

## Two Irish Plays of the Great War:

### Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* and Dermot Bolger's *Walking the Road*

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WWI, Frank McGuinness, Dermot Bolger, memory, Irish drama

#### Abstract

This paper examines how Frank McGuinness and Dermot Bolger represented the formation of collective memory and personal memory with regard to WWI in their plays *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (1985) and *Walking the Road* (2007). I began with an overview of earlier Irish plays dealing with WWI in comparison with the English ones, explaining why memory has come to be of particular concern in Ireland. With *Observe the Sons of Ulster*, I focused on Part 3, in which four different conversations conducted by four pairs of soldiers on leave in Ulster merge into one concerted call to march back to the front. This, as I argued, was the way McGuinness symbolically represented the formation of the collective memory of Ulstermen at the Somme, which ironically becomes fixed into a myth to deepen sectarian division. Bolger depicts the process in which the ghost of Francis Ledwidge recreates the memory of his life to make it whole and accept his death. This is what every person does, it is suggested, by having all the ghosts of soldiers marching to their respective home with Ledwidge joining in. I concluded by saying that this is a new type of WWI play in which the audience commemorate the dead soldiers through the performance, the personal memories thereby becoming collective memory without losing their individuality.

## 1. World War I Literature and Drama in England and Ireland

In *The History Boys*, a popular play by Alan Bennett about a class of students preparing to get into Oxbridge, "WWI", a cue given by a brash young teacher elicits a cacophony of responses: "Trench warfare", "Barrenness of the strategy", "On both sides", "Stupidity of the generals", "Donkeys, sir", "Haig particularly"(24). It gives a clear picture of how this war has been given shape, etched in the mind of every schoolboy in England. A mythologized war, Samuel Hynes calls it, of innocence lost, with the old men sitting comfortably behind the lines and at home and sending the young for futile slaughter. It has also been called a literary war by Paul Fussell. It was the first time a large number of educated civilians had enlisted. Public school boys responded to recruiting calls to save small nations in 'a war to end all wars', filling the ranks of junior officers. WWI fell at a time when the Victorian ideal of self-improvement was at its peak, while classical education was still thriving, so that even ordinary soldiers—not war poets—Fussell tells us, could freely quote from the Oxford Book of English Verse in their daily conversation. The belief that drama was somehow left behind, in the rich field of war poems and novels, furthermore, has been vigorously refuted by Heinz Kosok, Andrew Maunder and Gordon Williams in recent years.<sup>1)</sup>

The Great War literature has been predominantly an English phenomenon, however, with relatively few soldiers writing in Ireland.<sup>2)</sup> Fran Brearton ascribes this dearth to the political implications that any representation of the war was bound to carry in Ireland. She says since the writer was automatically placed on either side of the nationalist/unionist divide, the majority who stood in between, like the men who enlisted with no clear political motive, or those who enlisted but supported Irish independence, abstained from expressing themselves. However, Brearton also emphasizes that the few that exist of Great War literature in Ireland encompass a wider "framework" of violence that preceded and succeeded WWI, providing us with a fresh insight.<sup>3)</sup>

Brearton's main concern was with poetry, but when we turn our eyes to drama, what characterizes the few Irish plays that were written about the war at the time may be that they tended to be small-scale pinpoint attacks compared to the kind of panoramic plays that existed in England, like Reginald Berkeley's *The White Chateau* (1925),<sup>4)</sup> or Noël Coward's *Cavalcade* (1931).<sup>5)</sup> The closest we come to the large-canvas treatment may be *The Silver Tassie* (1928) when O'Casey etched a caustically iconographic image of the soldiers' lot, wedged between the story of the returned soldier. Although many critics, including Kosok, name Shaw's *Heartbreak House* (written 1916-17) as a great WWI play, this play is more about the society that led up to the war than the war itself.<sup>6)</sup> Another play of Shaw's, the farcical *Augustus Does His Bit* (1917), and St. John Ervine's allegorical

*Progress* (1922) are bitterly satiric short pieces exposing the ineptitude and callousness of the warmongers: politicians in one and scientists in the other. The fact that there were so few all-out Great War plays then attests to a sense in Ireland that essentially this was not their war but a war fought on England's behalf, a sense finalized when the Easter Rising took over the foreground. It is only late in the century, when people began to recover from the "collective amnesia"<sup>7)</sup> of the Great War that plays which treated the war more holistically started to appear. And these plays were characterized by their concern with 'memory', what we remember and how,<sup>8)</sup> so much so that in two of them not only is the war presented as a memory but the process by which that memory is formed is explored, placing them in the category of what Astrid Erll calls "memory-reflexive"(137) works. They are Frank McGuinness's *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* (1985), and Dermot Bolger's *Walking the Road* (2007). But there is a difference in the type of memory we see created in each play. McGuinness's is a collective memory. The bonding of eight soldiers that enables them to 'march to the Somme' is transformed symbolically into a myth of Ulster deepening sectarianism to this day. Bolger's is a personal memory, a narrative of one's life that every person needs to recreate to make his life whole. The play tells this by portraying Francis Ledwidge (1887-1917), the poet who died at the third battle of Ypres, as one among all the other soldiers who lost their lives in WWI.

