence, ultimately forcing both modes of existence into narrative conflict. Furthermore, in one of the most striking and terrifying narrative sequences written about the Northern conflict, a significant portion of the novel features Ferris' naïve refusal to limit his movements in Loyalist areas of Belfast, where he lives for a time with Catherine. The fractured romantic narrative is fused at an abstruse angle with Healy's observations about Belfast, and is all the more effective for doing so – with this portion of the novel generating an immense amount of anxiety and fear that lingers in the text thereafter.

Similarly, in *Sudden Times* (Healey 1999), the challenge was to locate a form that would serve to imaginatively encompass Ollie Ewing's broken consciousness rather than simply represent him as a deranged character, and the resultant novel is both a record of the protagonist's mental perspective and a powerful re-ordering of how we experience the world through his eyes. *Sudden Times* reveals a deeply innovative technical focus, in which Ollie's consciousness is composed of a fusion of fragments of real conversations in his head, guilt-driven nightmares and a deeply compromised capacity to gain access to the communal sense of the real that most other characters in the novel inhabit. Most unsettling, perhaps, is his fluid sense of time and space:

I went back to the crossword. Then some word made me step down off a train in France. One word and I'm away. For a long period I walked the docks listening to the sailors. ... After a long trip through the fields of wheat, I bed down for the night in Montmartre. (*Ibidem*, 116)

Within two pages his mental-spatial frame shifts from Sligo to France to London, and back to Sligo, with the barest of narrative transitions (*ibidem*, 116-117).

Healy's last novel, *Long Time, No See* (2011) further extends the search for a narrative form that might fit the endlessly complex, and ordinary, world of small-town Ireland during the Celtic Tiger years. The fluid form of the novel is largely constructed out of sequences of dialogue between local characters, various passersby, and immigrants, while many of the characters are adorned with characteristically exotic names (typical of rural Irish towns and villages) such as Mister Psyche, the Judge, the Bird, the Blackbird, Mr Awesome, Mister John, and Mrs Puff. Everyone seems to have a nickname in small-town Ireland. The ordinary, but imaginatively exaggerated, spectacles of their lives are what dictate the movement of the novel. But what is again artistically striking is the commitment to the dialogue-driven, unique formal system – the absence of a fixed central narrator, or designator of reality, creates a polyphony of voices each competing with the other, in effect suggesting that what we understand to be the real is an ever-changing dynamic composite rather than a coherent model. Although the form is quite different, it is clear that *Fighting with Shadows*, almost thirty years earlier, was similarly engaged in generating a style that might speak to the strange fluidity of everyday life; the true drama, it is implied, lies in how we conceive of and classify experience.

But the logic of the complex form of Healy's first novel was not immediately obvious. Several of the first reviewers of *Fighting* were bothered by the fact that the "Troubles remain in the background", and that Healy's "concern for the terrible scenes he describes" are in question because of the narrative distance (Morton 1985, 41; Hazeldine 1986, 87). Such concerns, of course,

primarily reveal the reviewers' own critical templates and they appear not to have grasped the aesthetic motivation that lay behind the carefully calibrated, detached voice that avoids any emotional, psychological, or overt political positioning. Several critics and reviewers did, however, recognize the kind of novel that Healy was writing, and were aware of the potent power of the voice that accompanies (rather than guides) the reader. Marianne Koenig, for example, although troubled somewhat by what she saw as the "difficulty" of the novel, nonetheless recognized the rationale and benefits of the "dispassionate, detached voice ... which effectively allows the author to survey, permeate, and withdraw from its characters at will" (1985, 113). And rather than see the narrative distance as a problem, Seán Golden, too, was aware of the potential impact achieved by "representing overt violence obliquely" and that by "ignoring the details and descriptions that we have come to expect", Healy managed instead to imbue in the reader a sense of perpetual dread that would otherwise have been unattainable (1984, 18). Golden further vindicates the author's frequently absentee narrator by illustrating how it facilitates an integrated, living quality in the represented landscape:

