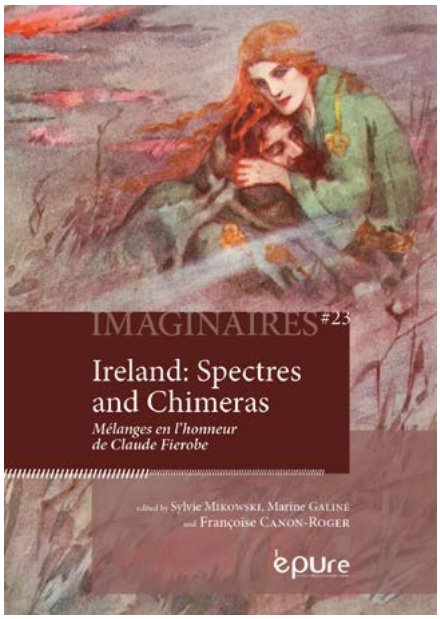
Permanence and transgression of the revenge tragedy motif in Stuart Neville's *The Twelve* (2009): a hauntological reading of a Northern-Irish thriller



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Chapter eight

Permanence and transgression of the revenge tragedy motif in Stuart Neville's *The Twelve* (2009)

A hauntological reading of a Northern-Irish thriller

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Abstract: The concept of "hauntology" - a word combining both haunting and ontology – was coined by Jacques Derrida to characterise a situation where an ideology that is no longer operative continues to haunt a place, informing its ongoing representations, its latent conflicts. The term refers to a temporal disjunction where the past persists in the present through the paradoxical observation that something has been lost but persists in the spirit of the place.

Northern Ireland embodies this concept, as its history, geography and institutions are marked by a radical political schizophrenia stemming from a troubled past that even the peace process has not managed to erase.

In The twelve (2009), Stuart Neville questions the feasibility and consequences of coming to terms with one's past when confronted with this haunting. Gerry Fegan, an IRA hitman, drowned in alcohol and depression, is shown to be obsessed, haunted by the ghosts of his twelve victims.

This article assesses the extent to which the book simultaneously renews the usual codes of thrillers and takes up the hackneyed classical tropes of the Elizabethan revenge tragedy, in a move that echoes the postmodern concept of differential repetition.

Keywords: Stuart Neville, Revenge tragedy, Hauntology, Derrida, Troubles, Belfast, Ghosts, Thriller, Postmodernism, Repetition

CRIME fiction in general reveals a deeply contradictory tension that feeds on an aspiration to restore order, which includes itself the possibility of transgression and disorder to do so. It is worth

noting that this paradoxical dynamic process also happens to be typical of Elizabethan revenge tragedies, whose archetype is probably to be found in *Hamlet* (1599) by William Shakespeare. This unexpected parallel between two seemingly radically different times and literary genres was powerfully analysed by Esme Miskimmin who boldly understood *Hamlet* as a piece of proto-crime-fiction, taking after Todorov's typology:

> Aside from its detective protagonist, *Hamlet* can also be defined as a 'whodunit' using the guidelines set out by Todorov in his chapter 'The Typology of *Detective Fiction*' in *The Poetics of Prose*: 'At the base of a whodunit, we find a duality and it is this duality which will guide our description. This novel [or play] contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. […] The first story that of the crime, ends before the second begins.[1]

This analogy between Elizabethan drama on the one hand and crime fiction on the other is neatly encapsulated by Peter James' provocative rhetorical question: "If Shakespeare was writing now, would he see his work on prize shortlists or in a buy-one-get-one-free slot in WH Smith?"[2]

Now, *The Twelve*,[3] originally published in Europe under that name in 2009, is a Northern Irish thriller written by Stuart Neville, a Protestant crime novelist born in Armagh, in 1972. This masterpiece of his was marketed in the USA under the eye-catching title *The Ghosts of Belfast*. According to James Ellroy, a prominent figure amongst American crime writers, "*The Twelve* is the best first novel I've read in years. It crackles. It grabs you by the throat. This is some guy to watch out for in a dark alley."[4] On Stuart Neville's website, the acclaimed author of *L.A. Confidential*, *The Black Dahlia*, *American Tabloid*, is also quoted saying: "*The Twelve* is 'The best first novel I've read in years. It's a flat out terror trip'".[5] What the American title of the book actually emphasizes though, is how much the past weighs upon the present times in Northern Ireland precisely through the trope of ghosts. As Brian Cliff aptly analyses in his recent book on *Irish Crime fiction*, much crime fiction originating from Northern Ireland is situated within a context which clearly has the past and the present colliding with each other as a staple theme of Northern Irish culture, turning this chronological merger into an almost hackneyed predictable feature :