## 2. *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme*

McGuinness, in his interview with Helen Lojek, as good as professes that it was the stone monuments that first inspired him to write a WWI play (59). He says he experienced a "cultural shock" (58-59) when he moved to the North of Ireland and saw how war monuments dominated the city (64). It compelled him to delve deeper into the entrenched sectarianism that these stones emblemized for him. In the play he turns these stones into the collective memory of the Somme, which Pyper, the only survivor of the company of eight men, is enjoined to perpetuate, as we hear in Part 1. But it is a memory given "shape" by "invention". In subsequent parts of the play McGuinness proceeds to disassemble this collective memory once more into its original experience. As the scene slides back to the past in Part 2, titled "Initiation", we see eight sturdy young men of sundry backgrounds brought in one place, with all the rough edges of human interaction expected on such occasions realistically depicted. Then, in Part 3, McGuinness, with a masterly hand, as I will demonstrate, shows the genesis of a collective memory by means of an intricate orchestration of four separate dialogues, taking place between four pairs of men, in four locations, emblematically dispersed throughout Ulster.

Part 3 opens with a series of four relatively extended exchanges introducing the crisis

each pair is facing on leave from the war. The air is refreshing, just like the Shakespearean green world. Except for the church presumably in Armagh (56), the scenes are set outdoors: Boa Island on Lough Erne, a suspension bridge in Coleraine (Carrick-a-Rede), and the Field outside of Belfast. The parallelism in the situation between the first two pairs (Pyper/Craig, Roulston/Crawford) and between the latter two (Moore/Millen, McIlwaine/Anderson) is quickly established. The mid-western pairs (Pyper/Craig, Roulston/Crawford) embark on a journey of self-discovery and mutual acceptance; the northeastern pairs (Moore/Millen, McIlwaine/Anderson) are engaged in a more physical test of courage, but the way to overcome fear involves reconfirming their identity in their case also. One man in each pair is given a specific task to perform. Pyper is asked to explain, first the Boa carvings, then himself. Roulston is challenged to leave the church (physically), which should be easy enough if his faith were secure, and when he refuses, to fight. Likewise, Moore has to cross the bridge, McIlwaine to beat a lambeg drum. In the following sections we will first look at how the kind of relationship Pyper has with Craig corresponds with the one Roulston has with Crawford, and then do the same for the other two pairs.

### 3. Pyper/Craig, Roulston/Crawford

Pyper and Craig, the two most inscrutable figures in their comrades' eyes, complement each other. What's missing in one is filled by the other as in a jigsaw puzzle, locked into one being. If Pyper is the god of destruction as he claims to be ("I'm one of the gods, I bring destruction" 56), Craig is the Living God (45-46). Pyper felt he had been trapped by the ancestral culture; Craig actively served in Carson's campaign as a carrier of weapons. Pyper, a failed artist and the killer of a woman, has a death wish, but is destined to live, as Craig foresees. Craig has a wholesome wish to transform himself and survive in a new age of automobiles (beyond that of horses and blacksmiths) (22) but knows that he belongs to "a dying breed" and "is going to die" (57). He says "I wanted to change what I am. Instead I saved you, because of what I am. I want you to live" (57). The same complementary relation is found in the Roulston/Crawford pair. Roulston, a self-professed paragon of his Church, suffers from an insecurity, which he blames on God and the elders' lack of trust in him. Crawford, a half-Catholic and therefore defective to begin with in Ulstermen's eyes, has had to contend with that secret on his own without any help from God. This ironically allows him to be free, while Roulston has grown "stunted" in the belief of his own exclusivity.

What amounts to a confession of professional failure by Pyper and Roulston draws out a corresponding admission of weakness from their partners, culminating in a physical

union/confrontation.<sup>9)</sup> In the end, Pyper and Craig, the rotten and the wholesome, become one, their union apotheosized onto the figure of Ulster's androgynous gods, to be comprehended only through touch. Roulston, for his part, is dragged down from his pedestal, spread-eagled on the floor of his church, to make him realize that his God is the God held in common with fellow Ulstermen. In this way, personal trials and resolutions are subtly transformed and invested with tribal and mythical significance, as a step toward the genesis of a myth.

The correspondence between the two pairs is reflected on the level of language by having their dialogues intersect and converge, using certain words as common denominators. This is made possible because both their talks, which alternate (45-48) after the opening exposition of the four pairs, revolve around the idea of God/gods. For example, Pyper is asked "what" those stone carvings they see around them are (45). Roulston, for his part, has a question that he posed himself thrown back at him: "what" is it he felt. The answers in both cases point towards the same concept. The carvings are men and women, who are identified as gods—of Ulster, as they are later specified. Roulston feels, having survived the harrowing battles in France, he is the chosen, the "Son of God, Son of Man" (45-46). Neither Craig nor Crawford is satisfied with their partner's answer, however,<sup>10)</sup> so that Pyper and Roulston make the limitation of sight or language as their excuse, Pyper appealing furthermore to the power of touch.

Pyper: I could only explain myself when I could see, not just with my eyes, but  
with my hands.

Roulston: It's beyond language (46)

Both of them, then, refer to the significance of their location, the island and the church. The dialogues intermesh to such an extent that at one stage it falls on Roulston, not Craig, to answer Pyper, with Roulston echoing the essence of a question Pyper has just asked.

Pyper: Did you see the stone, David?

Roulston: Yes.

Pyper: Do you hear what he's saying?