His approach to characterization creates the effect of a hand-tinted monochrome, a vision of a set of individuals objectified in intimate relation with their environment. The narrative voice intermingles with the thoughts and words of the characters to such an extent that it could as well be said that the characters live to contribute to the creation of that narrative voice, which, unspecified, avoiding the embodiment of an "I", shares their lives at the same time that it creates and comments on them. It also creates the living world around them. (*Ibidem*, 18)

The way in which the narrative voice and multiple other strands of perspective and information coalesce demands intense concentration from readers, but the result is a fluid assimilated dreamlike quality in which characters and context, both micro and macro, have a deeply integrated quality. Critics like Koenig and Golden clearly recognized the novel's technical achievement and saw in its construction a considered mode of responding both to the immediate socio-political upheavals – and, paradoxically, the concurrent deathly stagnation – that gripped the country, as well as the invention of a formal approach that allowed its author to speak of a mode of experience, above, or beyond, the very material realities that frequently threaten to devour his subjects. As a result *Fighting with Shadows* manages to, almost paradoxically, represent a genuinely meaningful engagement with the Troubles – in fact, the publisher Steve MacDonogh believed that it was one of the best novels to come out of the Troubles (cited in Morrison 2016, 67).

But the novel is not exclusively a Northern conflict fiction. It operates in a perpetual narrative borderland, on several different levels. Healy was fascinated by borderlands and liminal states of mind, and he frequently transgressed the conventional boundaries between poetry, drama and fic-

tion, and between fiction and reality. In all of Healy's work there is a productive tension between the representation of complex lives and events, and the neo-modernist desire to find new ways of expressing the rich subjectivity of these lives – a mode of discourse which we wish to refer to as *counterrealism*¹. Though usually set in small provincial towns, Healy's fictional worlds perpetually approach the edge of myth, and his vivid sense of place is rendered with an almost shamanistic intensity. Consequently, these strange landscapes and fractured lives can sometimes appear rather alien to metropolitan critics, which may well account for some of the more tentative and confused responses to his fiction.

In addition, the relationships between the characters are marked by a profound narrative distance – oceans of grief, longing and misreading, particularly in the furiously contested emotional and psychological spaces between Helen and Frank, although the other characters also do little more than probe each other's outer zones and remain imprisoned in their insulated imaginations. Similarly, the constant, unannounced time-shifts have the effect of introducing a thickening background context to our perspective on the characters, not with the intention of rendering them more comprehensible, but largely to remind us of the endless unknowable depths to the lives of people. More information does not necessarily clarify. And these depths, as elsewhere in Healy, are a complex amalgam of the material substances of daily struggle and the imaginative re-making of these struggles: "The night air was ripe with the smell of the local tannery. Calves with their hooves stiffened into the air had been hauled over the ditches. 'It looks,' whispered Geraldine, 'like we are only imagining all this' " (Healy 2015, 19).

Seán Golden's observations about the diminishing of the first person narrative voice at certain moments offer significant insights into the workings of the novel. Most obviously, the primary narrative voice is frequently surrendered to the characters' perspective via free indirect discourse – when the primary narrator's voice gives way to the individual characters' point of view, often for lengthy periods. Similarly, the point of view frequently shifts between several of the main characters, sometimes accompanied by shifts in pronouns. There is a constant shift in narratorial focus, between first and third person while, on occasion, the primary narrative voice is removed altogether and is

¹ The concept of counterrealism was first mooted by Richard Kearney in *Transitions: Narratives in Modern Irish Culture* (1988), where he uses it to describe an anti-realist mode of writing which explores the "fundamental tensions between imagination and memory, narration and history, self and language". For Kearney, the Irish authors within this recent counterrealist tradition – epitomized for him by Flann O'Brien, Aidan Higgins, the later Francis Stuart, John Banville and Neil Jordan – "share with Joyce and Beckett the basic modernist project of transforming the traditional narrative of *quest* into a critical narrative of *self-questioning*" (*ibidem*, 83).