1. Esme Miskimmin, "The Act of Murder, The Renaissance Tragedy and the Detective Novel", *Reinventing the Renaissance: Shakespeare and his Contemporaries in Adaptation and Performance*, Brown, Sarah Robert Lublin, Linsey McCulloch (Eds.), London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 289.
2. Peter James, "If Shakespeare was writing today, he'd be a crime writer", *The Guardian*, April 23 2016 (https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/23/shakespeare-crime-writer-today-roy-grace-peter-james).
3. Stuart Neville, *The Twelve*, (or *Ghosts of Belfast* [USA]), London, Vintage, 2009.
4. *Ibid*., blurb, back cover.
5. See http://www.stuartneville.com/the-twelve-the-ghosts-of-belfast.html (last accessed 25.07.2020).

> *Northern Irish crime fiction often blurs the lines between present and past*, taking place in a kind of grey zone that highlights the complex relationship between an enduring past and contemporary society and culture […]. At the same time, although much literature from Northern Ireland during the Troubles engaged to varying degrees with that conflict, even when it did not clearly do so critics nonetheless found persistent ways to frame literary meaning with reference to the Troubles.[6]

It is precisely that intricate combination of past and present which inspired the whole concept of hauntology to Derrida. One immediately identifies the sort of wordplay which has since become the hallmark of Derrida's peculiar forging of concepts. The very word "hauntology" is a portmanteau word combining the notion of haunting with that of *being* – in Greek, ὄντος, *ontos*, refers to "being" or "that which is"–, through the whole near-homophonous concept of ontology. Hauntology proper lies at the core of Derrida's 1993 seminal book entitled *Spectres of Marx*, which deals with history and enduring ideologies, even long after their demise. Peter Buse and Andrew Stott, discussing Derrida's notion of hauntology, in their 1999 book entitled *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History* explain the paradoxical temporality or sense of chronology inherent in ghosts in general and hence, in hauntology into the same bargain. To them, ghosts are hybrid entities actually belonging to both past and present, as they expatiate:

> Ghosts arrive from the past and appear in the present. However, the ghost cannot be properly said to belong to the past[...] Does then the 'historical' person, who is identified with the ghost, properly belong to the present? Surely not, as the idea of a return from death fractures all traditional conceptions of temporality. The temporality to which the ghost is subject is therefore paradoxical, at once they 'return' and make their apparitional debut [...] any attempt to isolate the origin of language will find its inaugural moment already dependent upon a system of linguistic differences that have been installed prior to the 'originary' moment.[7]

This fractured temporality is yet again clearly reminiscent of the often quoted phrase derived from Hamlet's expository sense that "Time is out of joint"[8] (Act I, conclusion of scene 5) in a tragedy. Precisely that disruption of time in the play follows the appearance of Hamlet's father's ghost, and it goes hand in hand with the very notion of "revenge" repeated

6. Brian Cliff, *Irish Crime Fiction*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, p. 26. My emphasis.
7. Peter De Buse, Andrew Stott, *Ghosts: Deconstruction, Psychoanalysis, History*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 1999, p. 11.
8. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. Stanley Wells, London/Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1994, p. 196.

three times in a dozen lines by both the dead father and his living son. In Neville's book, ghosts find their presence and conjuring further justified by the need for revenge. Yet more light is shed on their presence or apparition so to speak by the ambivalent not to say problematic epigraph by the Methodist, socialist-leaning Belfast-born – often caricatured not to say vilified as a unionist curmudgeon – poet John Hewitt [1907-1987]. That epigraph opening Neville's book reads: "The place that lacks its ghosts is a barren place", which triggers ambivalent expectations as regards the text to come and its reinscription within a particular geography ("place") and historical background. This indeed is a line extracted from Hewitt's famous dramatic poem entitled "The Bloody Brae" where a grandmother addresses her guilty grandson in these terms, underlining the paramount importance of enduring memory through ghosts:

> Fear is a wholesome thing for a proud young man.
> The Devil would never have fallen if he'd been afeared.
> These freets are useful. We'd forget the past,
> and only live in the minute, without their presence.
> *The place that lacks its ghosts is a barren place.*
> Your father'd get such stooks of corn,
> or fill the long pits with praties, or pull strong lint,
> if ghosts, that were men once hadn't given the earth
> the shape and pattern of use, of sowing and harvest?
> *Our own best* use may be as ghosts ourselves,
> not little mischievous freets but kindly spirits.[9]

This 15-page-long dramatic poem is problematic in that it tells of a legendary and largely fictitious massacre of Roman Catholics by English Protestant troops in Islandmagee, County Antrim, in 1641-42. This massacre is supposed to have foreshadowed the bloodsoaked reconquest of Ireland by Oliver Cromwell [1599-1658] in 1649. In the poem, John Hill, one of the soldiers who has been racked by guilt since he participated in the slaughter, returns many years later to beg forgiveness. He eventually receives forgiveness from the ghost of one of his victims. But this gesture does not entirely condone his past crimes since it also conveys some sense of condemnation of his self-indulgence, and guilt rather than taking practical action to fight bigotry. In the very same poem, one also runs into the bold assertion of the right of Hewitt's people (descendants of Protestant Scottish dissenters, as the Anglo-Scottish dialect used in the poem attests to) to live in Northern Ireland. That right is described as being deeply

9. John Hewitt, "*The Bloody Brae*", *Irish Poetry: An Interpretive Anthology from Before Swift to Yeats and After*, W. J. McCormack (Ed.), New York, New York U.P., 2000, p. 232. My emphasis. Note: In Scottish English a brae is a steep bank or hillside.

rooted into their stereotypically Protestant not to say Weberian[10] hard work and commitment to it, as explained in the following lines:

> This is my country; my grandfather came here
> and raised his walls and fenced the tangled waste
> and gave his years and strength into the earth[11]

In that sense, this epigraph identifies Neville with a specific community, that of Northern Irish Protestants of Scottish ancestry. It incidentally deals with history in general, and anamnesis in particular in the Six Counties. This theme correlating guilt to identity is strongly proleptic as regards the rest of *The Twelve* in that it foreshadows a whole narrative which happens to be the contemporary equivalent of the same guilt-ridden soldier's tale, this time involving Fegan, a Catholic fighter with blood on his hands, whereas John Hill in Hewitt's poem is a Protestant soldier.

As a matter of fact, *The Twelve* centres on Gerry Fegan, a former IRA hardman with a scary reputation who has been recently released under the terms of the cross-community Good Friday Agreement brokered and struck in 1998. The book opens in 2007, two months after the elections in which the province's voters finally chose a government of their own. Fegan embodies the usual trope of the guilt-ridden, drink-sodden protagonist who nonetheless has retained skills just beneath the surface of semi-permanent intoxication. The fragmented disjointed temporality is scrutinized by Nicola Barr, in her review of the book entitled "The haunting of Gerry Fegan". Fegan is haunted to the point of insanity by the ghosts of twelve people for whose deaths he has some measure of responsibility. As shown in the following incipit:

> Maybe if he had one more drink [the ghosts would] leave him alone. Gerry Fegan told himself that lie before every swallow. He chased the whiskey's burn with a cool black mouthful of Guinness […] He was good and drunk now. When his stomach couldn't hold any more he would let Tom the barman show him to the door, and the twelve would follow Fegan through the streets of Belfast, into his house, up his stairs and into his bed. If he was lucky, and drunk enough, he might pass out before their screaming got too loud to bear. That was the only time they made a sound, when he was alone and on the edge of sleep. When the baby started crying, that was the worst of it.[…] Fegan was still a respected man in West Belfast, despite the drink.[12]

10. See Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, 1905 .
11. Hewitt, "*The Bloody Brae*", art. cit., p. 236.
12. Neville, *The Twelve*, *op. cit*., p. 3-4.

In the extract, one immediately recognizes a sectarian geography stereotypically associated with the largest city in Northern Ireland. This bolsters the manichean atmosphere which pervades the whole incipit. To cut a long story short, West Belfast (and the adjacent neighbourhood known as The Falls, contrary to Shankill and East Belfast which are overwhelmingly Protestant) has historically been the most nationalist or pro-Republican of Belfast's four constituencies, even if it is only in the relatively recent decades that the votes for Unionist parties have plummeted to ridiculous levels.