Roulston: Yes.

Pyper: You're speaking to a stone. And this stone destroys whoever touches it.

Roulston: Do you not see who I am? I am Christ. Son of Man. Son of God. (47)

We see also that it is the image of the stone that connects what is supposed to be two separate exchanges. Pyper had turned his ancestors into a stone to rebel against, while Roulston has turned into one himself, immured in the shell of his godly pretensions. The stone is later to exact revenge on Pyper by compelling him to be its preacher, but for the moment, both pairs come to an understanding and union through 'touch' (sexual or

combative).

#### 4. Moore/Millen, McIlwaine/Anderson

Like the two pairs in the mid-west, Moore and Millen in Coleraine and McIlwaine and Anderson in Belfast go through parallel trials. But while the roots of the former pairs' traumas lay earlier in their private lives, with their explorations taking on a semi-theological aspect, the latter's problems are more collective, directly resulting from the atrocities they witnessed on battlefields. So what they need to do basically is to overcome their fear by staging a trial of nerve, either by crossing a famously precarious bridge or by staging a post-Orange Day meet in defiance of others' ridicule. The correspondence between these pairs could be physically expressed with Moore's horizontal movement across the bridge keeping pace with the up-and-down striking motion of McIlwaine's hands, just as there was a physical coming together of bodies in the other two pairs. But the correspondence is more pointed on the level of discourse. The dialogues in Coleraine and Belfast slip to and fro between them. For example, there is a following exchange.

Moore: I'm going to die. They're coming at me from all sides.

(McIlwaine beats louder on the lambeg.)

Anderson: Are you going to play it?

McIlwaine: What for?

Moore: Keep them away from me.

Anderson: Celebrate.

McIlwaine: What?

Millen: Keep them away from yourself.

Anderson: Us.

Moore: I can't keep on much longer.

(McIlwaine kicks the lambeg.)

Anderson: Why did you do that?

McIlwaine: Get it out of my sight.

Anderson: It's only a drum.

Millen: Close your eyes.

McIlwaine: Know what I'm thinking about?

Millen: Keep taking your breath.

McIlwaine: That boat.

Moore: I see nothing before me.

Anderson: The *Titanic*?

Millen: The end's in sight.

...

Moore: I'm drenched. (49)

When Millen and Moore in Coleraine are saying to each other that Moore has to keep “them” (hallucinations of guns and enemies) away from “me”/“yourself”, Anderson in Belfast is declaring that they should “celebrate” themselves, the word “us” directly following “yourself”. It is as if the two pairs are pulled together making “yourself” and “us” one and the same being. Next, when Moore is just about to give up, unable to step any further, as if on cue, Mcllwaine kicks the drum to get it “out of his sight”. Millen, in pursuance of the “sight” motif, tells his panic-stricken friend on the bridge to “close” his “eyes”. Moore thus says he sees “nothing”. But that darkness could well be the presage of their own “end”, symbolized by “the *Titanic*” that the Belfast man suddenly recalls. If that is not enough, Moore is “drenched”—with sweat naturally—but it could also sound ominously like drowning.

## 5. Pairs → Group → Tribe

In this way, the parallels between the Pyper/Craig and Roulston/Crawford pairs on the one hand, and between the Moore/Millen and Mcllwaine/Anderson pairs on the other, are unmistakable, but things go further to connect all four pairs, if in a somewhat more tenuous manner. For example, the ‘touch’ that we saw has played a significant part in uniting Pyper with Craig and Roulston with Crawford helps the latter two pairs to undergo their trial as well. Moore is made to feel Millen’s hands across the bridge (50), and Anderson takes Mcllwaine by the hand to beat the drum (52). More importantly, just as Craig and Crawford lay bare their vulnerability—by the revelations that Craig felt he belonged to a dying breed and that Crawford had Catholic blood in him—Millen and Anderson display their weakness in an even more alarming manner. Millen cannot walk the bridge. Anderson breaks down in mid-speech. Finally, all of them reach a resolution, or a point of stasis, before they march back to the front. It is the comradeship of eight that enables them to do so and meet their new challenge at the battlefield.<sup>11)</sup> This binding, first between two men, mirrored onto four, and finally fanning out to eight—is given expression by the coalescence of stichomythic exchanges into one concerted call to march at the end of Part 3.

Millen: Move.

Pyper: Coming with me?

Crawford: Come on.

Mcllwaine: Can you not sleep?

Craig: To the front.

Anderson: I can't sleep, Nat. No sleep.

Roulston: Out we go.

Millen: Move.

Moore: March. (61)

However, it is deeply ironic that a harmony so beautifully achieved through verbal magic, years later is to petrify into a ghostly dance inciting sectarian hatred. Although during the time of Part 3 "Pairing" the play's light is shed intensely on the eight individual soldiers standing on the brink of death, so that our thoughts do not extend over to the future, there is a fleeting but intriguing exchange between Pyper and Craig at the moment of their union that intimates what may come to pass.

Craig: Dance.

Pyper: The gods are watching.

Craig: The gods.

Pyper: Protestant gods.

Craig: Carson.

Pyper: King.

Craig: Ulster.

Pyper: Ulster.

Craig: Stone.

Pyper: Flesh.

Craig: Carson is asking you to dance in the temple of the Lord.

