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## Nostalgia and Post-Crash Irish Identity in Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* and Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones*

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### ABSTRACT

Nostalgia has long been an essential element in Irish culture. What is nostalgia like in contemporary Ireland? Does it fare well in Ireland's recent change of fortune following the economic crash? What is its function in post-crash Ireland, if any? This article seeks to address these questions through two representative works of fiction published in the post-crash period: Donal Ryan's *The Spinning Heart* (2012) and Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016). The first section offers an overview of current scholarship on nostalgia, with particular focus on how it may engender a reflection on identity and help people through crisis by fortifying their self-continuity. Another focus is how nostalgia can be generated by the formal devices of a literary text. The second and third sections analyze *The Spinning Heart* and *Solar Bones* respectively. I will first delineate the novels' formal and thematic nostalgia to give a comprehensive view of their nostalgia-*scape*. This will be followed by analysis of how nostalgia plays a role in the characters' struggle to make sense of loss and come through crisis. The last section discusses the implications of such a reading for reimagining Irish identity in post-crash Ireland.

**KEYWORDS** nostalgia, post-crash Ireland, identity, *The Spinning Heart*, *Solar Bones*

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Love it or hate it, Irish culture is never short of nostalgia. When W. B. Yeats imagines a simple and peaceful rural life in “The Lake Isle of Innisfree,” when Éamon de Valera talks about “the Ireland we dreamed of” in his St. Patrick’s Day radio address, and when *The Quiet Man*, *The Butcher Boy*, and *Angela’s Ashes* appear on any list of must-see films about Ireland, nostalgia is evoked, as if it were an inalienable component of Irish culture. Perhaps it is, and perhaps most visibly so in literature. In *Irish Pastoral: Nostalgia and Twentieth-Century Irish Literature*, Oona Frawley traces “the nostalgic mode” in Irish literature from before 1600 through Yeats and Synge the Revivalists, Joyce and Beckett the Modernists, to its contemporary version in the poetry of Seamus Heaney and Eavan Boland. Frawley claims that nostalgia serves as a “safety mechanism” for cultures experiencing change and attributes the prevalence of nostalgia to Ireland’s history of colonialism: “In post-colonial cultures, and in cultures that have experienced large scale emigration or social disruption, one would thus expect to find high levels of nostalgia, whether for the pre-colonial past, or for a time before emigration was economically and socially necessary. In Ireland, with its strange status as a western European former colony and its history of emigration, nostalgia has functioned at all of these levels” (3). In the twenty-first century, even as the colonial past recedes further back into history, Ireland still suffers more than its fair share of disruption as a result of the boom and bust of the Celtic Tiger. We would not be surprised that the fall of the Tiger, as a major economic and social crisis, would generate nostalgia in its wake, which is readily perceivable in the seemingly hasty summons for a Celtic “Phoenix,” the mythical creature predicated on a previous existence.<sup>1</sup>

Does nostalgia again serve as a safety mechanism in post-Tiger Ireland? Does it have any other functions? How is it represented in literature? Ultimately, these questions ask about how the Irish people in the post-Tiger era relate to the past and what purposes it serves. In *Irish Literature in the Celtic Tiger Years 1990-2008*, Susan Cahill remarks that in the Celtic Tiger period, “a rigid distinction between Ireland’s ‘traditional’ and ‘backward’ past and its ‘affluent’ and ‘contemporary’ present was valorized” (7-8). The past was considered “fundamentally different in kind to the present moment” and was used “to satisfy pre-given narratives,” either when its “backwardness” was underlined as compared with the “progress” brought

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<sup>1</sup> In November 2015, *The Economist* published an article titled “Celtic Phoenix: Ireland Shows There Is Economic Life After Death.” The term has not been widely in use later but did appear in some journalistic or academic commentaries on Irish economy. See also Mulraney, Donnelly and Kelpie, and Regan and Brazys.

about by economic prosperity, or when it was regarded “reverentially and nostalgically . . . in nationalistic discourse” (8). Now, since the economic crash has blown apart the façade of affluence and progress, are the Irish people relating to the past in any different manners? Is nostalgia perceived in new lights, that is, other than as a shady associate of nationalism? Can nostalgia be a viable approach to the past in post-crash Ireland?

In four sections, this article seeks to address these questions through two representative works of fiction published in the post-crash period: Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart* (2012) and Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones* (2016).<sup>2</sup> The first section surveys current scholarship to draw out how nostalgia engenders a reflection on identity, which can fortify people’s self-continuity and help them through crisis. This section also suggests that due attention be paid to how nostalgia can be generated by the formal devices of a literary text. Focusing on *The Spinning Heart* and *Solar Bones* respectively, the second and third sections first give a comprehensive view of the nostalgia-*scape* in these novels and then analyze nostalgia’s function for the struggling characters. That is, how nostalgia enables them to make sense of loss and come through crisis. The last section elaborates on how such a reading provides a more nuanced conception of the past and facilitates a reimagining of Irish identity in post-crash Ireland.

### Nostalgia, Self-Continuity, and Literature

The word *nostalgia* was coined by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer in his “Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia” (1688) to refer to the deadly disease among Swiss mercenaries fighting far away from home. Nostalgia is made of two Greek words—*nostos* (homecoming) and *algos* (pain, grief, distress)—to designate “the sad mood originating from the desire for the return to one’s native land” (381). Since Hofer’s dissertation, the definition of the term has undergone tremendous transformation, from a physical malady requiring treatment to the ordinary bitter-sweet emotion it is today. Commenting on the “normalization” of nostalgia, Michael Hviid Jacobsen observes that it is now “mostly a notion that describes a normal and quite common emotional response to a sense of loss or a memory of a time past that seems to stick” (11). Jacobsen concedes that nostalgia is still often regarded as “somewhat negative” owing to its association with “sentimentalism, pessimism, retreatism, backwardness and resistance to change,” in addition to “political conservatism, reactionary/traditionalist attitudes, or . . . a colonial or nationalist mentality”

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<sup>2</sup> Hereafter cited in-text as *TSH* and *SB*.

