



Painting-Whitewashing: Liminal Memories of the Martyr in the Mural Literature of Ireland

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Abstract

Walking along the streets of Ireland, one witnesses the bright, coloured pictures along the walls. These wall murals of Belfast and Dublin command spaces on both sides of the border separating Ireland. This paper will focus on the murals presenting the martyrs of Ireland with varied religious and political sympathies and the tropes of constructivist memories which emblemize their present existence. In the twenty-first century these are being whitewashed at various sites. By probing the reasons for it, this study will traverse the methodological trajectory from ‘prememory’ to ‘postmemory’ and engage with the presentation of dead heroes of wartime conflict in times of peace. From being sites of memorialization, the murals have become sites of grief tourism. In the process the dissemination of the martyr and the memory has acquired different dimensions. The heroic martyr is transforming into the pseudo-martyr who uses the mural sites for its specific claims. Reading the narratives of mural art will enable us to seek a mode in visual literature with which we may understand the nuances of this transformation. Depiction in murals mostly makes overt propagandist claims and their whitewashing make a case of bold erasure. Both have been appropriated for touristic purposes like ‘terror tours’ and ‘elegiac mementos’. This study will engage with the use and consequences of memory and its liminal spaces in the projection of the spectacle of the martyr as the new god-man or the paper-tiger or the accidental hero, and how these narratives constantly widen their frame to include the claims of both poetry and propaganda and move beyond it.

Keywords: murals, martyr, memory, liminality, grief tourism

Liminal Existence of the Martyr in Murals

This paper locates liminality in that space between painting and painting over. Murals in Ireland have long been subject to conscious fading, bold erasure, outright vandalism and replacement replicas. It is not confined to murals belonging to either the loyalist or republican side, situated either in Belfast or Dublin, or showcasing images of peace or war. In fact the murals have always proudly worn propaganda of both peace and war on its surface. The huge installation, the walled barrier and the fence along a road have become witness to sites of memorialization. The culture of martyrdom has occupied special place in memory studies, especially in Ireland. Richard Kearneyⁱ comments on the Irish national psyche rooted in the mythological cult of sacrifice, which has deep overtones of

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the Judeo-Christian tradition of martyrdom, working on ambiguities of camouflaged power – an expression of will and desire for power rather than an annihilation of it. A preponderance of this will and power is demonstrated in the martyrs of Christian faith, loyalist and republican martyrs, the Celtic warriors, the hunger strikers, the H-block political prisoners, the gunmen, martyrs to social causes, solidarity murals of martyrs from other conflict zones like Palestine, all of whom are presented as various prototypes of the martyr complex. Murals which portray martyrs thus provide a clear understanding of the dissemination of the culture of martyrdom in modern-day Ireland and its construction of memory as unravelled in the palimpsest of the layers of painted and painted over murals. For, the martyr in a mural receives adulation, as spectacle, on which the very culture of martyrology thrives. Alan Ford, in tracing the beginnings of martyrdom in early modern Ireland writes that early Irish Christians had to invent new forms of non-lethal martyrdom to compensate for the embarrassing shortage of deaths due to religious persecution. One form was the ritual recurrence through popular cults as tombs and murals became sites of pilgrimage. In the tomb the hero lay dead; in the mural he was resurrected anew as the spectacle of the new god-man. Incubated memories are subject to propagandist displays – not just in glorified depiction but equally overt disappearance. The murals portraying martyrs of successive eras present paradigm shifts in the recognition of martyrdom and memory as a liminal site in negotiating between them.

The depiction of martyrs in murals has given space to a resurgent display of heroic and contested martyrdom. Like the murals, the status of the martyrs depicted therein are contested, therefore both become subject to the dynamics of liminal memory. This paper presents liminality as a characteristic Irish condition, prevalent till date with its imposed borders of the North and South and walled communities between Loyalists and Republicans; the murals more clearly depicting it in the politics of erasure and whitewashing.