Pyper: Dance. (58)

A state of complete identification that made Craig say "I am you" (57) just before this enigmatically slips into an intonation of tribal themes. It is true that their union had been mediated through the stones of tribal gods, but this is rather an uneasy leap that makes us wonder whether McGuinness may be pointing at the element of arbitrariness in the way personal memories are transformed into collective memory and myths.

## 6. *Walking the Road*

*Walking the Road* was commissioned for the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 3<sup>rd</sup> battle of Ypres. It was produced by axis, Ballymun in association with In Flanders Fields museum in Ieper, to be performed at the Ieper Town Theatre. However, more important to Bolger personally perhaps was the fact that Ledwidge had been a guiding spirit in his own poetical career from the time he was a boy in Finglas and spent all his pocket money to buy Ledwidge's biography.<sup>12)</sup> Unlike *Observe the Sons of Ulster* with its dynamically panoramic use of the stage (four pairs of soldiers spread out in four regions of Ulster), *Walking the Road* is a

minimalist play with only two actors—the ghost of Francis Ledwidge and the Companion, who urges him to reconstruct his life story—on a small stage toned in the monochrome mud color with nothing but sandbags and sticks (in the 2007 production). When the stage is lighted, the audience does not know who the man on it is, or where and when. Neither does Frank himself. There are only fragments of sensations, as in the memories of a shell-shocked patient—and the realization that he is walking.<sup>13)</sup>

Frank: No Night should be this cold. No moon, the stars glinting like shrapnel.

And no sense of who I am. I just know that I am walking home. ...

Frank: This must have been a uniform once, if I could only remember what colour, what regiment, what reason we had to slaughter each other. (15)

Later it is revealed that this is the freezing 90-mile march to Salonika, Serbia, which left Ledwidge crippled with arthritis, sending him to a hospital in Egypt.<sup>14)</sup> Ledwidge's regiment had to fight with the extreme cold after the equally extreme heat of Gallipoli.

However, we will also learn that the cold and the dark with "the stars"<sup>15)</sup> are sensations that the sixteen-year-old Ledwidge experienced when he set out one night from Mr. Daly's grocery shop in Rathfarnham to his home in Slane (37). Frank's opening words, "No night should be this cold" "And no sense of who I am", will later like a refrain crosscut his reenactment of the walk through the streets of Dublin, Dodder, Tallaght, Templeogue, Lucan, Clondalkin, Saggart, etc. (41). In other words, two walks at different points of his life are made to merge into one long journey home, as often happen in memories or dreams. In the 2007 production at Tallagh Civic Theatre the actor playing Ledwidge marched in place a good deal of the time, his eyes fixed ahead, his bayonet on his shoulder, highlighting the act of walking in the limited space of the stage.

It could be said that the entire action of the play is comprised of walking, which becomes identified with the act of remembering to find salvation. But it is a backward journey, just as the nursery song "How Many Miles to Babylon",<sup>16)</sup> used to mark Frank's walking at three points in the play,<sup>17)</sup> is a song of returning as much as of going. In the song, the child sets out for Babylon during his sleep, being assured that he'd be safely back by the morning. Remembering for Frank takes the form of completing the lines he began ("No night..."), with the Companion as his taskmaster, just as Dr Rivers, who treated soldiers at Craiglockhart War Hospital for Nervous Disorders, did, as depicted in Pat Barker's *Regeneration*.<sup>18)</sup> The Companion helps him by anticipating the memory that is triggered in Frank's mind, often by casual word association, impersonating the characters/corpses required in the scene, questioning him, and continuing the narrative Frank began. She successively shifts roles to act the part of people who came in contact with Ledwidge at various stages of his life.

Bolger is not a psychologist and he would not have set out in his play to illustrate

what modern psychology says about memory, but the journey of remembering described in his play demonstrates an interesting correspondence with today's research and theory. First of all, we need to understand that experiences are encoded to become long-term memories selectively, depending on what we feel are important. This is done by using various sections of the brain, not just one. As a result, when we retrieve memories, we must do so actively, assembling the elements back from various parts. On top of that, the retrieval is done with relevance to the present, influenced by the values and goals one holds then and what has happened after the event or the experience remembered. The process inevitably becomes selective again, and memories keep changing every time we remember. What is relevant to *Walking the Road* is that our idea of the self is "grounded in" "autobiographical memories". We are creating a narrative connecting the past, present and the future, as it were. A traumatic experience disrupts this process by subjecting the person to a situation of helpless passivity and anonymity. When the brain encounters experiences that cannot be processed verbally, it may switch to "the more rapid processing" of sensory impressions—sound, sight, and smell—which may "intrude on the self in ... destructive ways" resulting in phobias and other disorders.<sup>19)</sup> In such cases, one treatment is "supported re-experiencing and reinterpretation" (Taylor 51-52). Remembering is linguistic in nature, because we perceive things through the medium of language. By telling memories to someone who listens, patients transform amorphous fragments into a narrative order. And this is what is figured as a road in the play. When patients thus gain control over their experience, it allows them to regain selfhood.

