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Dealing with “the Spores of the Past”: Masculinities and Liminality in David Park’s *The Truth Commissioner*

This article seeks to show how *The Truth Commissioner* by David Park ultimately undermines the current optimistic discourse in Northern Ireland. My contention will be that Park’s novel, by corroborating some aspects of the dominant discourse about masculinity and questioning others, constitutes a counter-narrative which builds up an interstitial space and reveals a deep malaise.

The Truth Commissioner by David Park was published in 2008, ten years after the Belfast or Good Friday Agreement was signed in Northern Ireland. Many considered this agreement as the definitive end of a thirty-year conflict which is euphemistically referred to as “The Troubles.” During the peace process and the signature of the 1998 agreement, an optimistic discourse developed, casting any other dissonant narratives out. Greg McLaughlin and Stephen Baker call it “the propaganda of peace,” like the title of their book. Colin Coulter and Michael Murray refer to it as the “narrative of progress” (15). This discourse has significantly expanded to become pervasive and hegemonic. Because of the close links between masculinity, violence, national identity and the military, the issue of masculinity is of particular importance in the aftermath of a conflict. Furthermore, one strategy developed by UNESCO in order to promote peace has been to focus on masculinities and violence as reflected in their publication *Male Roles, Masculinities and Violence: A Culture of Peace Perspective*. In Northern Ireland, Fidelma Ashe observes a particular pattern in community-based restorative justice scholarship which “inadvertently traces changes in military masculinities to non-violent reconstituted masculinities. As political conditions have shifted in Northern Ireland so too have new forms of masculinity emerged” (306). Similarly, in their book *The Propaganda of Peace, The Role of Media and the Culture in the Northern Ireland Peace Process*, Greg McLaughlin and Stephen Baker notice a change of paradigm mostly in the representations of paramilitary men in Northern Irish cultural productions. They were demonized from the 1980s to 1994, which marks the beginning of the peace process and the end of the broadcast ban. After 1994, their portrayal in the media and culture changed. Some films, which present paramilitary men as ordinary family men and were sponsored by the government, aim to change public perception and prepare it for the future peace agreement. “The developing peace process demanded a[n] [...] immediate shift in official propaganda, away from an anti-terrorist discourse towards the possibility that paramilitaries could be brought to the negotiating table” (53). The dominant discourse about masculinity – what Fidelma Ashe describes as: “a shift from macho, militarist masculinities to non-violent masculinities” (307) – thus goes hand-in-hand with the “narrative of progress.”

The Truth Commissioner received much critical attention and was awarded the Christopher Ewarts-Biggs Memorial Prize, which rewards works that encourage peace and reconciliation in Ireland. Drawing on Edward Said’s notion of “filiation,” Stefanie Lehner states that David Park’s *The Truth Commissioner*, along with Oliver Hirschbiegel’s docudrama *Five Minutes of Heaven*, do not challenge the gender hierarchy – or at least not in

the family structure – and eschew questions of “morality, truth and justice” (74). While she argues that Park’s novel withdraws from politics to invest the domestic sphere,¹ I propose another interpretation: that Park’s novel ultimately undermines the optimistic narrative dominant in the public sphere. *The Truth Commissioner* corroborates some aspects of the dominant discourse on masculinity: men have changed, and they are not violent any more. However, at the same time, the novel questions this discourse by revealing that men still hold a dominant position. My contention will be that *The Truth Commissioner*, by doing so, constitutes a counter-narrative which, instead of advocating a break with the past and insisting on moving forward, builds up a liminal space and reveals a bleaker outlook.

Park’s novel imagines the establishment of a truth and reconciliation commission in Northern Ireland modelled on the South African transitional justice instrument. The four main characters are linked together by the disappearance of Connor Walshe 17 years earlier. Henry Stanfield, a smug and educated upper class man is appointed as the truth commissioner and is in charge of the boy’s case. Walshe is believed to have been executed by the IRA for being an informer during the conflict. Francis Gilroy, once high-ranking in the IRA, is the recently appointed Minister for Children and Culture. James Fenton, an ex-RUC retired officer, is the one who elicited the involvement of Walshe. Danny, whose real name is Michael Madden, is younger than the other characters. He is a former IRA member who is about to become a father and now lives in America with his Spanish girlfriend Ramona.