Gradually, the *twelve* ghosts mentioned in the extract force Gerry Fegan to kill the people responsible for their deaths. These revenge killings are central to the novel's narrative made more complex since Fegan also seeks to protect Mary McKenna, a local Catholic woman and her daughter Ellen, whom he met as they got caught up in a web of corruption involving local Sinn Féin politicians, paramilitaries, criminals, government spies... As the novel unfolds, Davey Campbell –a British agent infiltrated into Republican paramilitary groups earlier in the novel– is set on Fegan's trail to stop the murders in the short-term interest of both the Republican political leadership and the British government, in a pattern that sounds like a full-blown conspiracy theory, which incidentally echoes the usual post-Good-Friday Agreement cross-party philosophy.

As mentioned earlier in this essay, *The Twelve* perfectly sticks to the principle according to which crime fiction in general, and sectarian thrillers in particular, reveal a contradictory tension that feeds on an aspiration to restore and guarantee peace and order while preserving the necessary resort to transgression, disorder, violence through the logic of retribution (to do so). This paradoxical dynamic process has been observable for a long time now in literature and goes a long way back in time, as far back as to ancient Greek mythology involving characters such as Medea or Phaedra and also ever so slightly more recently and aptly as regards this paper, work by Elizabethan playwrights, keeping in mind Kyd's *Spanish Tragedy* (1587), Thomas Middleton's *Revenger's Tragedy* (1606) or Marston's *Antonio's Revenge* (1601), in addition to *Hamlet* (1599) by William Shakespeare.

Hamlet itself reveals a far more ancient Latin and Greek intertext, notably *Hercules Furens* by Seneca. In such a plot, one identifies an original situation where an element of corruption or moral decadence prevails as a dramatic engine that irrevocably propels the plot forward. To sum this up, one can think of no better quote than "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" uttered by Marcellus towards the very end of Act 1, scene 4

in *Hamlet*.[13] In these plays, the avenger – an eminently Fegan-like ambivalent figure – often dies along with his accomplices or partners in addition to the villain in the play. Thus the final act usually displays a pile of dead bodies synonymous with a moral dead-end, or impossible resolution, as in Hamlet… What is more, the supernatural agency illustrated by the appearance of ghosts looms large at the level of the forces that preside over the plot, just like insanity, be it faked or not.

In all these classical plays, you find traces of the common legacy left by Aristotle's *Poetics*, where plot, the tragic knot, twists and turns before the final denouement and catharsis make up a predictable structure. Accordingly, at the end of *The Twelve*, which reads like a revenge tragedy to the power of twelve, where Fegan is the avenger of the twelve victims of sectarian violence perpetrated by himself, a sense of final peace and mercy is achieved. The final narrative countdown starting from twelve eventually reaches the last culprit that is Fegan himself, and to complete the vicious circle of vengeance and retribution encapuslated by *Lex Talionis*, Fegan should commit suicide. But instead of forcing Fegan to commit suicide, the final twelfth ghost of the woman Fegan killed when he planted a bomb in a shop[14], eventually forgives Fegan repeating the word "Mercy"[15] while dissolving into nothingness, leaving Fegan wording the sentence "I can have a life", "I can have a life"[16]. Here the significance of the natural number twelve takes on its usual biblical dimension that may be equated –after the trope made up by the twelve[17] apostles– with final redemption, whatever the earthly sins committed. The Christian twofold promise of redemption and resurrection is finally kept.

In essence, *The Twelve* is a Hamlet-like revenge tragedy based on a similar plot pattern resorting to similar supernatural agency – namely the ghosts of people murdered calling for vengeance – but also two major differences. The first one is that a proletarian figure like Fegan has replaced a prince and representative of the aristocratic order that is Hamlet, which is in keeping with our Western contemporary democratic though still frail

13. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet* [1602], ed. G. R. Hibbard, Oxford, Oxford U.P., 1998, p. 184 (I, 4, v. 65).
14. Let us note in passing this is strongly reminiscent of the Omagh bombing which took place on 15 August 1998, when a car bomb loaded with about 500 pounds of fertiliser-based explosives planted just outside shops exploded in Omagh, killing 29 people (including a woman pregnant with twins) and injured some 220 others. This tragic bombing caused outrage both locally and internationally, and ironically reinforced the momentum in favour of the Northern Ireland peace process. Ultimately this act of atrociously random violence dealt a severe blow to the dissident Irish republican campaign. The Real IRA denied that the bomb was intended to kill civilians and apologised; shortly after, the group declared a ceasefire paving the way for the actual peace process to endure.
15. Neville, *The Twelve*, *op. cit.*, p. 458, 459, 460.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 458.
17. No wonder Neville should have gone for the number twelve. It is a superior highly composite number, divisible by 2, 3, 4, and 6, which stands out symbolically and mathematically. Hence its frequent appearance in the world's major religions. For more information on this topic, read Gilbert Durand's *Les Structures anthropologiques de l'imaginaire*, Paris, Dunod, 1992, p. 327-328.