## 7. Childhood—'Rathfarnham-Slane Walk'—Later Life

At the beginning, Frank's remembering is a concatenation of sensory and emotional fragments related to war: a wounded soldier clutching at his leg (16), the devastating loss of reading glasses (18), the possibility of being shot if he falls asleep on watch (19), the photos of girls the soldiers passed round (19), a young German dying in a foxhole (20). Fear of pain and death with an admixture of pity permeates like a mist over all these slices of the war's landscape. The process of his coming to his full consciousness and regaining the subject "I" is gradual.<sup>20)</sup> He knows that he is walking but wonders where he started from (19). Clues to his identity are sought in immediate senses like the boyish stubble (20) and hardened labourer's hands (24). A sneaking suspicion that he may be Irish brings back the memory of road building. And it is the roadworks that provides a point of contact between the two worlds of war and of home, which are to crisscross Frank's mind. One is teatime at road repairs in Slane—a job Ledwidge got because it was better paying than a farmhand, once it was freed from the monopoly of local farmers. But

it has an uncanny echo of another roadworks and another pause for tea at which Ledwidge was blown up to bits by a stray shell. The repairing of duckboards and roads comprised a large part of the troops' work in the mud of Flanders. An older navy's words, "dry as death" in Ireland, brings back the memory of the second road so muddy that a "fat mouse" would have sunk, but Frank refuses to remember in full as he is not yet ready to accept his death.

Companion: When was that, Frank?

Frank: I don't want to remember.

Companion: We'll be here all night if you don't remember.

Frank: I want to remember building roads in Ireland...(22)

From this point on, instead of random tableaux of the battlefield, strings of old memories come back to him: farm work with Mother, his brother Patrick's coughs, the threat of eviction, a bonfire of Patrick's mattress, Mother mending at night—and finally Ellie, the inspiration for his poems. His idyllic remembrance, however, is shot through with the noise of guns, screams (27) and a shrill whistle (32-33) interrupting it spasmodically. Tar used for the road was smeared on a French girl (23). Ellie turns into a Cockney sergeant. Mustard gas, on the other hand, recalls the posh condiment he licked (35). Frank's memory alternates, weaving a tapestry of his life with images of the battlefields as the woof, across the warp of his days in Slane. And as in Ledwidge's poems, nature often serves as an ironic bridge between them. The blackthorn, woodcock, and kingfisher glide into mud and rats (32-33). A robin, the sunset, a blackbird, and horse chestnut seem to straddle the two worlds (35-36), jolting him back to a rat-gnawed hand. Eventually, a military march morphs into the 42-mile walk to Slane (37) the Companion had reminded him of earlier (27-28).

As previously stated, the walk, associated with cold and dark silence (27-28), is ritualistically reenacted midway in the play—the stage direction instructs the actor to "walk slowly around its [the stage's] extremities" (41-42). It is pivotal in the play because, just like the boy trekking to Babylon in the nursery song "There and back again" (42), Frank needs to retrace his life so that he can return home to find salvation, piecing his memories together into one narrative. After this ritual walk, the next stage of his "journey through life" (43) moves swiftly: Lord Dunsany's patronage, enlistment, a succession of battlefronts, his first published book. As Frank complained earlier that the Companion was "dragging me through time" (23), he is now physically made to "spin" with the Companion "circling him" (43).

The flight of a decade comes to a halt, however, before a final hurdle: he cannot remember what happened when he was building a road in Ypres (56). To complete his life narrative, it is essential that Frank acknowledge the fact that he is dead. One step in

doing so is for Frank to identify with all the other soldiers who died.<sup>21)</sup> And this is also the way Bolger chose to pay tribute to the public memory, commemorating the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the battle of Ypres. So once again, Frank recreates the walk to Slane (59-64), this time joined by ghosts of soldiers hailing from the towns and villages along the way from Rathfarnham through Templeogue, Lucan, Tallaght, Clondalkin, etc.<sup>22)</sup> The destination (Slane), which in his previous reenactment of the walk he stopped short of reaching, is now close at hand at last.

Bolger also employs several other means to show that Frank's remembrance has come full circle—or nearly so. He repeats the opening lines as if to complete them finally (15, 16-17, 65), but not fully, just yet. He had reached only as far as Finglas (Bolger's home). What is left for him to do next, is to paint a kaleidoscopic picture of his life after 'the Rathfarnham-Slane walk' to the Companion, now turned into Frank's younger self, and put his military career into a coherent orderly account, which he concludes with a stamp of affirmation: it was worth it, because of "the magic" of poetry (66).

Earlier in the play, Frank's fear of Joe's not being able to see him had been diverted by a quick switching of the scene to the day Frank was invited to Dunsany's dinner, so that Joe could say that he could not recognize his primed-up brother (42). Now at the end of his journey, at long last, Frank admits that Joe cannot see him because he is a ghost (68) and completes the final road-building scene at Ypres, his walk merging into the earliest memory of his walk back home from the fields as a boy in Slane.