(12). Even so, he contends that nostalgia as an emotion is not “*in and by itself* either good or bad” (13). Along with the normalizing trend noted by Jacobsen, critical studies across disciplines also see a turn to more positive evaluations of nostalgia. For example, social psychologist Clay Routledge claims that nostalgia is a powerful psychological resource that promotes positive states like social connectedness, self-esteem, self-continuity, and perceptions of meaning in life. Reviewing recent scholarship, Stephen Brown would go so far as to claim, “Negativity, in short, has given way to positivity. *Nostalgia* is no more. *Yestalgia* is the order of the day” (19).

Attitudes toward nostalgia have indeed changed, but what causes nostalgia remains the same: changed times and the consequent loss, which engenders the grief (*algos*) essential to nostalgia. According to Niklas Salmose, this emotive quality marks the distinction between nostalgia and memory, for “nostalgia involves a recollection or reconstruction of a past time or space that is invested with grief or melancholy” (“Nostalgia” 3). Nevertheless, nostalgia is not *all* grief, but a mixture of sad and happy sentiments. In “Nostalgia: The Paradoxical Bittersweet Emotion,” Krystine Batcho aptly notes that “the distinctive characteristic of nostalgia is its blending of positive and negative into a unique bittersweet feeling. . . . [D]uring a nostalgic episode, pleasant memories activate positive emotions, while thoughts of irretrievable loss activate sadness” (32). Granted, there is no established ratio between bitterness and sweetness to make proper nostalgia, but it is clear that nostalgia is distinguishable from memory, or simply recalling the past, by the emotive response triggered by loss.

Paradoxically, while nostalgia is caused by loss, it also helps to cope with loss. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, regarded by many as “the most influential monograph on nostalgia to date” (Salmose and Sandberg 198), Svetlana Boym claims that globalization—“a time of accelerated rhythms of life and historical upheavals”—has brought with it “a no less global epidemic of nostalgia, . . . a longing for continuity in a fragmented world” (xiv). Two decades later, Jacobsen sees the most recent “boom” in nostalgia as a response to contemporary social problems that disrupt the whole world: “mass migration and mass immigration, financial crisis, international terrorism, ecological challenges . . .” (19). In both scenarios, nostalgia results from loss of continuity or stability, but it also serves as a “defense mechanism” or “safety raft” against the crisis of losing the old way of life (Boym xiv; Jacobsen, Introduction 20). Frawley’s idea of “safety mechanism” mentioned above is another example in which nostalgia is enlisted to cope with loss. Exactly how nostalgia performs this task has to do with the maintenance of self-continuity.

In their survey study, “The Psychology of Nostalgia: Delineating the Emotion’s Nature and Functions,” Tim Wildschut and Constantine Sedikides indicate that

one of nostalgia's "existential" functions is maintaining self-continuity, "the subjective connection between one's past and present, . . . [which] is a prerequisite for identity formation and contributes to diachronic unity of the self" (57). One seminal study on this aspect is *Yearning for Yesterday: A Sociology of Nostalgia* by Fred Davis. Davis argues that nostalgia "reassures us of past happiness and accomplishment and, since these still remain on deposit, as it were, in the bank of our memory, [nostalgia] simultaneously bestows upon us a certain current worth, however much present circumstances may obscure it or make it suspect" (34). Evoking a good, if not better, version of the past self to uplift positive feelings about the present self, nostalgia helps people deal with "threats of identity discontinuity," such as "present fears, discontents, anxieties, or uncertainties" (34). Batcho elaborates on nostalgia's salubrious function in times of trouble in a similar fashion:

Grasping part of our past can *anchor* us, like clinging to a branch along the shore as we are being carried downstream. For a time, we can appreciate how our authentic self remains despite the constant change inherent in life. By *preserving continuity amid discontinuity*, nostalgia helps us cope with the inevitable tension between the contradictory needs to adapt and grow while maintaining an enduring self. (33; emphasis added)

"Preserving" and thereby strengthening self-continuity is tantamount to a reflection on identity. To understand the kinds of reflection involved, Boym's categories of "restorative" and "reflective" nostalgia are useful: "Restorative nostalgia puts emphasis on *nostos* and proposes to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps. Reflective nostalgia dwells on *algia*, in longing and loss, the imperfect process of remembrance" (41). The former has its eyes fixed on the past, which despite any effort cannot be restored. It is the nostalgia often associated negatively with escapism, conservatism, and nationalism. On the other hand, reflective nostalgia focuses on the feelings in the present, a stance that opens possibilities for the future. While both types of nostalgia, as nostalgia *per se*, help preserve self-continuity, the outcome can be very different. As Boym indicates, "The two might overlap in their frames of reference, but they do not coincide in their narratives and plots of identity. In other words, they can use the same triggers of memory and symbols, the same Proustian madelaine [sic] pastry, but tell different stories about it" (49). It seems plausible to assume that, for its concern with the present, reflective nostalgia is more effective than its restorative counterpart when it comes to helping people deal with crisis. This proposition will be further examined below with regard to *The Spinning Heart*.

For all the talk about these two types of nostalgia, it is worth noting that Boym brings up this typology as a tool for thinking—not as “absolute types, but rather tendencies, ways of giving shape and meaning to longing” (41).<sup>3</sup> Boym’s categorization has been cited so often and without this caveat that Alastair Bonnett deems it necessary to issue a warning: “attempts to valorize reflexive distance over ‘simple’ or ‘restorative’ nostalgia . . . underestimate the intrinsic complexity of nostalgia.” He underlines that nostalgia is “inherently reflexive” because “it presupposes a self-conscious relationship with history” (126). This predilection, or rather imperative, for reflection is yet another feature that distinguishes nostalgia from memory.

