Dermot Bolger's Ghosting the War

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Abstract

Dermot Bolger's *Walking the Road* (2007) is a tribute to Francis Ledwidge (1887–1917), one of the greatest Irish poets of the First World War. Focusing on the life and afterlife of Ledwidge who, as depicted in Bolger's play, emblematizes the condition of other Great War combatants doomed to oblivion, this essay, concerned with the various functions of the deployment of ghosts in Bolger's drama, argues that spectrality can become an effective means of revealing the plight of the war dead: the unremembered, whose names were effectively erased from public memory and who, thus turned into homeless revenants, were forced into a continual involvement in the war from which they cannot escape, even after death. As a spectral witness who moves between pre-war Ireland and the world of the trenches, Bolger's hero makes one aware how similar these realities are. Furthermore, as a classic case of shell shock, he demonstrates the role of haunting in the narrative of trauma, identity and memory. Last but not least, whilst enhancing the gothic dimension of the war, Frank's perceptions, as well as his spectral discourse, not only contribute significantly to illuminating the enigma which he personified, but, by providing an insight into his search for himself, they convey the plight of truth seekers who grasp, yet never fully encompass the Irish experience of the war.

Keywords: Irish poetry of the Great War; Francis Ledwidge; hauntology; Dermot Bolger; trauma; remembrance; desensitization; nostalgia; past versus present; the unremembered.

> [T]o tell a story is always to invoke ghosts, to open a space through which something other returns. (Wolfreys, 2002, p. 18)

> If I am getting ready to speak about ghosts, it is in the name of justice…. (Derrida, 1994, p. xix)

> In Ireland . . . all ghosts are political. (Mac Suibhne, 2008, p. 111)

Forgotten Heroes of the War

The interest in Ireland's involvement in the First World War, which grew dramatically towards the end of the twentieth century, brought with it the need of exorcising the ghosts of the Irish past. In his study of Ireland's war poets, Jim Haughey comments on this case of cultural amnesia in the following way:

> For most of the twentieth century a general drawing-down of blinds prevailed over Ireland's role in the First World War. While Northern Irish Unionists commemorated the 36th (Ulster) Division's service to Crown and Empire, across the border, nationalists, eager to promote their own myth of origin, found it politically inexpedient to acknowledge the sacrifices of the thousands of Irishmen who served in the British Army during the conflict. And so began the Great Amnesia whereby the memory of Ireland's war dead was effectively expunged from public memory. (Haughey, 2002, p. 61)

More importantly, in the opinion of Emilie Pine:

> Within a nationalist context the Irish soldiers of the Great War have often been forgotten in the larger purpose of remembering Easter 1916 while in a unionist context the entirety of experiences of the Great War has been refined into the remembrance of the Battle of the Somme, July 1916. Thus, as Keith Jeffrey argues, the Irish soldiers who fought in the Great War were left on the margins precisely because they were not politically central to the new, independent Irish State, on the other hand there was the overdose of ceremonial remembrance of the Ulster Unionists. (Pine, 2011, p. 127)

After their return, many ex-servicemen who had joined up the British Forces were considered traitors and, since the end of the war coincided with the rise of militant nationalism which was hostile to veterans, they were viewed with suspicion, intimidated and persecuted. Many were afraid to speak of their war experiences as it could endanger their families (Byrne, 2014). The 35000 (Pine, 2011, p. 127) who did not come back from the war were even easier to be officially forgotten in a country which was "changed, changed utterly."

Over the last thirty years—due to the joint efforts of historians[1] and writers—much has been done to expose the silent lies and reclaim that which Terence Brown described as "one of the great unspokens of Irish life" (Pine, 2011, p. 148). The theme of Irish participation in the Great War and its remembrance has been dealt with in many novels including

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[1] Some of the illuminating works discussing Ireland's involvement in the Great War include *Ireland's Unknown Soldiers* (1992) by Terence Denman, *Europe and Ethnicity: World War I and Contemporary Ethnic Conflict* (1996) by Seamus Dunn and T.G. Fraser, *Ireland: The 20th Century* (1999) by Charles Townshend, *Ireland and the Great War* by Keith Jeffery (2000), and *Ireland, the Great War and the Geography of Remembrance* (2003) by Nuala C. Johnson.