## 8. Conclusion

Memories cannot be considered apart from the person doing the remembering. And theatre, by its nature, is a form of art particularly suited to bringing the past into view alongside the person doing the remembering: as witness *The Glass Menagerie*, *Dancing at Lughnasa*, or *Da* to name but a few. The narrator can stand on the side of the stage relating his memory, joining in the scene when the past is dramatized, and coming out of it to comment directly to the audience.<sup>23)</sup> What distinguishes the two WWI plays discussed here, however, is that both McGuinness and Bolger have shown, not just the the past as remembered but memories in the making. In this sense, the two plays are in tune with the contemporary understanding of memory as an act and a process.<sup>24)</sup> It is said that Ireland is a nation of 'active' remembering, where the past is not regarded as something over and done with, but very much alive in the present—so much so that commemorations can cause controversies and former President Mary Robinson is quoted as saying "remembering has become a 'moral act'" (Pine 3).<sup>25)</sup> In addition, it may be that Ireland is better situated to produce 'memory-reflexive' plays about the First World War

than England, where people have a strong “folk memory of WWI” (Boyce 190).<sup>26)</sup> Ireland does not have that—at least not on its own, or not yet, aside from what had been imported from Britain. And where there is any, as Boyce amply illustrates, the Irish collective memories of the war conspicuously lack consensus. Consequently, Irish writers may feel freer to attempt constructing a WWI memory from scratch without having to pay heed to prior configurations, or conversely, feel a compulsion to challenge them.

In McGuinness’s and Bolger’s plays, arguably, the spotlight is on the protagonist’s act of remembering more than the past itself. For example, in *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* Pyper is forced to remember, notwithstanding his resistance, thereby focusing our attention on his remembering. The question is how. Memory has been likened to literature in that both use common techniques to condense and order myriad phases of reality into patterns which are meaningful and therefore retainable.<sup>27)</sup> We perceive and experience things according to “schemata”<sup>28)</sup> that we acquire through our social and cultural backgrounds—social norms, cognitive paradigms, the way a person thinks and perceives. We do likewise when we retrieve memories.<sup>29)</sup> Since not everything can be remembered, it is economical to have those “slots” so that things can fit into the net of related memories and the person’s world view. The shape Bolger uses to figure memory is a road, because his play is based on the idea that a person’s life is made whole when a consistent narrative is made of his life. The image is repeated again and again throughout the play as Frank attempts to reach its destination, baulking midway each time, until he finally succeeds. In a Möbius-like loop, moreover, the end turns out to be the starting point of his life narrative. McGuinness’s method is more abstract and symbolic, involving linguistic, spatial and performative coordination, since it is a collective memory he is dealing with, which would require a more complicated process of combining multiple individual memories. Psychologists have found that in ‘conversational remembering’, where a group of people remember together, details become “adjusted according to criteria of relevance specific to the group” (Erll 89). The process through which a myth is born as McGuinness portrayed it can be said to be similar. Four pairs of soldiers, each faced with a crisis of its own, come together in the end, their differences smoothed out, marching towards the Somme and giving birth to one collective Unionist memory of WWI.

As a final point, just as individuals’ memories are modulated by everything that intervenes between the time of the event and the time of its retrieval, and the change in viewpoints,<sup>30)</sup> *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching towards the Somme* and *Walking the Road* are products of its time. McGuinness wrote in the midst of the Troubles, Bolger at the multicultural turn-of-the-century when there was a greater respect for the rights of individuals and minorities. The WWI narrative keeps changing, being “re-presented” (43), as

Connerton says, because the person who remembers, both the writer and the reader, changes. Memory is not a monolithic mirror of the past. Now that WWI has receded further and further back with the last survivor having died, the focus has moved from the representation of the soldiers' suffering to the question of how we keep their legacy.

On top of that, Neumann insists, literature has a social function and can change the way people remember. McGuinness's play can make people think whether the collective memory of bonding in the war, as redemptive and beautiful as it may have been to the soldiers themselves, should be used to foster sectarian hatred. Bolger's, we can say, is a new type of WWI play, not even included in Kosok's categories. It does not simply represent, interpret, empathize with or use the war as an analogy for a contemporary situation, but is in itself an act of atonement, call it a commemorative play but in a spiritual and active, almost religious, sense. Here the play's performance is an act of remembering, which in turn is an act of redemption. We, together with the soul of Francis Ledwidge, remember the soldiers who are our fathers, grandfathers and great-grandfathers,<sup>31)</sup> as they march towards each one's home. In *Walking the Road* individual memories become a collective memory for the audience without erasing the individuality of each with its unique story.<sup>32)</sup>

### Notes

- 1) It had always been acknowledged that a handful of plays not only became a huge popular success but played a big role in forming the public perception of the war, like R. C. Sherriff's *Journey's End* (1928) and Joan Littlewood and Theatre Workshop's *Oh What a Lovely War* (1963). However, the critics now are calling attention to lesser-known plays of war including pageants, revues, comic sketches and musicals. Kosok says that from the 70s to 90s there is "hardly a year without" a play about WWI. His collection of 200-plus plays may be overblown by the inclusion of the Easter Rising plays, but shows his concern for today's academic trend towards discussing the Irish struggle for independence in the wider context of WWI. Melodramas with villainous German spies, recruiting plays taking the moral high ground, and realistic social plays on women waiting at home, touching on the question of remarriage and shortage of men, are representative wartime plays collected by Maunder.
- 2) Those who did go to war include Francis Ledwidge, Thomas Kettle, Thomas MacGreevy, Patrick MacGill, Liam O'Flaherty, St. John Ervine, Lord Dunsany and George Fitzmaurice. Fitzmaurice, who may have been shell-shocked, was emphatically silent on his wartime experience. He may have been forced to do so in the climate of the time, as Fiona Brennan speculates. This is due to the displacement of WWI by the struggle for independence as the nation's primary preoccupation, but Tjebbe Westendorp says the Great War became a very popular subject for poetry after 1968.