Erasure: Creation of a New Space

In discussing Northern Irish murals as “unfinished artefacts”, Stefan Solleder explains that erasure means, first, the complete removal with white or brick-coloured paint without a new mural in its stead or, second, the destruction of a mural through redevelopment processesⁱⁱ. Both have numerous implications. The white surface itself is a site demonstrating an affective lack, evoking both prememory of an event which had been depicted, the



postmemory of that event which has been erased, and the living memory enmeshed between the surfaces of both. Emma Grey has discussed the white walls, in Eoghan McTigue’s photography exhibition of painted-over murals, as a space of fluid referents to “suggest a development in the memorialisation process: a move from a supposedly unalterable historical iconography to an endeavour to erase this particular memory to make way for the future.”ⁱⁱⁱ The iconography for the martyrs is not only the deployment of the language of the sacrificial economy but iconic images of sacralisation, which are now being subject to erasure though whitewashing or re-appropriation through means of commodity culture. Aaron Kelly, in an essay entitled ‘Walled Communities’, accompanying this exhibition’s catalogue writes that the icon becomes “divested of its original religious ideological import as the manifestation of a sacral presence that assumes a seamless receptive community”^{iv}. Erasure then situates its meaning in the cleavage created with the denouncement of this seamlessness, moving beyond the containment of ‘prememory’ and ‘postmemory’.^v

Martyrs in Mural Literature

CAIN^{vi} lists two murals of the martyr Robert Emmet – still existing and painted over. A portrait of Robert Emmet Commemoration has been painted over and the other with Emmet justifying the unsuccessful rebellion in court remains, along with the epigraph: “Let no man write my epitaph until my country takes her place among the nations of the world” (Figure 1).



Figure 1: A mural with four panels painted to celebrate the bicentenary of Robert Emmet at Flax Street, Ardoyne, Belfast.^{vii}

An Ulster Freedom Force fighter is a British soldier imaged in a mural as a trooper, the cover figure of the album released by the heavy metal band *The Iron Maiden*. It wields a rifle, which has been painted over. Solleder notes that when painted over the Trooper image with its skull and a menacing sense of the macabre remained intact: ‘it

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is still macabre that one of the skulls on this paramilitary mural is surfacing again^{viii}. Murals dedicated to the IRA hunger strike martyrs like Bobby Sands tell a story of apostolic sacrifice and suffering (Figure 2),



Figure 2: A mural at Beechmount Avenue, Falls, Belfast, 1981 depicting apostolic suffering.^{ix}

They have been similarly erased, or even paint-bombed by rival paramilitary groups. This list denies the basic claim made by various ‘clean-up’ campaigns like the one undertaken by the Belfast City Council. As another symbolic milestone in the peace process, they announced an agreement to remove ten murals with violent imagery from loyalist areas of the city. The initiative is to replace them with images that relate to the area’s cultural and industrial heritage. The enlisted murals do not only contain violent images or belong to a specific area or are now less susceptible to the process of commodification.

Incorporation - Deletion

For one, ‘Next to the re-imaged Ardoyne murals, there are a number that celebrate nationalist views of Irish history or commemorate IRA volunteers killed during the war’^x. Paramilitary commemoration murals like the Iron Maiden trooper prototype is still found at various sites. Tony Crowley comments that the re-imagining communities programme has refused to acknowledge that such memorials and emblems represent the aspirations of the community^{xi}. When the memory of the martyr is constructed and refurbished it glorifies a set of aspirations. We must not attempt a de-sacralisation only in the name of debunking violence. It continues to exist. The erasures make a far greater point. In an ‘in-between’ site striding the displayed present and the erased past lies the thresholds of an existential reality. Crowley ends his article citing Yeats’ lines from the ‘Sixteen Dead Men’ who are loitering about to witness ‘poverty, dispossession and political disappointment of the years to come’. The

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modern-day martyr accommodates his locale amidst it. Despite the banal reality which has apparently ousted any scope for glorious heroic martyrdom, traces of the martyr's spectacle become available for various uses.

Forgetting as Remembrance

Located on walls which have a long history of internally dividing communities, the murals as artwork defies the nature of the very construct on which it situates itself. With erasure it makes this claim more pointedly. Grey cites from McCormick and Jarman's essay 'Death of a Mural' about a mural's "a need for permanence in the certainty of the past, has been replaced by a more fluid and transitory social memory, within which schema previous imagery is removed and replaced without comment"^{xii}. This "fluid and transitory social memory" is to be situated in the liminal space of erasure, whose meaning is always perceived with reference to the residue. If the martyr Robert Emmet is both existent and non-existent in terms of the mural signifier, then the fate of the martyr undergoes some revision. Guy Beiner argues that forgetting is/was a part and parcel of remembrance. He provides examples of ways William Orr, the proto-martyr of Irish republicanism was remembered through the covert means of prememory, which were shaped by oblivion. In the failed rising of Emmet as a martyr to the cause of Irish independence, Beiner finds Orr's memory (of forgetting) working as a 'mnemonic template'^{xiii}. The erased mural works as a similar template of a memorial of forgetting. Inscribed here, the figure of the martyr represents both desire and its lack simultaneously. Sean O'Casey's *The Shadow of a Gunman* focuses on martyr Robert Emmet as one who would have lived if given a chance. Our society encounters more pseudo-martyrs than martyrs - people who do not wish to sacrifice themselves. The erasure of the martyr's transcription calls out for the creation of this 'other' space, not of death but of living. Thereby the martyrs become not false heroes but ones who dramatize the need of our society to also travel along the martyr's path of salvation. What is sought from the City Council is not a hasty removal of all emblems of divisiveness but an unearthing of its facets and presenting them up-front.