Jennifer Johnston's *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1974), Sebastian Faulks' *Birdsong* (1993), Sebastian Barry's *A Long Long Way* (2005) and *The Secret Scripture* (2008), or Tom Phelan's *The Canal Bridge* (2005). Amongst the playwrights who have responded to the challenge of history are Frank McGuinness with his *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* (1985), Christina Reid (*Tea in a China Cup* 1983 and *My Name, Shall I Tell You My Name?* 1989), and Sebastian Barry (*The Steward of Christendom* 1995). Last but not least, there is Dermot Bolger and his *Walking the Road* (2007) which, like those others, proves that Ireland has become "a nation of 'active' remembering, where the past is [no longer] regarded as something over and done with, but very much alive in the present" (Satake, 2017, p. 78). Most tellingly, this "aliveness," "a potential to be resurrected in the endless present of the theatre," is, as Anthony Roche states, embodied in the figure of the ghost (Roche, 1991, p. 63) whose haunting presences emphasise "the performative nature of remembrance culture" (Pine, 2011, p. 3).

In perceiving haunting as a method of sociological research, A.F. Gordon's *Ghostly Matters* tackles the question of "how to understand modern forms of dispossession, exploitation, repression and their concrete impact on the people most affected by them" (2008, pp. xv, 7, 8). She defines "haunting" as an animated state in which a repressed, or unresolved social violence makes itself known (Gordon, 2008, p. xvi). As the "social figure" the ghost doubtlessly represents that "form" by which "something lost or barely visible, or seemingly not there . . ., makes itself known or apparent to us in its own way" (Gordon, 2008, p. 8). Edyta Lorek-Jezińska's study on *Hauntology and Intertextuality in Contemporary British Drama by Women Playwrights*, which explores various aspects of cultural significance attached to the ghost, demonstrates that the ghost figure, which is after all "a strong and recurrent feature of Irish drama" (Roche, 1991, p. 63), amongst others "comes to signify the process of being haunted by the past, and by those who have been marginalized or silenced" (Lorek-Jezińska, 2013, p. 307). She thus proves that the study of the spectral can be effective as "the opening to the voices [like that of Ledwidge] that so far have been neglected but which are allowed to surface or emerge in the gaps or contradictions created in the mainstream or dominant discourses" (Lorek-Jezińska, 2013, p. 307).

Francis Ledwidge—"our dead enigma"

It would seem that this hauntological perspective is particularly apt for the discussion of the issue of Irish involvement in the Great War, as dealt with by Bolger's memory play *Walking the Road*. The playwright retells the story of the life, death and afterlife of one of the "ghosts" of the Great War craving that their memory be restored by the country for which they gave their lives. This "ghost" is none other than Francis Ledwidge (1887–1917), one of the most tragic Irish soldier poets of the years 1915–1917. Although he was a supporter of the Irish Nationalist cause and the aspirations of those involved in the 1916 Easter Rising, he joined the British army—The Royal Inniskilling Fusiliers—and was involved in campaigns in Gallipoli, the Balkans and, finally, the Western Front. Described by Seamus Heaney as "our dead enigma" in which all strains of Irishness "criss-cross in

useless equilibrium" (Heaney, 1979, p. 3), Ledwidge, to quote the Laureate again, does "represent conflicting elements in the Irish inheritance which continue to be repressed or unresolved" (Bolger, 2007, p. 4).

Writing about his fascination with Francis Ledwidge, Bolger confesses that the Slane poet was a guiding spirit in his own career and he always wanted "his ghost to haunt me" (2012a). In walking the roads of Ledwidge's life, Bolger pilgrimaged to the poet's home, edited various collections of his poems (*Francis Ledwidge: Selected Poems*, 1999; *The Ledwidge Treasury*, 2008; *Francis Ledwidge. Selected Poems*, 2017), each with an Intro-duction by Seamus Heaney, and an Afterword by the editor). He was even invited to unveil the poet's monument in Flanders; this event led to the writing in 2007 of *Walking the Road*, commemorating the ninetieth anniversary of Ledwidge's death in the War.