- 3) Terry Phillips refutes the political amnesia view initiated, she says, by Declan Kiberd, arguing that it was the emotional pain resulting from multiple wars that held people back from expressing themselves.
- 4) *The White Château* is composed of disparate scenes from the beginning of the war to its aftermath, all set in the titular Château—based on the Château of Hooge destroyed in the Second Battle of Ypres. But these are subsumed under a bird's eye view of the "Spirit" of the Château. It was commissioned by the BBC for the 1925 Armistice Night gaining the distinction of the first radio drama to be broadcast. Berkeley was a brigade-major in the Rifle Brigade of the Fourth Army who was awarded the Military Cross in 1916.
- 5) *Cavalcade* starts with the Boer war from which the father returns in triumph. But his two sons lose their lives on the Titanic and on the Western front, respectively. Throughout this procession of patriotic events, the mother is consistent in her antipathy towards war. Coward served in the Artists Brigade for seven months before he was discharged due to consumption.
- 6) The play is about a group of upper-class people gathered at a country house.
- 7) Kevin Myers, for one, had long critiqued this.
- 8) Sharon Ouditt refers to the "fine-de-siècle preoccupation with memory and identity", which led the writers to be more aware of "the shortcomings of memory, the lack of knowledge, the imperfect nature of interpretation and the need to build monuments, literal or literary, as an objective correlative of loss" (246). Christopher Collins and Mary Caulfield say of Ireland in particular that "much of contemporary theatre is currently engaged with citizenship and collective memory that confronts history with memory" (2).
- 9) Pyper and Roulston are similar in that they have both fallen into a stony death-like state. In helping their more vulnerable partners, Craig and Crawford achieve their wholeness in return. Having been a very natural man of instinct, Craig is attracted to Pyper's intellectual sophistication, so he importunes Pyper with questions. By listening to Pyper's confession he may be said to have lost his innocence and become tainted with a touch of death, which makes him whole. The gods are seen to encompass both life and death here. Craig needs to be accepted just as he is, half Catholic and half Protestant, without concealment, and be beaten as a Fenian to feel like a whole man.
- 10) Craig "That's not what I was asking"/ Crawford "Explain what you're saying exactly." /Craig "That's no answer" /Crawford "I don't want your preaching." (46)
- 11) This group bonding is more explicitly summed up in a short character sketch by Moore (53) and by McIlwaine (51) though the latter is a darker picture in varying degrees of madness. Crawford does a roll call ending with "They're all one, aren't they?" (55).
- 12) Bolger's sense of identification with the Slane poet is intense. He says on his homepage that he "wanted his ghost to haunt me, skeletal fingers to touch my shoulder" (1) and even made the "pilgrimage" trekking the 30 (according to Curtaigne but Bolger says 42)

miles from Rathfarnham to Slane (Ledwidge 8). Curtayne notes that this road was “one of the straightest in Ireland” built for the Prince of Wales (later George IV) with “granite triangular stones” to mark the miles (30). One was found near Bolger’s home in Finglas.

- 13) Curiously, two major Irish novels of the war, Jennifer Johnston’s *How Many Miles to Babylon?* (1974) and Sebastian Barry’s *A Long Long Journey* (2005) both capture WWI in terms of a journey. Soldiers were always on the march during their training and after they landed on the Continent. And for many Irishmen the war was likely to have been their first travel abroad. So the march must have given them the feeling of the distance away from home, as typified in the song “A Long Way from Tipperary”; a music hall song of 1912 which had nothing to do with WWI but came to be identified with it.
- 14) The adventures at Gallipoli, with its heat, thirst, valiant Turks firing from the vantage point, Francis’s rescue of his friend, camouflaged withdrawal, all that was described with vibrant energy in Curtayne’s book has been skipped over to start with the cold of Serbia, which Bolger might have chosen because it suits the desolation and loneliness of the limbo better, and because of the long march.
- 15) The stars are important. As Fussell has shown, the sky being the only thing visible from the dugouts, its magnificence at the stand-to at dawn and dusk are familiar features of the soldiers’ writing.
- 16) It may be that, just as McGuinness had been inspired by *How Many Miles to Babylon?* to write his play (Boyce 207), Bolger got the idea from her novel. In Johnston’s novel, when the central character, Alec, leaves home to join the army, this song occurs to him.
- 17) It appears elliptically at first when his boyhood memory stops and that of the trenches begins, with the sergeant yelling at Frank to come out of a copse: “How many miles is it home?” (32). It occurs again more fully at the end of his reenactment of the legendary walk:  
Frank (16 year old): Will I be there by daybreak?  
Companion: There and back again, Sir. (42)  
Finally, we hear it when Frank is prompted by the Companion to remember the walk as a way to achieve salvation and take flight with the rest of the soldiers’ souls.  
Companion: “Think of one night, Frank. One night when you knew you were truly walking home.”  
...  
Frank: “Will I be there by daybreak?”  
Companion: “We’ll all be there by daylight. There and back again, Sir.” (59)
- 18) References to “amnesia” (20) and “hypnosis” (23) lead us to assume that Bolger most probably had read this widely popular novel.
- 19) Among the characteristics of traumatic memory that Brison lists are “fleeting (disconnected) images”, “the destruction of the sense of self” and the blurring of “the mind-body distinction” (41). Marita Sturken names other symptoms such as “hyperarousal”, “intrusion”, and “constriction” (235). Bal categorizes traumatic memory as

the third type of memory after “unreflective” (procedural) memory and “narrative” (episodic) memory, noting that traumatic memories remain “outside” the subject and not placed within the context of social structure (viii-x).