Nostalgia’s role for self-continuity and identity reflection is crucial for the current study. Equally important yet less talked-about is the *formal* aspect of nostalgia in literary texts. In “Literature and Nostalgia: Vestiges of Paradise,” Niklas Salmose and Eric Sandberg review studies on nostalgia in literature and observe that “most scholarship remains preoccupied with nostalgia’s thematic function, or its political and cultural significance,” to the effect that “the critical literature about the aesthetics of nostalgic [sic] is sparse” (201). In addition to the nostalgia found in the content of a literary text, they advocate examining the formal devices adopted to create nostalgia so as to “attend to readers’ nostalgic experience(s) of the text, and consider what it is in the text that makes them nostalgic” (202). This would require a study of “the poetics of nostalgia”—“a complex study of tropes, stylistics and reader responses” (202). As examples, Salmose and Sandberg note that formal devices like “the very structure of the narrative,” “nostalgic imagery and tropes,” or “nostalgic stylistics” can trigger “private” nostalgia on the readers’ part, and this nostalgia can also “be informed by notions of public nostalgia: marketing, trends, national mythologies and so on” (202-03). These formulations, non-exhaustive by far, readily show that the poetics of nostalgia is indeed a rich and variegated field for exploration.

Such formal considerations as outlined here shall not and cannot be separated from thematic nostalgia, for together they constitute the whole nostalgia-*scape* in a given text. Even though the present study dwells more on the thematic aspect and does not purport to fully delineate the poetics of nostalgia in *The Spinning Heart* and *Solar Bones*, it will attend—to different extents for each text—to the formal features that are part and parcel of the nostalgia in these texts. To do so will

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<sup>3</sup> Reading Boym’s formulation, one would be tempted to think that, in Freudian terms, reflective nostalgia is mourning, and restorative nostalgia melancholia. This is close to the case except for Boym’s refusal of “absolute types.” She does mention Freud briefly but offers no clear response, and her claim would be frustrating for anyone attempting to do so: “reflective nostalgia has elements of both mourning and melancholia” (55).

not only compensate, partially at least, for the “sparse” attention paid to the formal aspects of nostalgia in literature, but also provide a deeper and more complex understanding of nostalgia in these novels, which in turn will facilitate a better evaluation of nostalgia’s role in post-crash Ireland.

### ***The Spinning Heart*: “Aren’t We Still the Same People?”**

**Nostalgia and  
Post-Crash Irish  
Identity**

Donal Ryan’s *The Spinning Heart* depicts the impact of the economic crash on a tightly-knit community in a small town in Ireland. Following the crash, Pokey Burke, the property developer and engine for local economy during boom time, flees the country, leaving his legion of construction workers unemployed and unpaid and his housing estate unfinished. Eamon Maher observes that the novel “captures something of the *Zeitgeist* of post-Celtic Tiger Ireland, particularly the anger and disappointment at the trauma inflicted on ordinary decent people, while those mainly responsible for the crash appeared to be escaping relatively unscathed” (283-84). The anger and disappointment are certainly there, but they gesture toward a central emotion deep inside the characters’ psyche: a despairing sense of *loss*. People’s notion of a good life and prosperous future are as broken as the unfinished estate, which would be one of the “ghost estates” that constitute “perhaps the most arresting physical manifestations of the Republic’s precipitous economic collapse” (Cahill, “Post-Millennial” 615). A resident in Pokey’s ghost estate, the single mother Réaltín encapsulates the town’s distress when she states, “There are forty-four houses in this estate. I live in number twenty-three. There’s an old lady living in number forty. There’s no one living in any of the other houses, just the ghosts of people who never existed. I’m stranded, she’s abandoned” (*TSH* 42). Stranded or abandoned, the world of *The Spinning Heart* revolves aimlessly around loss and all sorts of related emotions—remorse, frustration, depression, hopelessness, and, of course, nostalgia.

*The Spinning Heart* abounds with traces of nostalgia. In terms of form, the book consists of twenty-one first-person monologues narrated in the present tense. These twenty-one narrators each have a story to tell, in which they recount their current life and recall the past while also gossiping about other people. These stories are disconnected for the lack of interaction or conversation, as they are also literally separated by chapter divisions. But the content of these stories is mostly interwoven so that the readers can form a mental picture of the community in the small town, which feels more like a village as the people do know one another’s family, sometimes going back for two or three generations, and live close by. The sense of a village and the distinct oral qualities of the narratives may evoke

nostalgia. As Elke D'Hoker observes, *The Spinning Heart* “flags its awareness of the nostalgic village narrative even as it testifies to the fundamental separateness of its characters in post-Celtic-Tiger Ireland” (23). Such a narrative *framing* also has traits close to what Salmose calls the “analeptic structure”: “a frame structure where a narrator subsequently narrates the events of some past imagination or experience, thus creating a distinct ‘now’ and ‘then’ on which he is liable to comment” (*Towards a Poetics* 287). This device is rendered more powerful in first person narration, for example, as in Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* (Salmose, *Towards a Poetics* 287-88). In Ryan’s novel, instead of one single first-person narrator, there are twenty-one. They may not be equally nostalgic about the past, but in their narratives there is clearly a now/then contrast on which they “comment” all the time. In this way, the structure of the narrative is the major formal component that sets up a background of nostalgia in *The Spinning Heart*.

In terms of content, the novel’s nostalgia comes mainly from the loss suffered by the characters as a result of the economic crash. They have lost so much materially that they become spiritually lost as well, not knowing who they are any more, not to mention how to move on. The crisis at present contrasts sharply with the good days during the Tiger years or even earlier, thus producing the bittersweet feeling of nostalgia, even though in the immediate aftermath of the economic crash bitterness tends to overwhelm what little sweetness people can still gather. For example, the construction workers have lost their jobs and pension, which severely damages their manhood and self-worth. This is made manifest in the beginning chapter of the novel, where Bobby Mahon, ex-foreman of Pokey Burke, reflects on his current situation and his loss of fortune as well as self-identity. During boom time, Bobby had a solid sense of self and a future: “I had a right swagger there for a couple of years, thinking I was a great fella. *Foreman*, I was, clearing a grand a week. Set for life” (*TSH* 13). But now, unemployed in an economic recession, he is “suddenly useless” (*TSH* 15), “like an orphaned child, bereft, filling up with fear like a boat filling with water” (*TSH* 20). Like Bobby, many of the characters are troubled because their self-perception has been gravely challenged, if not simply destroyed. When Seanie, another construction worker, considers suicide by drowning, he expresses loathing and disappointment in himself: “How come I can’t be like everyone thinks I am? I’d love to really be Seanie Shaper. I’d love to not be here again, sitting looking at the water” (*TSH* 96).