A New Type of the War Play: Objectives of Analysis

Bolger's, Satake argues, is a new type of World War One play, "not even included in Kosok's categories," which, after all, detail all essential aspects of the war:

> 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, 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. (Satake, 2017, p. 80)

Walking the Road retrieves the poet from the limbo of "never having [his] story publicly told" (Bolger, 2012b). Cast as Frank, a trench world-ghost, Ledwidge is given a chance to throw some light on the complexities of his Irish self, as well as on the desperation with which, walking the many roads of his past, he strives to find the one that leads to for-giveness of the people who no longer seem to recognise him as one of their own. This journey home, the one place which nothing can disparadise, is Frank's atonement, a search for the blessing he needs to be granted, absolution for the sins which, in his own con-science, he does not feel he committed.

Sadly inconclusive, this search seems to begin in earnest, paradoxically, only after Frank's demise, which also marks his progression towards an understanding of himself, a trial which he undergoes in an almost Heideggerian manner, projecting his life onto the horizon of death. This "repetitive confrontation with what has been repressed and forgotten, [and] what has become invisible" (Lorek-Jezińska, 2013, p. 24) seems to be a metaphor for haunting, which Wolfreys perceives "as an essential aspect of being" (2002, p. 18).

Focusing on Ledwidge's unfulfilled desire to come back, which emblematises the condition of other Great War combatants doomed to oblivion, this essay, concerned with the various functions of the deployment of ghosts in Bolger's drama, argues that spectrality can become

an effective means of revealing the plight of the war dead: the unremembered, whose names were effectively erased from public memory and who, thus turned into homeless revenants, were forced into a continual involvement in the war from which they cannot escape, even after death. As a spectral witness who moves between pre-war Ireland and the world of the trenches, Frank makes one aware how similar, due to entrapment and power struggle, these realities are. Furthermore, in a classic case of shell shock, he demonstrates the role of haunting in the narrative of trauma, identity and memory. Last but not least, whilst enhancing the gothic dimension of the war, Frank's perceptions, as well as his spectral discourse, not only contribute significantly to illuminating the enigma which he personified, but by providing an insight into his search for himself, convey the plight of modern truth seekers who grasp, yet never fully encompass the Irish experience of the war.

Establishing the Ghosts' Presences: A New Dimension of the Lost Generation

Having awakened after death, Frank's ghostly self relives various moments of his pre-war and trench existence. Representative of the many who are forced into oblivion, Frank is the ghost who not only has a history, but is himself history (Ratmoko, 2006, p. 1). Never alone in his plight, he has by his side a Proteus-like Companion, the only other character in the play and one who, depending on the situation, transforms (like Frank) into the ghosts of other people Frank used to know or met. Amongst them there are Frank's beloved Ellie, his younger brother Joe (by far the most frequent impersonation), a young German killed in the trenches, the fellow poet Tom Kettle, even a Francis Ledwidge (sic!) from Dublin, and, last but not least, a host of souls of the dead from various countries and continents. It is in response to their questions and pleas, but, above all, due to his need to come to terms with the various recollections he sees in his mind's eye, that Frank, disoriented and confused, can recreate his inverted *Bildungsroman*, which moves back and forth in place and time. As his memories unfold, they arrange themselves into a (ghost)[2] story about, first, Lance and then, about Corporal Francis Ledwidge, portrayed in his complexity as a soldier poet, patriot and family man. Underpinning each aspect of his spectral autobiography, haunting and death emerge as the key metaphors defining the concept of Irishness / Irish history depicted in the play.

Due to the *in medias res* convention deployed in the play, the viewers are not instantaneously aware that the two characters on the stage, Frank and Companion, are ghosts. And yet, the opening stage directions accentuate their deadness. Frank is described as "motionless, eyes staring out lifelessly" (Bolger, 2007, p. 15). Lifelessness, cold and/or numbness are also characteristics of his Companion. Occasionally, the protagonist informs his interlocutor: "I'm dead" or explains, as Frank does to the ghost Ellie, that he is unable to see her apparition because his "eyes remain mortal even in death" (Bolger, 2007, p. 69).