Erased Traces of Conflict and Packaged Remains

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For the conflation of violence and religious persecution is regaining a new foothold in the modern world, and the rhetoric of martyrdom helps us to understand its resurgence. The menacing trooper wielding a gun still exists but less as a hero of religious fervour and apostolic suffering, and more as the bandwagon of pop counter-culture. It underlines that an internalisation of the revolutionary and violent incarnations of martyrdom has taken place in a culture which has foregone the martyr's ability of sacrificial economy and has given in to a propagandist branding of self-annihilation. Maybe that is why the skull in the trooper mural is still the predominant trace (Figure 3).



Figure 3: A mural of Iron Maiden's 'Eddie' figure carrying UDA flag and sword, which has been painted over, though similar ones continue to exist.^{xiv}

Furthermore Kathryn Conrad probes the perpetuation of violence in the reproduction and dissemination of such images. Though she considers photography of these murals similar to the surveillance culture which is emblemized in these images, which in turn become a counterculture that returns that violent gaze^{xv}; the commodities which then utilize these tropes are equally implicated by her – the mural martyrs represented in refrigerator magnets (Figure 4).



Figure 4: The Crown, loyalist and republican martyrs in a decorative, commodifiable Belfast.^{xvi}

The contestation between popular demand and sectarian perpetuation is often elided as postmemory contests with prememory. Susan Sontag had cited a *New York Times* feature ‘Postcards of Belfast Strife Are Best-Sellers There’

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in her seminal work *On Photography*. As business for mementos and souvenirs swell there is also a sincere attempt by the new generation to retain memories of the old and not obliterate them. Erasure begins the way towards this obliteration but its traces withhold assent. If the violence has deeply embedded itself in our collective psyche then its confrontation rather than removal should be sought.

Paint-bombed

Paint-bombing by rival groups have defaced numerous murals. However this instance of conflicting memories has a greater nuance in Northern Ireland. A walled installation of splashed surface inscribes the fate of any revolution today. The dripping paint against the remnant of emblems of struggle creates new contours. Against the larger history of the Easter Rising which failed to bring about complete independence, the non-freedom of half of Ireland resounds till date. Hence the dripping downward curves have to be regenerated with its distinct dimensional beauty (Figure 5).



Figure 5: A paint-bombed mural^{xvii}

An art should emanate from the very loss of the artwork, beauty perceived from assault. The rhetoric of the self-sacrificial economy should not be nostalgically resurrected for devious ends of memorialization but reciprocate the need to attain greater dignity. One small instance of a painted over mural is one containing a poem by Bobby Sands in Gaelic (Figure 6).

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Figure 6: The mural containing the poem by poet and revolutionary, Bobby Sands.^{xviii}

Political struggle has forged its path through the means of language, and it's de-recognition is to club all protests as mere anti-establishment defiance. The language of the paint and the literature in the painting makes martyrdom a potent tool of representation. Given broad claims of solidarity such singular claims to literary, scripted memory is marked with solitude and erasure.

Murals: Solidarity-Solitude

In an era of global jihad, through its murals and graffiti, Ireland has expressed solidarity with other groups. Figure 7 depicts a graffiti of 'Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades' and 'PLO, BRY, ETA, IRA'.



Figure 7: A Solidarity Mural.^{xix}

It is a solidarity graffiti linking the IRA and BRY (Bogside Republican Youth) with other international groupings. The 'Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades' is an armed Palestinian group linked to the late Yasser Arafat's Fatah movement. Jie-Hyun Lim notes a shift 'from the heroic martyrdom to innocent victimhood'^{xx} with the emergence of the global public sphere which has fed a nationalism resting on the memory of collective suffering. Global accountability should not only emanate from transnational identification but also from honesty to our own solitary self. It is not about removing the images from the walls but removing the walls from the people's minds. It is only

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by learning about the conflict that one can hope to be a part of its solution. If the painted murals have told one story, the erased murals another, a new story is waiting to be told as part of its interface. (Figure 8)



Figure 8: A mural with the slogan ‘Saoirse—Free the Prisoners’.^{xxi}

Amidst a greater dilapidation the martyr’s cry for freedom and non-conformism should be given a greater ground. In painting, in whitewashing, the rallying cry of art is to create a new agency. It comes with defiance and not denial. This paper just begins to make that attempt.