aspirations. Secondly, provisional resolution seems to be achieved in chapter 61 when all of the ghosts have eventually disappeared. In a final scene full of macho heroic bravado, Fegan the survivor is seen alone and purified and washed by the cooling rain, about to embark on an entirely new life in America, probably full of thrilling adventures. In this instance, catharsis is actuated internally, by affecting the protagonist himself instead of being – normally and extradiegetically – directed at the reader as is the case in standard Elizabethan revenge plays:

> He […] picked up his bag, and turned to walk towards the boat. As he left the warehouse, gulls quarrelled, and rolled in the sky. Rain washed and cooled his skin. No shadow followed but his own.[18]

The standard synecdoche of "shadow" here refers to the whole class of spectres but it follows a blunt negative quantifier "No" frontfocusing their final departure.

Here we probably reach and hit the crux blatantly plaguing *The Twelve* and more generally Neville's thrillers – in both the Jack Lennon[19] and the Serena Flanagan series[20], even if in the latter, the introduction of a female detective may hint at an ever so subtle sense of innovation or renewal of the detective genre. But neither is this feminizing process wholly original: Brian McGilloway's Lucy Black series, Claire McGowan's Paula McGuire's series, Tana French's brilliant Dublin Murder Squad series, to mention but a few recent examples, already feature their fair share of female investigators who make up the distant empowered offspring of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple. Anyway, it is a fact that *The Ghosts of Belfast* has been critiqued and criticized –and righly so, one may feel entitled to say – by a wealth of reviewers for an overabundance of clichés without much actual irony or tongue-in-cheek-humour, contrary to what one may observe in Adrian McKinty's work for instance – especially in the Sean Duffy series. The Italian academic Laura Pelaschiar has, arguably but sensibly, perfectly summed up the paradox embodied by the whole book, namely:

> Neville's first novel parades without shame *all the most practised clichés and stereotypes of the genre* — the psychopathic killer, crooked British politicians, double-dealers, freedom-fighters, secret agents, innocent women, in a mix that has not kept up with the times but seems a *rehash of films already seen, books already shelved*. Just as Fegan thinks, at a certain moment in the novel that "the cause he once killed for was long gone", and reflects at the close that "all he knew

18. *Ibid*., p. 464.
19. The Jack Lennon series includes *The Twelve*, London, Vintage, 2009; *Collusion*, London, Vintage, 2010 and *Stolen Souls*, London, Vintage, 2012.
20. The Serena Flanagan series by Stuart Neville comprises *The Final Silence*, London, Vintage, 2014, *Those We Left Behind*, London, Vintage, 2015, *So Say the Fallen*, 2016.

> was this place had no more thirst for war. That had been quenched long ago. Men like him no longer belonged here. Exhaustion washed over him in a heavy grey wave", we too might conclude that given that the conditions that provided the context and justification for the Northern Ireland Troubles thriller, with all their political permutations, have now changed so radically, so too should the genre itself. But then again literature is an unpredictable organism and the future of the troubles thriller in the North is still to be decided.[21]

In a word, Gerry Fegan is the superlative quintessence of the maverick tough guy, as the following quote shows: "He looked like a killer, the *purest* kind, the kind who killed more out of want than need".[22] And since these Trumpian Covid 19-Brexit-laden days remain erratic, Fegan and his likes may well haunt the future of Northern Ireland, not just its past, offering an unexpected revival of an overhauled version of the infamous "Troubles trash" genre as identified by Brian Cliff.[23] Elizabeth Mannion characterizes Troubles trash as "sensationalistic" and trading in "reductive tropes of the conflict".[24] The only problem is the potential litany of clichés Neville's Fegan may contribute to maintaining alive. First his stereotypically Catholic surname "Fegan" reminiscent of the ambivalent political label "Fenian" never ever conjures up the ghosts of any precise political agenda or fair cause worth fighting for. The IRA remains but an empty acronym. In the book, there is no such thing as past discrimination against Catholics in housing, employment, civil rights. The very notion of partition is taken for granted and plainly fair. All the victims are essentially characterized as Protestants. The icing on top of the cake is the presence of two Ulster Freedom Fighters (the fascist-leaning paramilitary branch of the Ulster Defence Association) amongst the twelve. Let us run through the list of the twelve ghosts:

> Of the five soldiers three were Brits and two were Ulster Defence Regiment. Another of the followers was a cop, his Royal Ulster Constabulary uniform neat and stiff, and two more were Loyalists, both Ulster Freedom Fighters. The remaining four were civilians who had been in the wrong place at the wrong time. He remembered doing all of them […].[25]

21. Laura Pelaschiar, [Review of] "*The Twelve* by Stuart Neville", *Estudios Irlandeses*, 5, 2009 (https://www.estudiosirlandeses.org/reviews/the-twelve, last accessed 27.07.2020), p. 195.
22. Neville *The Twelve*, *op. cit.*, p. 144, my emphasis.
23. Cliff, *op. cit.*, p. 27. Let us quote: "The term 'Troubles trash' most often encompasses novels that depict political commitment as inimical to democratic society, that attribute the violence to the incurably atavistic inhabitants of the island, or that show scant regard for local differences and particular histories."
24. Elizabeth Mannion, *The Contemporary Irish Detective Novel*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 95.
25. Neville, *The Twelve*, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

The general picture drawn here is in black and white with a manichean death toll and rather one-sided perspective on events, so it seems. The victims are deliberately portrayed as Protestants and the executioner is Catholic – i.e. Fegan –, whereas one knows for a fact that the consequences of political violence were usually far more indiscriminate than this neat clear-cut sectarian binary. Death tolls on each side included victims and colateral damage from both communities – if only two communities are to be considered – which is a questionable assertion *per se*. Even the infamous Shankill Butchers never stuck to or wreaked havoc among Catholic victims only. According to Malcom Sutton's *Index of Deaths from the Conflict database*, at least a third of their victims happened to be Protestants or even members of the UDA and UFF, falling victims of internal strife and settling of scores.[26] The narrator in *The Twelve* seems to be indirectly oblivious of or impervious to the simple fact that there is no such thing as a clean or pure civil war.

Precisely here, the main literal ghost screaming in the reader's face is that of mere historical facts.

In his monograph *The Thriller and Northern Ireland Since 1969 :* subtitled *Utterly Resigned Terror* (2005)[27], as well as in his cogent essay "The Troubles with the Thriller : Political Violence and the Peace Process" (2012)[28], Aaron Kelly contends that, in the early stages of the Troubles, the connection between representations and the readership for which crime fiction was and still is produced in Northern Ireland cemented a lasting association between that genre, the Six Counties and regressive not to say reactionary, essentialist aesthetics.

> *At its most mechanistic, the thriller* is certainly a form which attempts to suggest that there are no classes, no gender, no community or women's groups, no human agency, or collective projects of collective emancipation, in short, nothing beyond the cyclical iteration of two tribalized, allochronic monoliths. [I ultimately wish to argue otherwise].[29]

In that aesthetics, ideological patterns are teeming with clichés. Notably the image of the backwards Irish, mired in an atavistic violence that is outside history. This patronizing view which heavily focuses on the Catholic population associated with an archaic religion, prevents any

26. See https://cain.ulster.ac.uk/sutton/chron/1982.html (last accessed 27.07.2020).
27. Aaron Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969*, London, Routledge, 2005, 224 p.
28. Aaron Kelly, "The Troubles with the Thriller: Northern Ireland, Political Violence and the Peace Process", *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, M. Rawlinson, A. Piette (Eds.), Edinburgh, Edinburgh U.P., 2012, p. 508-515
29. Kelly, *The Thriller and Northern Ireland since 1969, op. cit.*, p. 4.

effective political intervention. Fegan's brutal instinct is the epitome of that literary tendency and legacy.