Corroborations of the Dominant Discourse about Masculinities

At first sight, David Park’s *The Truth Commissioner* seems to confirm the dominant discourse regarding men. This third-person narrative presents various male points of views, namely those of the four characters I have just introduced. The use of internal focalization introduces many subjectivities, which question the idea that men constitute a monolithic group. This directly challenges the homogeneity of masculinity and confirms the idea that it has changed.

All the male characters are perceived as fathers or potential fathers. Stanfield and Gilroy are both grandfathers-to-be. Danny’s girlfriend, Ramona, is expecting: “and he tells her yes he will be a good father. Always. And the full force of the future is bright in his mind with truth. Always shining true in the transfigured days that lie ahead” (184). The ideas of fatherhood, a bright future and truth are bound together in Danny’s mind. Because he lies about his past, only the future holds the notion of truth. Fatherhood is what enables him to forecast change and, at last, to live truthfully. It appears to be the only source of salvation for all the characters. Fenton is the only one without children, and he suffers as a result. This is linked to his very negative view of the future:

[H]e blames the absence of children in his marriage and believes that it diminishes his ability to move on. [...] the absence that leaves an unresolved and instinctively agreed, inexpressible sense of loss lingering indelibly below the surface. (127)

1. “the peace process is ultimately removed from the political, public realm into the personal and domestic” (Lehner 74). This is also writer Joseph O’Connor’s argument in a review written in *The Guardian*: “But finally it is not a novel about politics at all. Its preoccupation is the private, the battleground of the self.”

Their conceptions of fatherhood may be seen as proof of the process of male domestication that McLaughlin and Baker witnessed as part of “the propaganda of peace.” Their analysis is particularly relevant to Park’s novel. Indeed, male characters feel guilty because they were absent fathers in the past. They think a lot about fatherhood in the present and firmly believe it will fulfil them in the future. In addition to this, the only violent men displayed in *The Truth Commissioner* are Provisional IRA activists, and they are represented in an analepsis at the beginning of the novel, a passage which takes place 17 years beforehand. Therefore, the novel seems to match the representations of masculinities within the hegemonic discourse in other words: in the timeline of the story, violent men are nowhere to be found.

Subversions of the Dominant Discourse on Masculinities: Connell’s Hegemonic Masculinity

At first sight, Park’s novel seems to confirm the discourse relative to a change in masculinities that displays mindful and nonviolent men who adopt a reflexive approach towards their action and role in society. However, on closer analysis, *The Truth Commissioner* challenges this discourse by exposing instead the dynamics of “hegemonic masculinity.” Examining how men’s specific position in the gender hierarchy is depicted in *The Truth Commissioner*, the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell’s concept of “hegemonic masculinity” is stimulating because it aims at analysing the process by which men maintain their dominant position in society. Raewyn Connell explains that “hegemonic masculinity” is not a “fixed character type, always and everywhere the same. It is, rather, the masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position in a given pattern of gender relations” (76).

All the main characters in the story are men, and the few women that appear in the narrative are solely defined in relation to them: they are daughters, wives or girlfriends. All these female characters are minor protagonists, and readers never see their perspectives. Needless to say, Park’s novel fails the Bechdel test.² Apart from Danny, because all the male characters’ jobs give them strong positions of power in society, *The Truth Commissioner* reflects the continuing male “entre-soi” in the higher echelons of power. Although men’s identities tend to change and reconfigure, their hegemonic position in the novel remains intact. Various patterns of stereotypical masculinities resist change and are recurrent: appraisal of authority, high libido, competitiveness, among others.