replaced by direct speech from the characters for a few pages, as when we are, variously, offered direct commentary by Helen, Peter, the soldiers, and Pop, without explicit narratorial anchoring (Golden 1984, 132). This elaborately-wrought approach ensures that the narrator appears to vanish at times, and lets the world get on with its own business. This is further accentuated by a regular alternating of the inner minds of the characters with a rather panoramic sweep and, at certain intervals, the characters are omitted from the narrative, and images of the landscape, or local historical data, momentarily replace the plot sequence (*ibidem*, 133-135). A direct contrast to this is also used in chapter thirty-three, when the epistolary mode replaces the primary narrator with a sequence of loosely connected letters between Margaret, Helen and Joseph. All such variations are indicative of a desire to reject the single, authoritative narrative voice and, by extension, to decline the implicit notion of the world as a monotone, knowable space – the textured tapestry of life becomes the primary focus, in which the characters themselves are simply constituent parts of its totality.

In this multi-focused world, many kinds of voice emerge, from the epistolary registers offered in the chapter of letters, to the diverse ways that reported speech is presented, including occasional intrusions such as “Said the radio” or “Said Maurice Caulfield” or “Said the Islander who rarely spoke” (Healy 2015 [1984], 136), and with the occasional interspersing of lines from songs by Dinah Washington (*ibidem*, 60), The Animals (*ibidem*, 295), and the music of The Beatles and Elvis Presley. Everywhere the texture of reality is interwoven with multiple voices, ghostly presences, shifts in perspective, and so a deeply interconnected world is elevated to become the primary focus of our attention. In fact, as recently as 2011, in an interview that accompanied the publication of *Long Time, No See*, Healy sought to explain his use of vernacular dialogue in the novel in the following terms: “I was trying to stay out of it and let the reader take over and run with it. So I would often put the meaning of a passage in, then take it out again” (O’Hagan 2011). His explanation holds a resonance for all of his fiction, in which there is a recurring fascination with somehow finding a way to allow the world to find utterance and to be witnessed, but without recourse to the singular authority of the fixed narrative voice. In *Long Time, No See* the world is channelled through the orchestra of voices that bear witness to their lives, while in *Fighting with Shadows* the complex narrative design offered advance notice of Healy’s desire to move beyond a linear mode of expression.

This desire is also evident in his evasion of a linear sense of time, so much so that several reviewers appear to be genuinely confused by the precise temporal frame that we fictionally inhabit (Hazeldine 1986, 88; Koenig 1985, 112). This is largely a result of lazy reviewing, as a novel like *Fighting with Shadows* is something of a trap for those who read swiftly, searching for the easy sequential temporality that structures many ‘realist’ novels. Healy’s fo-

cus, however, moves repeatedly back and forth in time, frequently switches tense in mid-flow, and offers up abrupt signals of temporal shifts at the beginning of chapters, e.g. “This was a long time ago”, or “There was another time” (2015, chapters 34, 37). Such temporal variations are all part of the mosaic-like tapestry of the novel. Healy instead allows coherence to emerge via a series of interconnected temporal patterns that speak of a less-structured understanding of time, akin to that which Margaret speaks of in one of her letters to Joseph: “life is made up of the half-forgetting” (*ibidem*, 255). Similarly, the genealogical lines of connection that link Frank, George, Tom, and Pop, knit the novel’s diverse structure together, while the recurring images of home that linger in Joseph’s maturing mind, long after he leaves, and his familial inheritance of anxiety and diffidence, ensures that the past perpetually haunts the present – again, though, just out of sight.

Aubrey Dillon-Malone recognized in some of these genealogical patterns a connection to the work of William Faulkner, but several critics have also observed a more profound, if calibrated, influence of Gabriel García Márquez on Healy’s early work. Eoin McNamee insightfully argues that the comparison holds, “up to a point”, arguing that Healy’s perspective is different – that the novels are related from the centre of strangeness itself, rather than simply being about a strange world – and certainly the disorientating point of view at times challenges material reality itself (McNamee 2015, 13); at one point in *Fighting with Shadows*, for example, we are informed that the island “veered sharply across the sea” (Healy 2015 [1984], 294), momentarily disrupting one’s sense of the real. In a telling recollection, Bill Swainson, Healy’s first editor, also acknowledges the presence of García Márquez’s work in Healy’s consciousness during the years when he was composing the first novel:

In 1980 when I first met him, he was reading *The Autumn of the Patriarch* by Gabriel García Márquez and this was an influence he had to absorb and then expel, or at least all that he could not use. I remember that in an early draft of *Fighting with Shadows* (then called *Sciamachy* or *A Fight with Shadows*) there was a chapter called “The City of the Swallows and the City of the Swifts” that owed a lot to the Colombian master, but being undigested did not make the final cut, nor did the opening sentence of *The Autumn of the Patriarch* survive as the epigraph it had once been destined to be (“Over the weekend the vultures got into the presidential palace by pecking through the screens on the balcony windows ...”). On the other hand, the Márquezian influence can be seen most clearly in the attempt to generalise by elevating the particular to an almost mythic level. You can sense it in “Banished Misfortune” and see it at its most fully developed in *Fighting with Shadows*. (Swainson 2016, 185-186)

The influence of García Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is also clearly evident in this respect, the structure of which is in part framed around the multi-generational complications of the extended Buendía family. In both

cases we have an apocalyptic opening, a drought, the hint of incestuous relationships, while the madness and gaiety of Healy's midlands town reads like a peculiarly Irish variation on García Márquez's Macondo:

At two, the bell-ringer sauntered round the sodden streets announcing how the parade would begin at three. His sons swung out of his coat-tails. He was a chimney sweep by trade. Not long after the bell-ringer came the float from the bacon factory, with live pigs chortling through the bars, and then a man on stilts, fearful of the thin snow below and the bunting above. Next a showband playing Country and Western airs on the back of a lorry advertising furniture. The owner of a large supermarket in the town seated, in old-fashioned regalia, on a penny farthing. "Will you look at Fegan," said Cathy, "and a pair of balls on him like the weights of a grandfather clock." Next the brass band marching into step as they played a mixture of patriotic and show business tunes, "Oklahoma" and "Mise Éire", their ranks depleted because of death and lack of instruments. (Healy 2015 [1984], 276-277)

In *Fighting with Shadows*, the narrative focus shifts, temporal frames vary, and the inner and outer worlds of the characters frequently interchange, all generating a sense of a world that forever lies just out of sharp focus. While this quality is clearly apparent in his later work, already in *Fighting with Shadows* one has a haunted sense of the fragility of human consciousness in perpetual negotiation with material reality. In fact, throughout the novel, several characters experience deeply unsettling slippages in their sense of themselves, as when Frank, one day after a solitary drink, "lost touch with his surroundings and headed towards some house in the town" imagining, wrongly, it to be his own house (*ibidem*, 9). Similarly, in a particularly disorientating temporal and spatial shift, Healy presents Joseph as he experiences a profound sense of dislocation:

His bladder began to pain him and out in the yard he stood waiting. And pissing, he went back through all the times he had stood like this, his *bod* in his hands, pissing. Smaller, smaller he went till he shook with fear that his mind might not return to him, but stay in the head of some two-year-old self, and leave him mindless. Only bits of him would travel back. Though he could sense the yard around him, the yard was not there. (*Ibidem*, 75)

From the point of view of the characters there is a general sense of the unsolidity of material reality in the novel; George occasionally believed that his children "Margaret and Jim were only figments of his imagination" (*ibidem*, 59), while Pop, after having had his cataracts removed, can for a time "see through the ceiling to the sky beyond" (*ibidem*, 89).

Healy's imaginative appropriation of place names also speaks to the wider struggle for meaning within a fiercely divided culture. As we have noted in our brief "Glossary of Irish Terms" for the 2015 Dalkey Archive Press edition of *Fighting with Shadows*:

The etymology of the name of the fictional village, Fanacross, is explained differently on two occasions in the novel: first by Frank Allen: “Fanacross. *Fan ocras*, the end of hunger, surely” (Healy 2015 [1984], 9); and then, towards the end of the book, a police interrogator says to George, Frank’s twin brother: “‘Fanacross,’ he says, ‘*Fánaí na coise*, the slopes of the bank’” (*ibidem*, 352). Both etymologies are imprecise and this may be deliberate on Healy’s part, implying a kind of ignorance of place that is a result of not knowing the language properly. (*Ibidem*, xxiii)²