For all these depressing sentiments, critics see little hope out of the predicament for the characters and their community. Daphne Kalotay remarks, “These people have been left in a rut, spinning their wheels as well as their hearts” (Kalotay). Marie Mianowski claims that the community has been “shaken at its roots



because it has lost most of its former references without having yet found any new solid or substantial stronghold or sets of references to replace them and play the role of fresh foundations” (61). She concludes that there is no way out for the community, which is not able to find and “hold on to new strongholds and build a future for all” (77). Mianowski rightly suggests that some “foundations” would be needed for rebuilding lost selves and getting through crisis. Nevertheless, given the novel’s overarching sentiment of nostalgia, if we consider how nostalgia help maintain self-continuity during crisis and examine how individual and collective identities are negotiated through nostalgia in *The Spinning Heart*, we might come to a more nuanced analysis and perhaps a different conclusion.

We have discussed how nostalgic remembrance of a better past self triggers a reflection on identity and strengthens self-continuity. This is readily perceivable in Seanie’s case. In his mournful anguish, Seanie cries that “I’d love to really be Seanie Shaper,” his nickname since secondary school, which he regards quite positively compared with other lads’ “awful” nicknames like “Vomity Donnell,” “Incest Johnny,” or “Kiddyfiddler” (*TSH* 90). Seanie remembers how he got the nickname in a self-congratulatory manner: “I was forever fixing my hair and throwing auld smart shapes for fear that there’d be girls along the road. I used to take a bit more care about myself than the other apes. I used to change my shirt *every* day, a thing unheard of in my circle” (*TSH* 91). This younger Seanie used to give sexual initiation indiscriminately to girls from a nearby convent, and he is proud of this past version of himself: “I went off with the hunchbacks, lispers, smelly wans, lesbians, the whole lot. . . . Them wans needed a bit of a good time too. . . . I still believe I did good work at the convent with those unfortunate young ladies; I made them feel good about themselves. . . .” (*TSH* 91-92). The sweet memory of sexual braggadocio stands in sharp contrast to his now frustrating inability to properly communicate with Réaltín, his ex-girlfriend and the mother of his son, who would rather be a single mother than marry him. When Seanie cries “I’d love to really be Seanie Shaper,” he is not only voicing disappointment in his current self but also wishing to be restored to a former and better version of himself, implying that he would love to be Seanie Shaper *again*. This emphasis on *nostos* is a clear marker of Boym’s restorative nostalgia, which renders Seanie’s appeal to self-continuity more painful than helpful, for he dwells on the impossibility of return that initially gives rise to the *algia* in nostalgia.

On the other hand, Bobby’s wife Triona recalls the past to mediate her feelings in the present, in a manner more in line with reflective nostalgia, and this turns out to help fortify her self-continuity. Triona’s story appears at the end of the novel. By then the community has long been gossiping about Bobby’s affair with Réaltín,

and Bobby is suspected of killing his father Frank, but he would not say anything about it. Triona begins her story by recalling an early-life memory about her cousin Coley, who we later understand is like Bobby in several ways. She then remembers how she fell in love with Bobby. On their first date, Triona recounts, “I was suddenly aware of all the other things behind his eyes: fear, doubt, shyness, sadness. I was wrapped in him from that minute. I’d never look at another man again” (TSH 147). She also recalls the subtle way Bobby reveals his inner secrets to her, not least about how Frank used to abuse his wife and son when Bobby was little: “Every now and again, and with no trigger that I could ever figure out, Bobby would start to tell me things. A few times I was just asleep when he started talking . . .” (TSH 149). Triona hates Frank for the mental torture he has inflicted on Bobby, so much so that she regards the spinning heart at the front gate of Frank’s house as “a mocking symbol, Bobby’s rough cross” (TSH 148). These reminiscences evoke crucial *anchors* that establish a continuity in Triona’s character. This continuity even extends further back to the days before she started her life with Bobby, to her appreciation of the “beauty” of cousin Coley’s delicate temperament, a personality trait she also finds and loves in Bobby (TSH 146).

At her core, Triona understands Bobby deeply and has an abiding love for him. Thus, even when the couple face three crises all at once, that is, unemployment, rumor of extramarital affair, and alleged patricide, Triona stays adamant:

I wouldn’t care if Bobby never again brought a cent into the house. Earlier in the summer, when the whole village had it that he was going with that girl from Pokey’s ghost estate, I couldn’t have cared less; I knew he wouldn’t betray me in a million years. When he wouldn’t talk to me after they left him out on bail, though, I could have killed him. I screamed at him, into his face, over and over again to just *talk*, please, please just *talk* to me. I don’t even care if he *did* kill Frank. I wouldn’t love him any less. (TSH 148)

Triona’s stance is plausible because the readers get to see how she remembers her past. She does not dwell on the past, nor does she want to return to the past. The conclusion Triona draws from her reflection on the past is how much she loves Bobby and how much she hates Frank, and she continues to be so in the present. We see a continuity in this character, and the continuity, thus fortified, is enabling. Triona is not obsessed with the better past or the current problem, say, the fact that Bobby used to be the foreman and “clearing a grand a week” but might never earn a cent again. She acknowledges the loss but remembers who she has always been and will continue to be. Her only concern is her love for Bobby, as she confirms at

the end of the book: “Oh love; oh love, what matters now? What matters only love?” (TSH 156). Triona’s case can be an exemplary illustration of the way nostalgia works to give people strength through times of trouble.