In this regard, the quotation from the novel used in the title of this paper “the spores of the past,” is rather telling. The term “spore” is defined in biology as a cell or a structure that is capable of multiplying without sexual fusion, but more importantly, when it comes to bacteria, spores also refer to especially resistant units which are able to survive even in unfavourable environments. This word is thus relevant to the depiction of masculinities because it refers to what seems to proliferate, such as the spores of hegemonic masculinity which are made tangible in Park’s novel, and thus directly questions the dominant discourse: even if men appear to be different, their hegemonic

2. The Bechdel test was developed by the American cartoonist Alison Bechdel. It has been used as an indicator of sexism to evaluate different works of fiction. The test requires the presence of at least two women who talk together about something else than a man. It has usually been applied to movies but it has spread to all forms of fiction.

position remains unchanged.³ Corroborations as well as subversions of the dominant discourse highlight a subtle dialogue.

An Ambiguous Dialectic: Questioning the Optimistic Narrative in Northern Ireland

The ambiguous dialectic between conformity to and subversion of the dominant discourse on men creates a liminal space from which a counter-narrative emerges. This counter-narrative reveals the spores of the past and more particularly the spores of the colonial situation on masculinities. Male characters have indeed very different ways of asserting their masculinity. This is particularly conspicuous by comparing Stanfield and Gilroy. Whereas Stanfield is characterised by his over-confidence and mocking of any other way of performing masculinity, Gilroy feels rather insecure and is overcome with a feeling of self-denigration. Contrary to Stanfield's complacency, he is uncomfortable in his new position; mostly he feels not cultured enough. Stanfield refers to Shakespeare and quotes Coleridge, while Gilroy struggles to understand poet Philip Larkin. He is ashamed at not having read widely. He tries Joyce and Yeats but he does not succeed and gives up quickly. To him, their prose represents "a secret language, a secret society like the Masons, and he has no one to initiate him or introduce him to the rituals" (73). Gilroy apprehends his lack of education as a "weakness," (73) in terms of military strategy. He assesses his reading of Larkin in a stereotypically masculine way, as a fight with the meaning that he wants to grasp: "if he's not yet arrived at a full understanding of some of the poems, he thinks that he is moving steadily towards it and he's not going to give up. This is the bridgehead; from here there is no retreat" (73). He strives to gain access to the meaning as if he were engaged in a war with words. If sometimes readers may sense that Gilroy, because he is depicted as incapable of understanding literature, is portrayed satirically as the uncultivated terrorist, Stanfield is definitely a caricature of the arrogant upper class man who takes himself too seriously. In a key passage, the narrator's presence is made apparent and Stanfield's high self-esteem is ridiculed. Uptight because he was forced to go on a cage-diving trip in South Africa with his team of younger colleagues, Stanfield is resentful:

He tries to contain his spreading anger by telling himself that with a little creativity it will shape itself into a good story [...] Already he constructs a comic portrait of Captain Ahab, searches for a punchline that will send the story spinning into folklore. Of course he will have to reinvent his own role, airbrush the inconvenient parts that go against the flow, but it's what artists do and above all he is an artist. (16)

At that precise moment, his thoughts are interrupted by the laughter of the team, revealing how grotesque his reflections are. If other parameters of Stanfield's and Gilroy's identities are taken into account, in other words, if an approach in terms of intersectionality is assumed, it appears that despite the fact that they both have dominant positions in the public sphere, they come from very different social backgrounds both in relation to their economic conditions and to their ethno-religious identities. Stanfield grew up in "a leafy suburb of Belfast" (19) whereas Gilroy is "the son of a sign-painter" (89). While Stanfield left Belfast when he was very young (twelve years of age) to pursue a prestigious path abroad, Gilroy spent all his life in Belfast and fought for the IRA.

3. On this particular point, I agree with Lehner's analysis.

Moreover Stanfield clearly identifies himself as British, wondering why his daughter is living in Northern Ireland, in what he calls "this provincial backwater" (56).