Notes

ⁱ Richard Kearney, *Post Nationalist Ireland: Politics, Literature, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1997).

ⁱⁱ Stefan Solleder, ‘Unfinished Artefacts: The Case of Northern Irish Murals,’ *Continent*, issue 5.1 (2016). Accessed at <http://www.continentcontinent.cc/index.php/continent/article/view/230> on November 4, 2016.

ⁱⁱⁱ Emma Grey, ‘The Need for Whitewash and Disinfectant’: Eoghan McTigue’s *All Over Again*,’ *Review of Irish Studies in Europe* 1.1 (2016): 62. Accessed at <http://www.imageandnarrative.be/index.php/rise/article/view/1252/1006> on October 30, 2016.

^{iv} Aaron Kelly, ‘Walled Communities’, in Eoghan McTigue, *All Over Again* (Belfast: Belfast Exposed Photography, 2004). Cited in an excerpt from Kathryn Conrad, ‘Widening the Frame: The Politics of Murals Photography in Northern Ireland,’ (2007). Accessed at http://www.academia.edu/685971/Widening_the_Frame_The_Politics_of_Murals_Photos_in_Northern_Ireland on October 5, 2016.

^v These two terms have been defined by Guy Beiner in ‘Probing the boundaries of Irish memory: from postmemory to prememory and back,’ *Irish Historical Studies*, vol. 39, Issue 154 (Nov 2014): 305. “Premember here refers to the anticipations and expectations in advance of the events, and postmemory refers to their subsequent anxieties and angst over the changing nature of memory.” In the murals a repetition of depicted past events constitute a reconstruction and regeneration. Thus the proposed line of break between biographical and intergenerational memory as proposed by Marianne Hirsch does not operate as memory structures the delineation of history in the murals and not only otherwise.

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- ^{vi} The CAIN (Conflict Archive on the INternet) Web site contains information and source material on 'the Troubles' and politics in Northern Ireland from 1968 to the present. There is also some material on society in the region. CAIN is located in Ulster University.
- ^{vii} Accessed from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick/photos/no1952.htm#photo> on November 1, 2016.
- ^{viii} Solleder, 'Unfinished Artefacts'.
- ^{ix} Tony Crowley, 'The Art of Memory: The Murals of Northern Ireland and the Management of History,' *Field Day Review* 7 (2011): 32. Accessed from http://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1027&context=scripps_fac_pub on October 25, 2016.
- ^x Crowley, 28.
- ^{xi} Crowley, 30
- ^{xii} Jonathan McCormick and Neil Jarman, 'Death of a Mural', *Journal of Material Culture* 10.1 (2005): 52. Cited in Emma Grey, 'The Need for Whitewash and Disinfectant', 65.
- ^{xiii} Guy Beiner, 'Forgetting to Remember Orr: Death and Ambiguous Remembrance in Modern Ireland,' in *Death and Dying in Ireland, Britain, and Europe: Historical Perspectives*, edited by James Kelly and Mary Ann Lyons (Dublin, 2013), 183.
- ^{xiv} Photograph accessed at <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick/photos/no504.htm#photo> on September 21, 2016.
- ^{xv} Kathryn Conrad, 'Widening the Frame.'
- ^{xvi} Fridge magnet photos credited to Irish Picture Company
<<http://www.irishpicturecompany.com> > [31/01/06] copyright 2000. Cited from Conrad, 'Widening the Frame.'
- ^{xvii} <http://ccdlibraries.claremont.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/mni/id/569/rec/1> on November 2, 2016.
- ^{xviii} Accessed from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/mccormick/photos/no417.htm#photo> on September 10, 2016.
- ^{xix} Graffiti of "Al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades". Accessed from <http://cain.ulst.ac.uk/cgi-bin/murals.pl> on September 11, 2016.
- ^{xx} Jie-Hyun Lim, "Victimhood Nationalism in Contested Memories: National Mourning and Global Accountability," in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, edited by Aleida Assmann and Sebastian Conrad (UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 138.
- ^{xxi} Kathryn Conrad, 'Widening the Frame.'
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