In addition to the personal level, nostalgia can also provide continuity for a collective self. The local garda Jim, bogged down by the murder of Frank and the kidnap of Réaltín’s son, recalls earlier crimes in the community: “Madness must come around in ten-year cycles. That time, there was two shootings and a fatal car crash in the space of two months. Now we have another murder and a snatched child” (TSH 137-38). As if this foray into the recent past is not enough for him to make sense of the situation at present, Jim goes further back in time into the national past:

This must be how things were at the time of the war against the British when a crowd outside of Mass would suddenly explode into a flying column, guns appearing from under overcoats, killers appearing from inside of ordinary people. They were *good* killings, though—the Tans burned churches and creameries, interfered with women and shot little children. That was a time when killing was *good*, for God and country. That time is long ago. *But aren’t we still the same people?* (TSH 138; emphasis added)

Jim’s repeated references to “good” killings imply that the time these killings happen has also been *good*, making this passage an affectionate, nostalgic musing of the good old times, compared with which the present for its “madness” is a bad time. In this episode, violence provides a clue to the continuity of an Irish identity, whether before Irish independence, during the Celtic Tiger, or post-Tiger. This could be a bit eerie and embarrassing, but the continuity is there in Jim’s words and no less—“aren’t we still the same people?” Through nostalgia, Jim is reminded of what his people have been like, and this allows him to better comprehend the violent crimes he is now facing.

Interestingly, the nostalgic reflection that incorporates a collective past might help establish self-continuity for the individual. The case in point is Brian, one of Bobby’s former crew members. He is considering going to Australia, and he begins his story by remembering those who have emigrated in the recent past:

I remember the mother and father talking about Matty Cummins and the two Walshes and Anselm Grogan and all them boys when they went to Australia a few years ago. A right shower of wasters they called them. Imagine fecking off to the far side of the world to drink their foolish heads off and *the power of work*

to be had here! (TSH 56; emphasis added)

As he recalls his parents' scorn for "all them boys," Brian also remembers the prosperous job market just a few years ago, which contrasts with his current unemployment and implicitly makes his consideration of emigration a nostalgic reflection. Now, as he is embarking on a similar enterprise of emigration, for his self-defense Brian reasons that he is going to Australia in a different context, and "context is everything" (TSH 56):

So I'm going to Australia in the context of a severe recession, and therefore I am not a yahoo or a waster, but a tragic figure, a modern incarnation of the poor tenant farmer, laid low by famine, cast from his smallholding by the Gombeen Man, forced to choose between the coffin ship and the grave. Matty Cummins and the boys were blackguards; I am a victim. (TSH 57)<sup>4</sup>

Brian likens his present situation to the victims of eviction during the great famine in the nineteenth century, who faced emigration or death by starvation. For Ralf Haekel, Brian's words "suggest that the Celtic Tiger years merely covered up a past of suffering and victimhood that has never really been gone" (26). This could be the case if we consider *The Spinning Heart's* overall critique of the Celtic Tiger and the aftershocks of its fall.<sup>5</sup>

However, for Brian the individual, this appeal to the Irish history of poverty and suffering is important because it offers *self-justification* and thereby strengthening his identity. The famine is certainly not part of Brian's personal past, but it is a collective past which he as an Irishman can lay claim to. It should be noted that Brian does not long for the time of the famine as a better past, but rather co-opts this collective trauma for his personal nostalgic reflection on emigration, thus grafting himself onto the continuity of a collectivity. By doing so, he is able to

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<sup>4</sup> According to Kieran Keohane and Carmen Kuhling, the gombeen man is "a village usurer, a native Irish petty bourgeois publican, merchant or estate agent, who, during the course of the nineteenth century, became the main supporter of the Home rule movement" (8). Like Brian here, Keohane and Kuhling also use the term to critique the current plight: the latter-day gombeen man is "the obscene, insatiable greed of the post-colonial, post-Catholic, post-Nationalist, post-democratic-Republican Irish who have ruled for the twentieth century" (9).

<sup>5</sup> For example, Eóin Flannery argues that *The Spinning Heart* "must be read as 'imaginative' critiques of the globally connected yet resolutely local consequences of [the neoliberal] strand of the Celtic Tiger period" (407), while Cahill suggests that "Ryan's novel is a highly ethical meditation on the trickle-down consequences of sudden and severe economic disruption" ("Post-Millennial" 609). One opposition to the overall positive reception of *The Spinning Heart* comes from Seán Kennedy, who regards such reception as "symptomatic of an unwillingness (perhaps an inability) among Irish people to confront what really happened after 2007" (393).

reformulate his own self-perception and confirms that he, like so many poor tenant farmers before him, is a victim—his by turns *new and rediscovered* identity in post-Tiger Ireland. Now one might ask: Does this enhanced self-continuity or reformulated identity really help people go through crisis? Brian’s narrative offers no answer to this question, but at least we know he is considering emigration, not suicide. Even though seeing oneself as a victim is by no means gratifying, Brian’s self-appointed victimhood can still have some positive effects, for it provides a starting point and some solid ground for further actions of mediation.

So far, we have seen how nostalgia can help recalibrate one’s identity in a changed world, which might eventually prove helpful in getting people to move on. Admittedly, not all kinds of nostalgia work, not everyone benefits from nostalgia, but with nostalgia there can be hope. This hope would harken back to the discussion above on Triona’s remark that ends the novel, “What matters only love?” (TSH 156). The seemingly clichéd appeal to love has dissatisfied Seán Kennedy, who sees Triona as a sheer “idealization” (397). Similarly, Haekel sees Bobby and Triona as “slightly unconvincing,” partly due to their obsession with love (27). However, Triona’s *love* is pivotal to her continuity as a person, an important core she both rediscovers and consolidates through nostalgia, and this love, albeit in no way new or fresh, will serve as the “fresh foundations” that Mianowski believes to be indispensable for recovery but finds missing in the novel (61). Reading the ending as positive and hopeful, I concur with Eamon Maher, who observes that toward the end of the novel, “One has the sense of a community slowly emerging from the wreckage of their lives and *rediscovering the things* that might sustain them into the future: love, community spirit, resilience, a sense of their inherent worth, a reappraisal of what truly matters” (284; emphasis added). Maher’s commentary on *The Spinning Heart* is only two pages long, and for its brevity he does not explain how these “things” necessary for a positive future are rediscovered. Based on the discussion above, we can add with conviction that these rediscovered things, real or imagined, are rediscovered through nostalgia.