He tries to understand why his daughter should choose to live in this forsaken part of the world with which she is linked only through a deceased grandmother, why she should throw away the expensive and cultured start she was given in life to teach in some school he's never heard of and live in a one-street town. (56)

On the contrary, Gilroy has trouble accepting the fact that his daughter is going to live in London and even worse that she might be able to enjoy living there. Gilroy's and Stanfield's different ways of experiencing their identities must be assessed in relation to Ireland's post-colonial context. Indeed, colonial discourse is often gendered, and this creates more complex notions of masculinity and femininity. The Indian sociologist and psychologist Ashis Nandy explains that during colonization in India, a "homology between sexual and political dominance" (4) was established, a process that was applied to every colonial situation. Virility was thus a way of signifying the power relations between the colonized man and the colonizer. The colonizers tended to divide colonized men into two stereotypical categories: either effeminate or brutal and uncivilized. Therefore, the colonized men's masculinity is particularly affected. As the French philosopher Elsa Dorlin observes, men who have undergone colonization, have been subjected to a constant symbolic emasculation (102). And this could translate into Gilroy's inferiority complex versus Stanfield's superiority complex. Stanfield strikingly resents Northern Ireland and his point of view verges recklessly on colonial racism: "[A] city [Belfast] that he considers much the same way as he might think of a piece of dirt that he hoped he had shaken off his shoe" (20). Since Stanfield has been unaffected by the Troubles,⁴ his comments about Belfast can be associated with a form of racial and classist contempt, which exhibits a post-colonial attitude exposing the colonial spores: "he feels a renewed flare of vigour and blames the stinking cesspit of the country he's temporarily found himself domiciled in for his momentary fall from grace. Hard to lift your head above it in a godforsaken land, he tells himself, where a ship that sank and an alcoholic footballer are considered holy icons" (38). The recurrence of the analogies between Belfast and excrement, such as "the stinking cesspit" and "a piece of dirt," conveys a great deal of repugnance. This metaphor reveals his desire to rid himself of his Irish roots, suggesting a strong feeling of abjection. According to Julia Kristeva, what causes abjection is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (13). Considering Stanfield's feeling of abjection seems to be caused by his mother's Irish roots, Kristeva's analysis of the abjection of the maternal entity is all the more relevant (22).

Drawing on the historian Kenneth Ballhatchet, Ashis Nandy explains that a "split [...] emerged in the Victorian culture between two ideals of masculinity": "the lower classes were expected to act out their manliness by demonstrating their sexual prowess; the upper classes were expected to affirm their masculinity through sexual distance, abstinence and self-control" (10). Notably, these two models of masculinity mirror Gilroy's and Stanfield's perception of their sexuality. Both Gilroy and Stanfield seem to be experiencing a feeling of failure which can be attributed to their performance of mascu-

4. "An Irish Catholic mother and an English Protestant father allow him to straddle both tribes and, despite spending the first twelve years of his life in a leafy suburb of Belfast, he has no personal or political baggage to be unpacked by either side. Not even any meaningful or sharp memories to prick him towards anything as strong as prejudice" (19).

linity. On the one hand, Gilroy is subjected to a great amount of frustration because he does not manage to make love to his wife, revealing that despite the change in his social status, he is still subjected to the norms of masculinity inherited from his past social background. On the other hand, Stanfield is simultaneously obsessed and ashamed by the fact that he can't restrain himself and calls on the services of a prostitute. The conflicting positions of the characters in the postcolonial context influence and reshape their masculinity, allowing the spores of the past to germinate.