- 20) After he remembers Salonika and Ireland, Frank becomes sufficiently self-possessed to wonder who the Companion beside him is (19, 23) and begins to address him (in the role of his brother Joe). At first he speaks briefly, “They’re neighbours, Joe” (26), “Do Zulus ride horses, Joe?” (28), in between his narration and self-questionings. He then plunges headlong into a dialogue when he first shows his poem to Joe, actively engaging with the scene that is being recreated (30-32). This, however, is followed by moments of relapse, when he wavers, reflecting on the state of his recollection: “I could have sworn that I knew who I was a moment ago...I know where I am now” (32). This may have happened because his memory has turned to Ellie, who forsook him.
- 21) The reason why it is important for Frank to walk together with other soldiers may be sought in the current understanding of memory construction. As Ernst Van Alphen explains, since we experience through language, which is a medium shared with others, all experience and memory by their nature are collective at the same time as they are individual (37).
- 22) Bolger honors the dead by using the real names of soldiers who came from places along the road between Rathfarnham and Slane, as well as Germans, the Dutch, Austrians and soldiers of other nationalities. He even finds a way to include Thomas McDonagh and Willie Pearse “walking towards St. Edna’s in Rathfarnham” (but not Padraic, perhaps to avoid politicizing the play) and Tom Kettle to St. Margaret’s, Finglas. This form of commemoration may have become a trend today. Tom Phelan’s *The Canal Bridge* (2005) is dedicated to the veterans of WWI in his hometown with all their names listed.
- 23) *Da* by Hugh Leonard is a little different from the other two in that there is an interaction between the ghosts and the person who is remembering. As the son rummages through the family memorabilia, the ghosts of his parents appear on the stage to give body to his memories. But they also communicate with the present son the way he imagines they would have responded.
- Among the WWI plays that use ghosts are Vernon Sylvaine’s *The Road of Poplars* (1930) and Noël Coward’s *Post-Mortem* (1931). In the former the ghosts of marching soldiers appear at the door of an estaminet to take away a guilt-stricken former officer who ordered a mistaken attack during the war. Coward wrote his play, he says, aboard a ship in a fury after acting in *Journey’s End*. In his play a soldier lies dying on a stretcher and sees visions of the society thirteen years later, to which he returns as a ghost. This kind of time-slip with two or more different planes of time may be said to be characteristic of the 1930s when J.B. Priestley experimented with time. More recently, ghosts are frequently war poets, as in Stephen MacDonald’s *Not About Heroes* (first produced 1982, published 1987) and Nick Dear’s *The Dark Earth and the Light Sky* (2012).
- 24) *Acts of Memory* is a collection of articles which see “cultural recall” as “something you

actually perform". It is a "process of linking" "the past to the present and the future", Mieke Bal says (vi). In discussing ways to recover from traumas, Susan Brison uses Pierre Janet's words, "Memory is an action" as her epigram (39).

- 25) As Edna Longley puts it Ireland is in "continuum" with the present, as opposed to England, which sees "the past as mortality" (88). Ian MacBride states, "In Ireland, perhaps more than in other cultures, collective groups have thus expressed their values and assumptions through their representations of the past...Not content merely to remind us of ancient quarrels, then, Irish anniversaries have an uncanny way of making history themselves" (3-4). Emilie Pine, furthermore, says that this tendency has increased "Over the last thirty years, Irish remembrance culture has opened up our recent history so that audiences, readers and viewers are now more present in the past and vice versa—than ever before."(2)
- 26) D.G. Boyce says, for example, that the creators of *Blackadder* [a satirical TV programme] "could take much for granted" (190), like the image of inept generals that the audience are expected to share—as the 'History Boys' certainly did.
- 27) In Frederic C. Bartlett's experiments "The participants recalled the story [given earlier] according to their culturally shaped ideas about what 'good' stories should be like" (83). He concluded from this that "memory is shaped by distortions—leveling, accentuation, assimilation" (Erl 83).
- 28) Paul Connerton says, "literal recall is very rare and unimportant, remembering being not a matter of reproduction but of construction; it is the construction of a 'schema', a coding, which enables us to distinguish and, therefore, to recall." (27) Astrid Erll defines schemata as "patterns and structure of knowledge on the basis of which presuppositions regarding specific objects, people and situations as well as regarding the nature of their relationship can be made." (83)
- 29) Erll refers to these two functions of perceiving and retrieving as "prospective" and "retrospective" (90).
- 30) For example, a revival of WWI literature in the late 60s, Adrian Barlow explains, was caused in part by the peace movements against nuclear armament and Vietnam because it best represented the futility and pity of war (262).
- 31) To bring them alive, Bolger poignantly reminds the audience of the ties of blood that runs through them.  
"I am the unremembered great uncle whose features you inherit."  
"I live on in my laugh that only you possess."(60)
- 32) It was Halbwachs, who first argued the collective memory and the individual memory are unthinkable without each other. (Erll 16)

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