It comes as no surprise then that crime fiction may be regarded as conservative and also in keeping with an ancient tradition stretching as far back as Elizabethan revenge tragedies not to mention Aeschylus. In that sense, ghosts –especially those haunting Neville's thrillers, are traces of or hints at a deep reluctance to delve into the real complex web of interwoven social ideological reasons for violence, be it the offshoot of imperialism or latter-day capitalism. Kelly quotes from Raymond Williams' marxist analysis and Fredric Jameson's postmodernist criticism to account for that oversimplifying process.[30] As Brian Cliff himself acknowledges, quoting extensively from Elmer Kennedy-Andrews'research, crime fiction is a place where political engagement is often too easily shunned or dismissed for the wrong reasons, depoliticizing a literary corpus that ultimately proves to be archpolitical all the same:

> Absent more substantial explorations, that is, fiction about the Troubles has too readily resulted in texts in which 'terrorist violence is treated *metaphysically*, as the manifestation of evil and madness', or texts that seemed 'to confine their explanations to psychosexual motives.' Such metaphysical and 'psychosexual' narrative patterns frequently relied on more than a hint of dark, pre-rational atavism, which served not just as atmosphere but as a substitute for explanation, as something that foreclosed further engagement.[31]

To conclude, one may venture that, instead of shedding light on the complex genesis or engineering of identity, community healing and political binaries, Neville actually recycles terribly effective voyeuristic narrative strategies at work in the so-called Troubles trash genre, where violence both elicits fascination *and* repulsion, which incidentally largely accounts for the genre's perennial massive commercial success. The final assessment of the literary worth of Neville's work depends on whether or not one thinks they can spot an ambivalent postmodernist, post-political, entropic vision of Northern Irish society therein. Brian Cliff and Elizabeth Mannion think that work by writers like Stuart Neville in Northern Ireland or Claire McGowan (in her book *Dead Ground* for instance) in the Republic, transcend, what they call "half-baked clichés" and a fake sense of restored order. To them, they preserve and illustrate the ambiguities and ambivalences of a dynamic complex society.

The Republican mafioso-style Bull O'Kane in *The Twelve* may then point to the last stages of metastasized old-school local sectarianism. It

30. *Ibid*., p. 4-26.
31. Cliff, *op. cit*., p. 28-29. My emphasis.

is graphically portrayed by Neville the moment when it crashes into the newfangled walls of neo-jingoism and transnational capitalism embodied by Brexit post-truth politics. This is fittingly summed up by McGinty, yet another dubious agent in the *The Twelve* ending up caught up in a massive shoot-out on a farm close to an everproblematic border separating the North from the South. The following quote reveals what he thinks at the prospect of a heap of dead bodies discovered by the police forces:

> It was only a matter of time before the bodies were found at O'Kane's farm. […] The politicians and the media would convulse, accusations would be hurled, recriminations threatened. Stormont might collapse again, or perhaps more concessions would be given by the British and Irish governments to keep the Assembly afloat. The European Union might throw more money into community grants to quiet the streets of Belfast. Maybe the British would blame it on the dissidents; they were friendless anyway.[32]

But yet again this seemingly contemporary chaos spanning from Westminster and the Dáil to the EU, beyond the unmistakable whiff of conspiracy theory it may elicit, is quite redolent of very ancient lines, which show, if need be, the permanence and transgression of old motifs haunting the anomalous territory known as Northern Ireland.

> So shall you hear
> Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
> Of accidental judgements, casual slaughters,
> Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause;
> And, in this upshot, purposes mistook
> Fallen on the inventors' heads. (*Hamlet*, V, 2)[33]

What remains to assess now is whether or not, as Jacques Derrida famously posited: "The ghosts belong to the future.",[34] which may turn out to be an ominous hypothesis, within the context of Northern Ireland, depending on their degree of obsession with revenge translating into a potential equation between ghosts and enduring binary sectarianism. It is the very motif of that danger of History repeating itself in Northern Ireland that lies at the heart of Neville's work. That repetition (already observable in the recurring narrative mechanism on twelve occasions through twelve murders and twelve potential revenges in the book) turns out to be both Deleuzian[35] in that it is differential -murder is repeated but the victim is different - and Marxist in that it has History locked up in

32. Neville, *The Twelve*, *op. cit*., p. 462.
33. Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. cit., p. 354, V, 2, 333-337.
34. Jacques Derrida (1991), *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington, Chicago, Chicago U.P., p. 359.
35. Read Gilles Deleuze, *Différence et répétition*, Paris, PUF, 1968.

a loop, tragic in essence and grotesque not to say absurd in its nihilistic repetitiveness.[36] It is that hateful cycle to the power of twelve that propels forward the book. the plot only ends when this absurd cycle is brought to a halt by forgiveness.

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36. In his 1885 essay entitled *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*, Karl Marx posits: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all the events and personalities of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." (https://web.archive.org/web/20170303190424/http://www.marx2mao.com/M&E/EBLB52.html).