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[2] C. Clover argues that the ghost story might have such elements as "ghosts, a concern with trauma, with history, with class, with inheritance, a sense of terror and horror." See *Men, Women and Chain Saws: Gender in Modern Horror Film* (1992). See also Jack Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood* (1978).

Spectral Parade

When he finally comes to terms with his death, Frank becomes aware of thousands of other ghosts who, like himself, keep walking home. Their spectral "parade," one of the climactic, and most heart-rending, scenes of the play, demonstrates a new dimension of this war generation: "lost," not just because of the tragic waste of lives, *but due to the indifference* of their people whose unremembrance does not allow the dead to find peace: there is no resting place for the unreclaimed.

In *Walking the Road* ghosts are indeed a prominent and dynamic presence which, underscoring their communal nature, points to what Kathleen Brogan describes as "a historical consciousness of a people" (1998, p. 28). This presence becomes all the more significant due to their role as protagonists, narrative agents of their experience, and performers in/of the tale of their failed/lost lives. Their multiple impersonations as well as narratives are best rendered in the scene when Frank encounters other eternal stragglers. These errant ghosts acknowledge his presence and choose him (and / or his Companion) to be their spokesman, thus enhancing Frank's (and/ or Companion's) role as Everyman, the epitome of the war sufferer. The audience can hear the words of grief articulated through C (Companion) or F (Frank) who, at first, face each other:

> F: "My name is Wolfgang and I am walking home". "My name", [says another] "is Hans and Gunter and Gabriel." C: "My name is Alasdair, and Alexander, and Dirk and Dieter."

> F: "My name is Frederic and Flavio and Fritz and Felix." (Bolger, 2007, p. 60)

After a while, however, they turn to address the audience:

> F: "My name is forgotten by every living being. I have lost my legs and arms.

> C: "The mustard gas in my lungs still burns, even though my lungs were eaten by worms."

> F: "I am the unremembered great uncle whose features you inherit."

> C: "I live on in my laugh that only you possess."

> F: "During lovemaking I am reincarnated inside your sharp intake of breath."

> C: "You are not walking home alone, Frank."

> F: "No, I sense thousands walking, a great host in tattered uniforms" (pp. 60–61)

No accusations, no anger, no craving for revenge, not even a plea for attention and remembrance—merely a catalogue of examples of the "pity of war distilled," affecting all those scarred by the war: Wolfgang, Flavio and Gabriel. Stressing the blood ties that run through them as well as using the real names of the soldiers representing different sides of the conflict, Bolger poignantly reminds the audience of their membership in the human family that knows no nationalities or borders (Satake, 2017, p. 84).

Permeated by pity, this orchestrated manifestation of the dead (Davies, 2007, p. 2) produces "a narrative illusion of characters and plot in front of the audience" who, Roche posits, "together shape a symbolic plane of shared imagination out of this foundational

illusion" (Roche, 2015, p. 189). On this plane, the living who cannot but allow the haunting, can finally hear the message about the plight of the war dead and hopefully try to put an end to it. Moreover, this haunting enables the audience to realise "how emphatically di-dactic figures" the ghosts are, and how their visitation, "due to [its expected] transformative effects . . . emerges as a pedagogic event" (Miller, 1997, p. 328). Francis O'Gorman argues that, being the "posthumous function of the behaviours of the once-living," the ghosts come with a mission "to change the living too, to draw out a kindly spirit of humanity and to release the life that was not. [Thus, the spectres] reinvent the notion of moral awakening because they are its agents. . . . By them are the living quickened" (2010, p. 261).