### ***Solar Bones*: Ghostly Homecoming and Post-Mortem Nostalgia**

Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones* consists solely of material recalled by its narrator Marcus Conway, whose affectionate remembrances of the past provide fertile ground for nostalgia. But there is a catch to this innocuous plot description: Marcus is a ghost, and the novel is his unbroken, one-sentence monologue. This formal innovation is, in Neil Murphy’s words, “fundamental to its character-narrator’s way of seeing and being in the world—or, more precisely, his way of no

longer being in the world even as he posthumously bears witness to that world” (52). For one thing, McCormack explains that the novel lacks full stops because “a ghost would have nothing to do with a full stop, . . . might fatally falter at a full stop. Might dissipate” (Wallace). For another, Marcus’s life plays out against a backdrop of boom-time Ireland on the cusp of the phenomenal bust, which McCormack acknowledges has much to do with the experimental style of the book: “The collapse of the Celtic Tiger was a dramatic and surreal event which was both physically tangible and a collapse of abstract values. Therefore, it seems likely those fictions which would deal with it would have to step outside the bounds of the realist novel” (Flynn). From all these comments, it is clear that the form of *Solar Bones* is closely related to its content. In her review, Sharae Deckard calls *Solar Bones* “a novel of collapse” and praises it for “how perfectly its form embodies its content” (Deckard). Here I would like to call it “a novel of nostalgia” and keep the same praise, for the thematic nostalgia in the novel is embedded in its many formal devices that generate nostalgia, first and foremost the ghost narrator.

A ghost is premised on a prior death, the ultimate loss of life. The presence of a ghost is a painful reminder of that irrevocable loss and is thus inherently nostalgic; the same goes for the narrative by a ghost. That said, *everything* Marcus the ghost recalls about his past life is by default nostalgic, even when he seems to simply remember without evoking any bittersweet feeling or any kind of emotion. Marcus is granted this exemption from our earlier distinction between nostalgia and memory by his singularity as a ghost and his *post-mortem* nostalgia, which unlike thematic nostalgia is dictated by the narrative form. Under these circumstances, what counts as ordinary remembrance in another narrative would have to be regarded always already as nostalgia when narrated by Marcus the ghost. Truly, Marcus himself is not aware of his ghostly state until he remembers his death near the end of the novel, but the fact of his lost life looms large in his narrative and accounts for much of its nostalgic quality.

Another formal setup that is part and parcel of the ghost narrator is the date of narration, November 2, All Souls’ Day, also known as the Day of the Dead. For Catholics, this is the day for remembering and praying for the souls of the faithful departed, while on the Celtic Calendar this is the day for the dead to return home. On this day, as McCormack explains in an interview, the dead are “paroled from purgatory by the prayers of the faithful. . . . Food is laid out for them at the table. In some parts of the county [Mayo], that would be taken quite seriously” (Seidel 33).<sup>6</sup> In

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<sup>6</sup> This custom is observed in the novel as well. Marcus claims that he is so bogged down by an “anxious feeling” that he initially “miss[es] the fact that [his wife] Mairead has laid out some food for [him] on the table” (SB 34). He also misses another, more important fact: on All Souls’ Day, the food on the table is meant for the dead.

*Solar Bones*, All Souls' Day has to be taken seriously because it intimates that the book is about the homecoming of a ghost. Unlike any ordinary homecoming, the ghostly homecoming carries no cheerful tone. Even worse, it is painful and, in the end, simply impossible. This is classic nostalgia with a twist. Nostalgia in its original sense is the pain of longing for one's home, and the best cure is a return to the beloved home or homeland. In ghostly homecomings, however, even when the ghosts indeed return to the house where they have lived, they can never *truly* come home. There is no return for the ghosts because there is no returning to *life*. This underscores the conundrum that for ghosts a proper homecoming is at best uneasy and always unlikely: the *nostos* of a ghost is *algia* in itself.

The above formulation allows us to better understand Marcus's uncanny feeling in his own house. In the beginning of the novel, Marcus materializes in his kitchen accompanied by the mid-day Angelus bells and immediately feels "confused" (SB 8), for everything seems to be out of kilter. Finding his family gone on a weekday, he feels some "gnawing unease" while "normally" he would be "too happy" to have some time to himself (SB 10). The tables and chairs are "marginally out of place," "as if some imp had got in during the night and shifted things," and the tea canister is not "where it normally sits" (SB 33). This inexplicable sense of disorientation intensifies and keeps interrupting Marcus's thoughts. Halfway through the novel, he still wonders "how strange this day is," which makes him feel "anxious," "panicked," "rage," and "fear" (SB 147, 148). Even though Marcus does not understand why he feels dislocated in his own house, we can see that the house becomes uncanny for him not because it has changed but because Marcus as a *ghost at home* is an oxymoron. A ghost cannot return home even when it is at home, and the painful feelings he experiences are symptoms of nostalgia. A heightened nostalgia is thus created and shall be seen as intrinsic to the narrative of a ghostly homecoming like *Solar Bones*.

In addition to the ghost narrator, there are other formal devices that contribute to the nostalgia in *Solar Bones*. For example, the "analeptic structure" mentioned in the above discussion of *The Spinning Heart* also applies to Marcus's narrative, perhaps even more fittingly as he is the only narrator in the whole novel. Meanwhile, imageries of ruins abound, especially in the beginning parts of the novel, conveying a deep sense of loss that generates nostalgia. A "large, abandoned industrial facility in the north of the county" bespeaks an unfulfilled "promise of prosperity" (SB 16, 17). The broken-down wind turbine, like "luminous bones of some massive, extinct creature, now disinterred" (SB 26), makes Marcus feel "sorrowful" when it is "hauled through our little village out here on the Western Seaboard . . . a clear instance of the world forfeiting one of its better ideas" (SB 27).

These forlorn material ruins tie in with the collapse of the Celtic Tiger, “something that never was has finally collapsed . . . falling to ruin in that specific way which proved it never existed” (SB 19). Still another way to highlight loss is what I would call the spoiler moments, when Marcus remembers a person and, apropos of nothing, inserts a side note on what would later become of that person. For instance, when Marcus talks about a boat trip with his father, he begins thus: “years later, when his days as an oarsman were behind him but *there was as yet no sign of the madness that would overtake him at the end*, we took that Sunday trip in the trawler up towards Clare Island . . .” (SB 90; emphasis added). Or when Marcus describes a strained interview on the doorsteps of his father-in-law, with the latter “breathing heavily from the emphysema that would kill him three years down the road” (SB 138). Given the cascading flow of Marcus’s narrative, these tiny spoilers are easily overlooked, but they in effect anticipate the loss to come and add to the overall nostalgic mood of the novel.