Despite their desire to let it go, the past is alive for the characters. The present seems to be haunted by the past, and Belfast seems to generate this mysterious atmosphere:

[Stanfield] understands now that it was a mistake to take this job and come to this city. He doesn't believe in ghosts but there is something spectral about the thoughts that have started to haunt his consciousness. [...] the growing awareness of a deepening desperation begins to blunt the edge of his desire. (44)

A ghostly ambience pervades the novel. Connor Walshe's spectre manifests itself in all the characters' lives, becoming an obsession for some of them. Stanfield's daughter is good friends with Connor Walshe's sister, Maria Harper, that's why she has contacted her father and asked him to do all he can to shed light on Connor's case and discover the truth. His private life starts to blend with his public mission: "How can his desire to see his only child be meshed with some other long-dead boy from a Belfast back street?" (67). This absent body paradoxically springs up regularly in the characters' lives. Connor's face keeps appearing fleetingly in Fenton's mind: "[Fenton] looks at himself in the mirror and thinks of a boy with a white owl face swooping towards him out of the darkness" (177). In an insightful article "Learning How to Live: David Park's *The Truth Commissioner*," Tom Herron observes accurately that: "In death Connor Walshe comes to exert a power in life he was never able to yield" (24). When Gilroy voices his disagreement with the establishment of the truth commission, he seems to be haunted by some irrational distrust:

Maybe it's time to let the dead stay dead, move on instead of digging them back up every day. It's like having a ghost permanently on your shoulder. You've heard of *Hamlet*, haven't you? [...] Well apparently there's this thing in it about being blown up by your own bomb – hoist by your own something. What's that guy looking at? (97)

Ironically while Gilroy is speaking about moving on and about the uselessness of the commission, his own paranoia about his past interrupts him. He appears to be defensive and his excessive suspicion challenges his discourse about moving forward. Danny too is still affected by a past event which is linked to Connor's death. Before he knows anything about the truth commission and while he is peacefully living somewhere in Florida, Danny's past regularly comes back to haunt him, even if he has been away from Belfast for a long time. He is introduced as a character who struggles with his past, wondering if he needs to confess in the face of his marriage and impending fatherhood. When he is about to make a confession to an Irish priest, the latter tells him he has been accused of sexually abusing a child, preventing Danny from confessing:

How could he have been so stupid to consider making his confession to Mulryne? [...] After all this time to open the closed box of the past and try to unpack what he's been so careful to stow away. The only thing he knows is that it wasn't a religious impulse because he has already stopped believing in one part of his head. It was for Ramona, for the child – to somehow be more worthy of them. To start afresh, step into the future clean and

entitled to the happiness that it promises. [...] So how could he, even for a moment, have thought of letting loose the spores of the past, of casting them to the wind with no way to predict or control where they would land? / [...] So why even in this place should he let these tainted seed heads blow through his mind and infect the future? (228-9)

These lines reveal Danny's distress and point to his trauma. The contradictions within the expressions "to open the closed box" and "to unpack what he's been so careful to stow away" disclose Danny's inner tensions. According to Cathy Caruth, the very essence of trauma is its "unassimilated nature," and that is precisely what haunts the victim. "Caruth makes it clear that the pathology in question cannot be defined by the event itself, nor in terms of the distortion of the event. [...] it is the very unassimilated nature of trauma, the way it was not acknowledged in the first place, that returns to haunt the survivor afterwards" (Herrero and Baelo-Allué 10). The only thing Danny knows is that his need to confess has not come from his religious beliefs because his faith has weakened. Danny seems to be in the middle of a process, in an interstitial state of mind; he would like to forget the past but clearly is not able to do so.

A certain form of resistance seems to prevent change. The description of the river metaphorically echoes the resistance of Northern Irish society towards progress: "Now the river has weakened and the sky lifts itself a little higher and tries to imprint the water's surface with a new pattern but it resists and seems to hug its own coldness" (22). Throughout the novel, the leitmotif of water recurs in relation to the characters' pasts. Since water is associated with the idea of purification in religious symbolism, this motif suggests the struggle of the characters to rid themselves of *their* pasts. It is not necessarily *the* past they want to be rid of. This is clear from Gilroy's point of view:

In every speech he makes, every soundbite for the radio or television, he speaks of the future but increasingly he wants to lie down in the comfort of the past; but not his own one, instead it's a past shaped and nurtured by his imagination where his life is divested of all its complications and responsibilities. And in it he's a family man with all his children safely round him. (261)

His desire to have an important role in the domestic sphere rather than in the public sphere strengthens the idea of the domestication of paramilitary men. It also implies that being a good father and being politically engaged are mutually exclusive in Gilroy's mind. What is interesting here is Gilroy's rejection of the future although he regularly delivers speeches that reflect the hegemonic discourse about a brighter future.