Midway through *Fighting with Shadows*, this brooding obsession with *dinnseanchas* (the lore of place names) finds its fullest expression in a strange and uncanny funeral sequence. Following the brutal murder of Frank Allen, his family bring his body to an island graveyard on a lake near Fanacross, where generations of the Allens are buried. In a moment reminiscent of Healy’s groundbreaking short story “Banished Misfortune” (1975)³, the naturalistic flow of the primary mimetic narrative is suddenly interrupted – without signpost or warning – by a diegetic digression, as if history itself seems determined to have its say beyond the characters or the exigencies of plot:

Seabirds’ droppings, white as shingle, covered the other Allen graves. Geraldine, and around her the recent deaths buttressed with stone, and beyond that, the unmarked grave from the Famine. For when the lazy beds failed and the first boatloads of skeletons took to the sea looking for grain, the villagers were too tired to bring any new corpses up to the old burial ground at the deserted village in the mountains. . . . So they turned their funeral boats up the river, across the freshwater lake to the Island. (2015, 149)

This dramatic slippage into the dark Famine past continues on for another two pages. Then, just as suddenly – and again without signpost or warn-

² It is possible to discern a deliberate mischievousness in these misrepresentations of the etymological roots of Fanacross: “fan” (wait), “fán” (slope), and “fánaí” (wanderer), plus “coise” instead of “croise” (of the cross[roads]). Implicit in this Joycean wordplay is a subtle statement about cultural disconnectedness, one which speaks of waiting, wandering, and a terrible sense of loss in the lives of the Irish people. See Murphy and Hopper, “Glossary of Irish Terms” (Healy 2015 [1984], xxiii. Thanks to Dr Seosamh Mac Muirí and Dr Guinevere Barlow for their Irish-language expertise.

³ In “Banished Misfortune” the narrative cross-cuts between multiple viewpoints, but it also flickers backwards and forwards in time and space, and as the critic John Wilson Foster remarked: “The journey through history and geography becomes a form of meditation on Ireland’s violent present and broken past” (Foster 2015, 1093). At the end of the story – which, like *Fighting with Shadows*, is set on both sides of the Irish border in the 1970s – the narrative abruptly and unexpectedly shifts back in time to 1910. For further discussion of this formal strategy, see Keith Hopper and Neil Murphy, “Editors’ Introduction: Making it New”, in Healy 2015, xix-xxi.

ing – the primary mimetic narrative begins to reassert itself, mid-sentence: “And when another of their clan fell dead from starvation they oared to the Island just as the Allens did, over the same water, knowing nothing of who came after” (*ibidem*, 150). Briefly, for another few beats, the narrative lapses back into a kind of continuous past, before finally flickering back to the present moment, and to Frank’s distraught father, Pop:

Water-lilies lifted up like a mat before the cut of the boat.
The black depths followed them.

Two weeks later the [coastguard] cutter passed again. This time they had biscuits, Indian meal and salt. Again they had been saved. They cursed the dead for not having hung on just one day longer. So Pop took leave of his son. (*Ibidem*, 150-151)

It is difficult to locate with any real certainty the source of the diegetic narrative voice: is it simply an authorial amplification of Pop’s grief-stricken imagination, or some kind of collective unconscious channelling itself through Pop and the other mourners? Or is it, perhaps, the melancholy voice of the island itself – a ghostly enunciation of past traumas coming back to haunt? In any case, it is a bold and unsettling moment, one where the habitus itself seems to bear witness to the memories and desires of a troubled people, and to the terrible burden of Irish history.