Without a doubt, the participants of the spectral parade are all "figures of unresolved past" (Deane, 1974, p. 13; Martinovich, 2012, p. 1), and hence, as Kathleen Martinovich has it, they can be seen as "a means by which Ireland's history, especially the one that does not fit into the official narrative of Nationalism versus Unionism, can be accessed and as-sessed" (2012, p. 13). More significantly, even though no actual criticism of the status quo (of how cruelly the war dead are forgotten) is verbalised, the ghosts' very appearance—Frederick Jameson argues—calls "for a revision of the past, for the setting in place of a new narrative" and "reinvention of our sense of the past" (2008, p. 43). It is from this ethical imperative—calling "for a something to be done"—that, as Gordon posits, "comes a concern for justice" (2008, p. 194), a call which, as defined by Martinovich, involves acting "by way of the practice of mourning and remembering and [acknowledging] the part haunting plays in everyday social life" (2012, p. 13).

The Haunting and the Haunted

Although the spectres have no way of knowing if, or to what extent, their haunting will truly affect the audience, Frank's communion with this myriad of the war dead allows him to eventually accept his own death which, after two aborted attempts, he is finally able to relate to. Their stories give him the courage to cope with the horror for which he prepares by expressing the wish for "someone to find my remains: a splintered skull, and some buttons, two rows of teeth biting into a rusted identity tag" (Bolger, 2007, p. 59). The very description of his being blown to bits by a stray shell (suppressed for so long that it is offered just before the play's end) constitutes the ultimate proof of his being a ghost. "We were laying planks across thick mud," he recalls,

> Next thing I was flying through the air, gazing down at men below gathered round my shattered limbs. A stray shell. . . . Then I was soaring up, warm air beneath my feathers. And I wasn't alone. Our father was there and our brother Patrick and Ellie and the faces of men from Aus-tralia and Belfast and Antwerp and Berlin drawing me towards them. (Bolger, 2007, p. 68)

"I'm a ghost, Joe," Frank finally confesses to Companion who in turn replies: "And what do you think I am?" (Bolger, 2007, p. 69).

In fact, Frank earned his spectral status when he was still alive, after a nightmarish ninety-mile march to Salonika when, "zombiefied" from exhaustion, the soldiers resembled "a line of walking ghosts." "Nobody," it was emphasised, "could survive walking the road" (Bolger, 2007, p. 18). Well-versed in the theatre of war, Frank's ghost realises that he is a case of shell shock (Bolger, 2007, p. 67) whose symptoms he recognises only too well: feeling hypnotised, not knowing who and where he is, talking to himself, suffering from frequent memory lapses and confusion (Landsburg, 1977, p. 67; Winter, 2000, pp. 7–11). With his national insignia indistinguishable in what "must have been a uniform once" (Bolger, 2007, p. 15), Frank has "no sense of where I am or who I am" (p. 19). He cannot even tell how old he is (p. 69) or why the war broke out. He does not always recognize his Companion—"Who are you again?" (pp. 19, 65), he enquires every now and then—and is not even sure if he is Irish (p. 21). There are times he definitely thinks he is "going mad" (p. 20). Most telling, though, is his refusal to acknowledge certain facts: "I don't want to know," he claims, or "I don't remember… I don't want to remember. I keep trying to forget" (p. 56). Even more tragically, it turns out that the trauma does not seem to disappear after death; it just continues, deepening the soldier's identity crisis and weakening his reliability as a narrator, already undermined by his travelling through different time zones ("into when he was 9, 19, or 29"; Bolger, 2007, p. 56), yet never staying long enough in one place to offer more than a fragmentary recollection of events. For this reason his haunting can neither be deliberate nor determined; it just happens and seems to derive from the helplessness of the never-ending plight of entrapment in war and his need to liberate himself from the dread he has internalised and come to personify. In fact, Frank and Companion are quite vulnerable, and frequently haunted themselves. Every bend of the road home "calls out to them" (p. 40), but it merely seduces them into making another futile circle. Frank pleads with Ellie not to "steal the peace of my mind" and not to "torment" him (p. 32). Joe, in turn, is oppressed by the innocence in the face of Frank's younger self, haunted by the knowledge of the horrors it will have to absorb. Frank, too, is plagued by the faces when these happen to look at him from the tattered sacks used for bayonet practice; the exercise during which he "kills" not Germans, but the Irish from his past. More alarming still is his confrontation with the sight of "my own face haunting me" (p. 53).