The counter-narrative developed in the novel also points out the hypocrisy in official discourses. The truth commissioner, Stanfield, does not believe in the importance of his mission. Readers are misled because, at first, his expectations seem to be consistent with what can be expected from a truth commissioner who takes his job seriously. Stanfield hopes that the end of his mission will be full of "opportunities, possibilities of development and even, in his most optimistic and private imaginings, consummation" (11). Through innuendo, the bathos is revealed and readers understand that all these hopeful terms are instead describing his desire to have sex with his colleague Laura. Ironically enough, these words masquerade as a description of his mission, but they are devoted instead to his sentimental/sexual expectations.

In their study, McLaughlin and Baker shed light on the capitalist perspective of the promotion of a unique discourse of peace; they call it "the peace dividend" (12). Again, Stanfield reveals the economic aspect of it. His reputation and career are more

important to him than his assignment. He admits that he was attracted by the salary and the title of the mission "truth commissioner." He made a name for himself in what he cynically calls "the Balkan business" (19). His desire to write a book conspicuously reflects his professional ambition and makes him a careerist. He has already thought about titles for his forthcoming book: "*The Whole Truth ... Nothing but the Truth ...* perhaps even *The Freedom of Truth*. He dismisses them all as too hackneyed and obvious, like Perry Mason potboilers" (19). Here commercial ambition points out Stanfield's cynicism and the shallowness of the discourse around the peace process. Stanfield's characterisation satirizes official discourses. Considering himself as realistic and adopting a patronising attitude, he compares his colleagues to children who are convinced they will enact change, and he mocks their naivety:

So how would they feel if he were to tell them now that it's all been for the optics, that what will happen and how it will happen has already been agreed, mapped out, and the fixity of the main boundaries established like every continent after every war. (17)

This comment suggests that there is hardly any agency left for them or for anyone. Stanfield's personality and disillusionment enable a critical narrative to emerge, undermining the enthusiasm of the hegemonic discourse. Stanfield is not the only character who reveals duplicity inherent in these discourses. He is threatened by some men who do not want him to dig too deeply into Connor's case. Danny is also incited to lie by former IRA members. They go so far as to prepare the entire speech he is supposed to deliver. The text is reproduced in the narrative. Readers are therefore convinced that this is what he reads. Then the narrative voice comments: "This is what he's supposed to say," (336) and then the speech he actually delivers is disclosed. The water metaphor appears in the middle of his talk. While he is catching his breath, "[h]e lifts the glass of water but his hand is shaking too much and he puts it down again. For a second the light coming through the stained glass seems to colour the water" (340). The light reflected in the water clearly stands for the truth. But the time adjunct "for a second" and the copular verb "seem" undermine the idea of absolute truth and foreshadow the subsequent issues. Because of Danny's second speech, it can be assumed that the novel somehow undermines the hypocrisy and vacuity of discourse towards the end. But the problem is that his truth is not absolute. He reveals Gilroy's involvement in Connor's death, saying Gilroy is Connor's killer, being convinced of the truth of it. Yet, readers have just learned, through Gilroy's point of view, that it was Rafferty, another IRA member, who killed Connor. Danny arrived a few seconds after Rafferty shot Connor and saw Gilroy with the gun in his hands, which is why Danny is certain that Gilroy is responsible for Connor's death. So despite Danny's genuine intentions, the truth is pending, which favours an ambiguous position over a stable solution.