All of this contributes to a sense of the novel being structured not by the tight rules of verifiable reality or linear histories, but with a sense of the world as a product of the imagination. In fact, the novel frequently hints at the idea of the imagination as an alternative ordering system, as when Frank assures us that there is “nothing ... in your imagination cannot happen in reality” (*ibidem*, 40). Healy too suggests as much in a book review the year after *Fighting with Shadows* was first published, when he expressed the view that “Irish people prefer to side with the imagination, leaving linear history to those who can chart specifics into generalisations” (Healy 1985, 13). The general sense of the essential mutability of things, of the powerful ebb and flow of time and space, explains the vast multi-focal range of Healy’s narrative, and the subtle manner of its own ordering principles. Indeed, within the novel itself the fiction sometimes self-reflexively hints at this fact – for example, when George’s mind threatens to break free of its moorings, while he is imprisoned:

He heard himself say and think things that seemed rootless, to have no seat in his mind. Yet the outside world could accommodate all this randomness. Anything he thought or said was possible. It was in the yard. It was in the indescribable trees. It was in the things fought over. It was in what remained after the fighting was over. It was the shadow of things long dead that stretched off into the future. That sudden darkening of the fields and the streets that has no explanation. And then the brightening, even a greater darkness. (2015 [1984], 350)

The world for Healy was always a commanding, haunted, imperious presence and while his work provides constant reminders of this, it does so via a sequence of intricate, innovative fictions that both confirm the – paradoxically – coherent randomness of the living, and perpetually register the artistic struggle to name that apparent randomness. *Fighting with Shadows* opens with an unanswered question: “Anything strange?”. The same question is asked again almost a hundred pages later, but Frank Allen denies that anything is strange. However, as Eoin McNamee suggests, Frank is wrong: “The answer is that it is all strange, the world mutable, not to be depended upon but strewn with marvels. The air is thick with the dark matter of the Troubles” (2015, 13). A powerful sense of strangeness, of the uncanny, permeates the novel, as McNamee observes, and this may, in fact, be the major achievement of the novel, speaking as it does of the immeasurable, and peculiar, multiplicity of things:

The novel circles back on itself. There are shifts in time and in points of view. There’s an argument for taking the whole book as a poem, for it demands the same attention and resolve that a poem does and rewards in equal measure. Neither the novel nor the stories depend on plot. They are driven by the majestic impulse of Healy’s prose. There is always the possibility that words will break the structure of the sentence and become incantation. (*Ibidem*, 13)

In recent years, several critics and reviewers have considered Healy’s work in the context of modernism. Luke Maxted has written of Healy’s “imagistic late modernism” (2016, 20), while J.P. O’Malley observes that the “footprints of Irish modernism are everywhere” in Healy’s early work (O’Malley 2015, 22). But as far back as 1978, two of Healy’s early stories were included in *Paddy No More* – an anthology of contemporary Irish stories that featured work by several writers associated with the Irish Writers’ Co-op, including Neil Jordan, Desmond Hogan, Lucile Redmond, and Dermot Healy. It was prefaced with an introductory essay by Francis Stuart, “The Soft Centre of Irish Writing”, first published in the *Irish Times* in 1976. For Stuart, the history of the Irish short story is an ongoing struggle for signifying supremacy between “cosy” realists and “subversive” modernists: between conformists who wish “to preserve communal cultural standards and present the national identity”, and dissidents who seek “to preserve the true purpose of art as an instrument for the discovery of alternative concepts and new insights” (1978 [1976], 5-6). From this perspective, traditional Irish realism – exemplified for Stuart by “soft-centred fiction like Frank O’Connor’s ‘Guests of the Nation’” – is more easily consumed and assimilated by the dominant culture, and its conventional poetics enshrine an inherently conservative politics:

This writing – knitting would be a better word – is to the expected pattern or formula ... Familiar sayings and attitudes are echoed with a nudge of humorous intent, the curtains are drawn, the fire poked, and a nice little tale with a whimsi-

cal slant is about to be told. No passion, no interior obsession, no real or outrageous comedy as in Flann O'Brien, Joyce or Mr Beckett. (*Ibidem*, 7-8)

Dermot Healy's work offers neither the interior obsessions of Joyce, nor the metafictional fascinations of Beckett or O'Brien, in part because, like Aidan Higgins, he never quite relinquished the desire to accommodate his powerful sense of the real, of the incantatory presence of the world in which he lived. The living forces of provincial Ireland offered unique and profoundly compelling landscapes for Healy's imagination and the subtle and masterful narrative complexities of his work managed to speak of that context, even when it so often – unavoidably – declared itself to be a living dynamic presence.

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