Although the analysis above is by no means exhaustive, it should be clear that the formal design of *Solar Bones* triggers nostalgia in multiple ways. Within this nostalgic framework, the novel presents Marcus’s memories of family, work, politics, local and global crises, all of which together amount to an entire life, his being/identity, the exact thing lost to Marcus upon his death. This makes *Solar Bones* a somewhat obsessively prolonged, detailed contemplation on both loss and life, which are one in Marcus’s case. Such a reflection on loss again reminds us of Boym’s reflective nostalgia, which is “more oriented toward an individual narrative that savors details and memorial signs, perpetually deferring homecoming itself” (51). Homecoming is indeed deferred indefinitely for Marcus, not only because a ghostly homecoming is impossible, as delineated above, but also because return/*nostos* is not the point. What matters is the reflection itself and what understanding or insight Marcus gains as a result.

Much as for the characters in *The Spinning Heart*, nostalgic reflections in *Solar Bones* help Marcus tackle the crisis at hand, though unlike Ryan’s characters, who face specific problems like unemployment and financial difficulties, Marcus has no idea what is hitting him. The crisis first reveals itself in the confusion he feels in his own kitchen and is later specified as “the certainty of being wholly displaced here, in this house, my own house and the uncanny feeling of *dragging my own after-image with me like an intermittent being, strobing and flickering . . .*” (SB 159; emphasis added). Still unbeknownst to himself, what Marcus faces is an existential crisis caused by his state of (non-)being. A ghost lost in the human world, Marcus urgently needs some anchor to position himself, and he does so by appealing to his past for self-continuity:



standing here in the kitchen  
of this house

I've lived for nearly twenty-five years and raised a family, this house outside the village of Louisburgh in the county of Mayo on the west coast of Ireland, the village in which I can trace my seed and breed back to a time when it was nothing more than a ramshackle river crossing . . . , my line traceable to the gloomy prehistory in which a tenacious clan of farmers and fishermen kept their grip on a small patch of land. . . . (SB 9)

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Here Marcus establishes his self-knowledge by laying claims to his own extended and unbroken residence in the same place as well as his local ancestry since prehistory. This sets up the keynote of his subsequent reflection on identity, namely how the individual and the collective are inseparably interwoven, in a way that exemplifies Boym's formulation of reflective nostalgia: "The nostalgic rendezvous with oneself is not always a private affair. Voluntary and involuntary recollections of an individual intertwine with collective memories" (50). The remaining part of this section will delineate how Marcus reflects on and re-conceptualizes his individual identity in his post-mortem nostalgia, and the result and implication of his reflection for post-crash Ireland will become clear toward the end of the section.

We have witnessed how Marcus instinctively seeks self-confirmation through his relation to the collective. For different versions of the interrelation between the individual and the collective, *Solar Bones* offers many other kinds of connections, for example, "between private and public realms" (Connolly 454) and "between global conflict and local disputes" (Paye 126). Even the house is imagined by Marcus to be "a living thing" connected to a larger body, where a local "web of utilities"—oil, water, and electricity—is just "a tiny part of that greater circum-terrestrial grid of services which draws the world into community, pinching it up into villages, towns and cities" (SB 129). Adam Hanna suggests that here the house is portrayed as "something more complex and interdependent" than a "self-contained entity" (127). Like the house, people are not self-contained, but are related to the world in a complex manner, which in this novel seems to always carry political implications. When Marcus reads a news story about a female environmentalist on hunger strike against "the largest pipe-laying ship in the world," the image of "this small woman against this ship" reminds him of "the lone protester standing in front of the column of tanks in Tiananmen Square, way back in 1989" (SB 15). Both images illustrate "that dangerous confluence of the private and political converging on" the individual body (SB 15).

Similar convergences happen to Marcus's family members, mainly his wife and

daughter, and directly impact his life and his conception of who he is. To begin with, his artist daughter Agnes holds a visual art exhibition consisting of local newspaper excerpts written in her own blood. In the opening reception, when Marcus realizes he is looking at “litres” of his daughter’s blood, the “common element” that unites everyone in the gallery, he cannot but think of this as an “indictment” against him (SB 44). In panic, Marcus rushes outside to have “a full self-reappraisal of [himself] as a man and as a father,” asking, “had I failed my daughter” and “had I pushed her towards this” (SB 47). Later, to exonerate her parents, Agnes would reassure Marcus that the potential “finger-pointing and accusation” in her art “wasn’t personal” (SB 52). However, her work is indeed personal in a different register, for it “combines public and private spheres,” and thus in her rendition “the stories of the crimes and misdemeanors of a community [are] made personal” (Hand 339). Though Agnes’s artworks lack the photogenic direct confrontation performed by the female environmentalist and the Tank Man, they carry the same theme of “the body as a rhetorical field” (SB 184), and it is the heightened personal nature of the body that flusters Marcus into self-reappraisal.

These instances of how the political is also personal build up to the major event in Marcus’s post-mortem recollections, of the illness of his wife Mairead and of his days as her caregiver. Shortly after the couple return from Agnes’s opening in Galway, Mairead starts vomiting and having diarrhea. What is thought to be food poisoning turns out to be cryptosporidiosis, a contagious disease caused by the bacteria in contaminated water, currently raging in the city of Galway. As the number of patients grows and the city government has no idea when it can solve the problem, a personal health condition turns into a public health issue and then into a civic disaster: a water crisis that reduces the Irish people “to the condition of third-world supplicants who were now forced to queue up for water at relief points throughout the suburbs, a shameful state of affairs” (SB 121). This episode in *Solar Bones* has attracted many critical commentaries, mostly in terms of the novel’s critique of the neoliberal logic of the Celtic Tiger. Jason Buchanan, for instance, claims that “the viral, and invisible, nature of cryptosporidium is a manifestation of the virtual forces of globalization that can cause markets to collapse” (187), and Michael Rubenstein sees the outbreak as “a real effect of economic overheating—in particular of excessive private investment without a concomitant investment in public things, like access to water” (318).<sup>7</sup>