Another aspect of this counter-narrative is its liminal status. Liminality is the idea of a transitional space, of an intermediate state. It comes from the Latin "limens" which means "threshold." The use of the present tense throughout the whole novel promotes a sense of continuity and gives an impression of immediacy. Even the flashbacks are related in the present tense, which produces the sensation that there is no break with the past, thus contributing to develop a liminal space which makes the past ever so present. Sometimes, the narrative voice intermingles the timeline of the story with past events and develops a dialogue with the past. For instance, while Fenton is driving his van to Romania to bring supplies to orphans, he reflects on his first encounter with Connor

Walshe and their subsequent meetings. The description of the road is interspersed with his memories. He remembers how he recruited the adolescent to become an informer. It starts when they arrest him for a petty theft. While Connor is crying, Fenton takes advantage of the situation and suggests: "there's another way, [...] Maybe there's a way out of this" (140). Readers understand that the other way means giving information to the police. Then, the narrative voice looks back at the journey in the van. The description of the road echoes the "way" in relation to Connor's possible activity as an informer: "The road feels increasingly narrow [...] each side is bordered [...] that sweep right down to the edge. [...] For a second he is confused and wonders if he has taken the right road" (140-1). Fenton never really expresses guilt directly in relation to Connor's fate. The comment on the road could be interpreted as an indirect manifestation of his guilt towards the figurative road that he has forced upon Connor.

As far as the construction of the novel is concerned, the first and last chapters respectively entitled "Beginnings" and "Endings" display this sense of liminality. The narrative instance of the first part reflects Connor Walshe's point of view and recounts Connor's last moments when he was taken away, beaten and killed. It starts with the tautological pleonasm "He's never been anywhere he's never been," (1) reflecting the boy's point of view. This first part illustrates an interstitial state on various levels: from the city to the countryside, from day to night, from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from boy to man, from child to adult, from life to death. Connor is taken outside his familiar space where he feels insecure. The journey in the car is compared to going "to the end of the world." "He feels like he's drifting slowly out of the world to which he belongs [...] he feels suddenly weightless, carried away from home and safety by currents he can't resist or even see" (2). It is as if he has anticipated and sensed his impending death. Being in his teens, Connor is in a liminal state in terms of masculinity: neither exactly a boy nor a man. At that precise moment, he chooses to stick to being a boy, because he believes it is the best way to survive. Yet, the men decide to act with him as if he were a man. Connor's feelings are telling: "it feels as if he's drifting in the vastness of space, as if he's been cut off from the mother ship" (3). The adolescent is violently thrown into adulthood: the hint at the umbilical cord is made clear by the reference to the mother.

Likewise, the last chapter describes in great detail the transition from night to day. The grey sky which at first is resistant to light gradually clears up. The place is "trapped in the settled dreams of darkness" but "[i]n an hour the vestiges of the mist will have faded and light will shock into new definition" (371). Figuratively, this dawn could be interpreted as positive, the potential for something new, for change, thus matching the narrative of progress. Yet, this idea is directly thwarted by another sentence: "But this is not somewhere that humans ever come" (371). The place is mysterious. This chapter is the only one that relies on an unidentified point of view. A driver waiting in his cab is the only person mentioned, but his identity remains unknown. However there is "a yellow digger," and it is indicated that "others will arrive with their transit vans and equipment, their thermal-imaging cameras and their marking poles" (372); this enables us to guess that Connor's body is going to be dug up. The novel ends with the excavation of the dead body. Although the truth has not been fully revealed, and there is a sense of injustice about it, the excavation of the past is going to take place. And this in particular seems more important than the truth itself.

By developing an ambiguous dialectic between conformity and subversion towards the dominant discourse on masculinity, David Park fosters the emergence of a counter-narrative which questions the hegemonic discourse in post-conflict Northern Ireland. Through an aesthetic of liminality, *The Truth Commissioner* presents a society in transition; time is a continuum in which the past has not been clarified, and this attempt at dealing with it reveals a need for such an endeavour in the context of post-conflict Northern Ireland. By facilitating a liminal space, the novel challenges the very notion of modernity and questions the necessity to move forward. Far from the optimism of the official discourse, *The Truth Commissioner* reveals a profound malaise that is all the more conspicuous as there is no real sense of closure at the end of the novel.

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