In *Walking the Road*, Frank's death in war is the structural beginning of his tale which leads backwards into life, experienced in No Man's Land through occasional flashbacks. As these time journeys do not occur in a chronological order, they merely highlight the chaos of his spectral existence, reflecting his inability to cope with his past and the confusion with the present, which cannot seem to lead to a certain future. Frustrated by his fate, Frank enquires,

> Why am I standing there trapped in the eternity of one second? I can't go forward, yet I can't go home. . . . I'm twenty nine years old, I'm nineteen, I'm nine. I'm continually walking back through time, seeking the moment when I feel safe, when I'll glimpse a woman who will cure my hunger. (Bolger, 2007, p. 56)

The only woman who can embrace his dire need to belong is his "Mama," accepting her son regardless of his radical choices; even a memory of her smile envelops him with love and enables him to feel alive again. However, as will be shown, Mother Ireland is a very different story.

Spectral Spaces: Ghostly War and Ghostly Ireland

When reminisced about in Flanders, Ireland seems as distant as "another lifetime," yet not even his homesickness can erase Frank's bitter taste of oppression which he was doomed to experience in both places. His sergeant's command: "It's bayonets on, lads! Charge!" (Bolger, 2007, p. 54) triggers one of the many parallels between the soldiers' actions at home and in Turkey.

> We *charged* through cheering crowds on the Dublin quays. We *charged* up the beaches at Suvla Bay into the teeth of Turkish guns at Gallipoli. We crouched in crumbling holes in the sand and rose and charged and then retreated amid the slaughtered bodies. We *charged and charged* as the battle fronts changed. What never changed were our screams during each bayonet *charge*. (Bolger, 2007, p. 54; emphasis added)

When interpreted through the prism of the various meanings of "charge," life, even at its most carefree never sheds its underpinning of feverish haste, of prices to be paid, or of an alertness to the danger of attack.

Stuck in his trench ("like insects under glass"; Bolger, 2007, p. 37), meditating on the pervading sense of entrapment which he was also exposed to at home, he despises himself for being like "a blind mouse tussled up in a grain sack, scurrying with no way in and no way out" (Bolger, 2007, p. 58). Ireland is "innuendoes, whispers and taunts" (p. 46), a "goldfish tank of a place" (p. 46) where every man "has a label for me: pro-German, coward, traitor, failed lover" (p. 50). Written off by Dublin literati because of his peasant roots and "for trying to be something he wasn't" (p. 44), he is further ostracised (even beaten up) for fighting under the British flag, while his British sergeant treats him like dirt, using invectives rather than his name: "Bloody Irish," "Paddy," "Bloody poets" (p. 33), constantly threatening him with punishment or death. Frank cannot afford to mention his amnesia, because in this army it is cured "with a bullet—especially if you're Irish" (p. 21).

Never one to be pampered by his country, he was "sacked at twenty for leading a strike, stooping in farmers' fields" (Bolger, 2007, p. 43) and then finding the only work he could hope for—mending roads. Sick as he is "of the smell of asphalt and drinking tea from a scalding billycan in the rain" (p. 46), he continues to build roads in No Man's Land and, ironically, it is while doing this job that he meets his death: "We were building a road amid the screams of dying and drowning men. We paused for tea and then. . . " (p. 56).

Apart from this recollection, Frank is haunted by the ghostly, scarred landscape (Bolger, 2007, p. 37) whose horrid sights linger behind the eyelids, adding to the nightmare of the war even during sleep: "Famished, ghost-like looking children yearning for bread" (p. 17);

"The smell of trench rot, cold terror of men sinking . . . in the mud till they slurped from sight" (p. 22); the presence of rats "who'll gnaw through your boots while you sleep" (p. 33), or surprise one with a gift "of a half-chewed hand" (p. 37). Whole woods are gone, reduced to merely "the few trees left standing" (p. 36). If the guns go silent, the "unearthly silence" pitilessly exposes one to far more frightening noises: "the screams of the unsave-able" (p. 27) "to finish them off as you pass . . ., while you scrambled in terror over the dead and the dying" (p. 16). The spectres still recall the experience of their bayonets "getting tangled in the ribs of dying men. Lads tugging, amid the spew of guts, to retrieve their rifle and run on through the mud, terrified and terrifying inhuman and yet all too human" (p. 54).