Whereas these comments attend to the macro, political significance of this public health and political crisis, I would focus instead on its micro, personal

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<sup>7</sup> See Darling for a discussion on the cryptosporidium outbreak and the female body.

impact on Marcus. In Mairead's sick body, Marcus again sees the convergence of the private and the political:

news  
in the way I understood political phenomena to be news, had taken up residence under my roof  
down the hall in the far bedroom, engineering and politics converging in the slight figure of my wife lying in bed, her body and soul now giving her an extension into the political arena. . . . (SB 117)

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With a newsworthy political phenomenon in his private home, where his wife's body becomes part of the political arena, Marcus is compelled to weigh his job as a civil engineer in the local council in a new light, as he deliberates:

I never had any intimate sense of history's immediate forces affecting my day-to-day life, not even, I have to admit, during those work meetings where large public facilities and budgets were being decided upon, meetings in which I would sit with politicians and developers to argue this or that point . . . not even then did I have a full sense of myself as an engaged citizen within a political horizon. . . . (SB 119-20)

Here Marcus admits to his former blindness to the political nature of his job. In fact, as a public employee, he is always part of "the political arena," forever caught between corrupt politicians and greedy developers, constantly navigating the thin line between political pressure on the one hand and his professionalism and conscience on the other. In his post-mortem nostalgia, Marcus recalls how he has nursed Mairead through illness and in the meantime rediscovers himself, coming to a deeper realization of who he has always been: a civil engineer trying to do his job amid and despite local politics.

Equally important to this rediscovered identity is how it is achieved, that is, through the backward-looking perspective provided by nostalgia. As Marcus would have it, "all this is only clear in hindsight" (SB 30). Incidentally, in its original context in the novel, "all this" refers to how the Irish economy comes to a crash. Given the interrelationship between the collective and the individual, it turns out that this macroeconomic question about the fall of the national economy can be answered from a micro perspective of a county engineer's personal life. In Marcus's struggle against the cronyism in local politics, we see a miniature of the corrupt national politics that sunk the Celtic Tiger.

In Marcus's nostalgic reflection that is *Solar Bones*, individual life is portrayed as interwoven with the collective network of lives. In this formation, as just noted, examining an individual's life may shed light on the national economic crisis. Moreover, the loss of one life implies the loss of collective lives, signaling not necessarily death but rather a vanished way of life. In the case of post-crash Ireland, this lost collective way of life is the prosperity and confidence the Irish people once enjoyed in the Celtic Tiger years. The uncanny feelings Marcus experiences in his own house—be it confusion, anxiety, panic, rage, fear, or sorrow—are symptoms of nostalgia, and they are shared by Irish people in post-crash Ireland. Bearing some severe loss as Marcus does, the Irish are at home but not quite, confused about their own situation in the present. In such a crisis, Marcus turns to nostalgic reflections and achieves a deeper self-understanding, which becomes for him a new foundation for moving on. Even if such a possibility is not available for Marcus, dead as he already is all the time, it is significant that at the end of the novel, in his dying moment, Marcus still urges himself to “keep going, one foot in front of the other / the head down and keep going / keep going / keep going to fuck” (SB 223). Marcus does not survive into post-crash Ireland, but through the nostalgia evoked by his narrative, through the identity he rediscovers via nostalgia, his fellow Irish people might gain an insight as to how to “keep going” and move on.

### **Nostalgia and Post-Crash Irish Identity**

Nostalgia permeates *The Spinning Heart* and *Solar Bones*. The formal features of the novels reinforce the sentiment of nostalgia, and thematically nostalgia proves essential because many of the characters rely on it as a defense mechanism in times of crisis. We see how nostalgia helps the individuals strengthen self-continuity, engendering in-depth reflections on identity in the process. Meanwhile, the individual's nostalgia may have larger implications for the collective, as personal crisis is often linked to or created by collective problems.

The villagers in *The Spinning Heart* live in the material and spiritual ruins left by the Celtic Tiger, and they are compelled to come to terms with the discrepancy between past affluence and present distress, a condition that all but inevitably triggers nostalgia. The novel suggests how it is possible and even useful to look into the personal past and national history to make sense of the present and address its problems. Though not all characters manage to gain strength from nostalgia and some remain stuck, Ryan's novel does illustrate how nostalgia may help people recalibrate themselves in a drastically changed world and provide grounds for moving forward. Admittedly, given the number of characters, even the longer

narratives like Bobby's and Triona's do not provide comprehensive representations of an individual character's nostalgia, and reflections on the collective past are sporadic and have to be pieced together from different stories. This is a limitation inherent in the composite structure of the novel. For that matter, the unbroken narrative in *Solar Bones* offers a good contrast. Unlike the characters in *The Spinning Heart*, Marcus occupies the whole book, and in his nostalgia for his entire (and entirely lost) life, he demonstrates an awareness of the many forms of connections that bind individuals to larger entities, thus achieving a deeper understanding of both individual and collective identities.

*The Spinning Heart* and *Solar Bones* show that nostalgia can be enabling and beneficial. The reflection on identity in these novels demonstrates the value of the past for the present and by extension the future. This reappraisal is important for the post-crash Irish society, considering how in the Tiger years the past was dismissed as traditional and backward, as well as antithetical to the narrative of progress, modernity, and economic prosperity. Moreover, this more nuanced conception of the past advocates a more critical application of nostalgia, as a means to curb the indiscriminating reverence for the national past. By thus demonstrating a different way to relate to the past, these post-crash texts reimagine an Irish identity which accommodates the contradiction between tradition and modernity and which is, therefore, closer to the lived reality of contemporary Ireland, as illustrated by Marcus: he is a modern engineer but his now ghostly existence rests solely on traditional folk beliefs. He lives a very local life in a small village on the western edge of Ireland, but his serious and sophisticated considerations of politics and international affairs rather make him a proper global citizen. Such a reimagination is no doubt a critique of boom-time Ireland and its penchant for development and progress, which could use some reckoning with reality. More importantly, it may help contemporary Ireland maintain its footing, work through loss, and build a viable future.

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