Even though exposure to such sights (and sounds) may result in a soldier's desensitisation to suffering, at the same time it makes him strangely vulnerable, creating a desire for "some-one to hold me amid the bullets screaming" (Bolger, 2007, p. 59). Surprisingly, even poetry has its share in No Man's Land anguish. When a soldier poet dies, his verses turn into "a confetti of words," "evaporating [and] fluttering out of sight" (p. 68). If, sometimes, they happen to survive, they are merely ghosts, shadows of what they were, "scraps [of poems] lost in the trenches, caught on barbed wire, too saturated with rain to be legible" (p. 55).

The Ghostly Trajectory: "beginning by coming back"[3]

The last episode of the play focuses again on Frank's memory of walking the road. The seasoned soldier is talking to his young self, again at sixteen, sharing with him the wisdom of the man who, despite the horrors he has experienced, has not forgotten the magic walk home with his first poem:

> you are afraid now to face your mother, but one day you'll have to face bodies being blown asunder, you will see love torn from you. You will wake in flooded trenches, having dreamed of home; the first poem will lead to others and make you never truly fit in anywhere again, you will be pinned down in the baked Gallipoli sands, freeze and Serbia and then, with your body crippled, be packed off again to Flanders, a cheap meat for the slaughter. That's where your poem will lead, lad. But even if you knew this, you would still walk this road for the magic feel of writing. (Bolger, 2007, p. 66)

Nevertheless, it is not only for the magic feel of writing that Frank the ghost continues walking: there is no place for him in Ireland "except on the roads" (Bolger, 2007, p. 55). His walking, often in circles or retracing the previous paths, constitutes the most essential action in the play and one that has been taking place for ninety odd years. Ninety miles to Salonika, forty two miles from Slane to Rathfarnham and Dublin, and back again. Many, many times. At sixteen he could not have guessed that, passed through at night, "quiet as the land of the dead" (p. 41), these isolated places would become part of the vast cemetery of No Man's Land. Like himself, they have turned into ghosts of the past, irrevocably lost,

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[3] Derrida as cited in Lorek-Jezińska (2013, pp. 38, 302).

alien signifiers which, nevertheless, still have a haunting power of sheer poetry. The map of these isolated towns is imprinted in his heart and mind, and "beyond tiredness," he can "just keep walking, carrying an uncertain gift of this first true poem" (p. 42).

Finally, there is the home. Frank sees his cottage, so vividly remembered and yet unreachable. The last scene of the play shows him almost there, close enough to hear his mother softly speaking his name. He has time to realise that "our cottage looks so dark" (Bolger, 2007, p. 69), and then the field near the house "spreads to infinity" (p. 70), distancing him again from all he loves and cherishes, tormenting him again by letting him look at what is no longer within reach. How could something as tangible as home suddenly turn into its ghost?

Conclusion

If one multiplies Frank's personal trauma by the myriad of fates of the unremembered dead of the Great War, one can perhaps imagine the scale of the plight Bolger merely touches upon portraying through the last journey of Francis Ledwidge the fate of the spectres who still fight their battles for the dignity of remembrance. Even if No Man's Land is almost forgotten, "despite everything, ghosts remain." Even, as Schenstead-Harris argues, "if they cannot be seen to do so" (2015, p. 6).

As Bolger's play ends with Frank on the road, the shape used to "figure memory" (Satake, 2017, p. 79), his ghost neither permits nor is allowed closure (Lorek-Jezińska, 2013, p. 302). Like the Wandering Jew, he seems to exist for the purpose of reconstruction, of coming to terms with, and retelling, his experience: the soldiering of an Irishman in the British Army.

In 2007, when Ledwidge's poetry was known by the few, his haunting did open a space of awareness which, after a long wait made his voice heard in the mainstream. In 2017, the year of the centenary of his death, the whole nation was commemorating the poet whose achievements had finally been widely recognised. Does this mean that Ledwidge finally found the forgiveness he had so desired from Mother Ireland?

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