

# Spectral Streams of Post-Consciousness in Mike McCormack's *Solar Bones* (2016)

## Flujos espectrales de la post-conciencia en *Solar Bones* (2016), de Mike McCormack

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**Abstract:** This article analyses Mike McCormack's novel *Solar Bones* (2016) which narrates in a run-on sentence Marcus Conway's everyday life within the rural context of a 2008 Celtic Tiger Ireland about to collapse. Drawing upon the narratological precepts of experimental writing, especially the use of streams of consciousness, and Derrida's hauntology, this article argues that McCormack's novel charts tensions of coherence and collapse in post-Celtic Tiger fiction. The narration takes place within a *post-* perspective as Marcus's ghost brings it into existence. The experimentation with streams of post-consciousness and spectrality provides McCormack with valid aesthetic mechanisms to respond in fiction to Celtic Tiger concerns.

**Keywords:** Mike McCormack; experimental writing; hauntology; stream of consciousness; Celtic Tiger.

**Summary:** Introduction. McCormack's Experimental Writing: Marcus Conway's Streams of Post-consciousness. McCormack's Use of Spectrality: Marcus Conway's Ghost's Perspectives. Conclusions.

**Resumen:** Este artículo analiza la novela *Solar Bones* (2016), de Mike McCormack, que narra en una única frase la vida de Marcus Conway dentro del contexto del Tigre Celta irlandés de 2008, a punto de colapsar. Se adoptan los preceptos narratológicos de la escritura experimental, especialmente el uso de flujos de conciencia, y la teoría de la hauntología de Derrida, para demostrar que la novela representa una tensión entre coherencia y colapso en la ficción post-Tigre Celta. La narración discurre desde una perspectiva *post-* pues el espectro de Marcus la hace realidad. La experimentación con flujos de post-conciencia y la hauntología permiten a McCormack desarrollar mecanismos estéticos para dar respuesta a problemas derivados del fenómeno del Tigre Celta.

**Palabras clave:** Mike McCormack; escritura experimental; hauntología; flujo de conciencia; Tigre Celta.

**Sumario:** Introducción. La escritura experimental de Mike McCormack: los flujos de post-conciencia de Marcus Conway. El uso de la espectrología por McCormack: las perspectivas del espectro de Marcus Conway. Conclusiones.

## INTRODUCTION

Experimental writing in recent Irish fiction has been linked to the exploration of Celtic Tiger Ireland and its aftermath. For many, this representation of the contemporary social, economic and cultural discourses in Ireland addresses both “the notion of wandering through an unknown country in order to examine and observe its transformations and stigmas” (Epinoux 4) and the belief that “mapping Ireland’s future is even more difficult because so many of the old landmarks have disappeared” (O’Toole 3). This paper sets out to analyse Mike McCormack’s use of spectral streams of post-consciousness in his acclaimed experimental novel *Solar Bones* (2016) as a way to chart tensions between organisation and collapse in the context of a 2008 Celtic Tiger Ireland.<sup>1</sup> In a text lacking punctuation, Marcus Conway’s ghost remembers past life events in small-town rural Ireland. There, the “celebration of the minutiae of everyday life” (Flynn) and tedious work prevail against the backdrop of Celtic Tiger corruption and environmental disregard in a “pragmatic, dismissive and ideologically indifferent Ireland” (Ferriter 759).

Together with McCormack, Irish writers including Eimear McBride, Caitriona Lally, Sara Baume, Kevin Barry, Danielle McLaughlin and Colin Barrett are providing a new voice to Irish literary experimentation. Irish winners of the Goldsmiths Prize for experimental fiction,<sup>2</sup> Eimear McBride in 2013 with *A Girl is a Half-formed Thing*, Kevin Barry in 2015 with *Beatlebone* and Mike McCormack in 2016 with *Solar Bones*, are “concerned, on a deep and nuanced level, with the issue of the voice . . . ; cryptic, wild, jazzed, jagged, unstoppable, glottal, fucked. A voice

<sup>1</sup> *Solar Bones* won the 2016 Goldsmiths Prize for experimental fiction in the United Kingdom, the 2016 *Bord Gáis* Energy Irish Book Award and the 2018 International Dublin Literary Award.

<sup>2</sup> Launched in 2013 and sponsored by Goldsmiths, University of London and the *New Statesman*, this award distinguishes novels pioneering form and content experimentation.

that is nowhere settled” (Maleney). McCormack engages with the concerns of contemporary Ireland, re-visits an Irish literary tradition familiar with experimentation since the first modernists and combines it with references to Celtic superstition, folktales and Catholic beliefs. For McCormack, “the old ways of speaking to ourselves and of ourselves did not work, didn’t provide a complete picture of who we were” (Falvey). His experimental writing re-formulates older forms and aligns with Declan Kiberd’s statement that, “in Ireland, traditions often appear to die, while in fact [they are] being reborn in some new mode” (496).

Up to *Solar Bones* McCormack’s *oeuvre* offers a constant search for an experimental voice. His 1996 short-story collection *Getting It in the Head* shows a “febrile, brutalist, sci-fi-enhanced aesthetic” (Doyle) and points to experimentation.<sup>3</sup> For Liam Harte, this collection presents “the motifs of fragmentation and incompleteness [which are] the most recurrent in recent Irish writing, being especially marked in the contemporary short story, a genre which has proved highly effective in rendering the discordant juxtapositions of post-1990 Ireland” (201). McCormack moves into the form of the novel with *Crowe’s Requiem* (1998), whose protagonist is only twenty but suffers from progeria, a rare ageing disease. This first novel delineates tropes present in *Solar Bones*, such as illness, death, the need to recall the past and make amends when life is ending. His 2005 *Notes from a Coma* mixes domestic realism with features of a “1950s science fiction novel” (Kehoe). McCormack’s fragmented narration and a profusion of footnotes and commentaries provide a reflection of past Irish history and a contemporary look at Celtic Tiger Ireland. Although, for some, *Notes from a Coma*, was the “first great 21st-century Irish novel” (Nolan), for others, “at the height of the Celtic Tiger there seemed to be little appetite for the novel’s split narrative” (Falvey).

Much has been written about Ireland’s Celtic Tiger and its two phases: from 1994 to 2000 and from 2004 to 2008 (Smyth, Kirby). Ireland transformed itself from an “underachieving” state (Smyth 132) into one of the world’s financial referents as its GDP grew exponentially. This translated into rising salaries, frantic consumerism and a property boom. These were accompanied by changes in the socio-cultural and ideological foundations of the Irish State and people’s lives. Terms such as affluent, global, modern, open and excessive characterised these

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<sup>3</sup> He was awarded the Rooney Prize for Literature for this collection.

changes (Epinoux; Inglis; Fagan; Kirby et al.; Kirby; Mays). However, the Financial Crisis and Global Recession of 2008, about to happen at the end of the narration in *Solar Bones*, saw the collapse of the Celtic Tiger. Experts had already warned about the shaking pillars on which the Tiger had been built: xenophobia, corruption, inflation, debt, aggressive capitalism, clientelism, environmental disregard, inequality, stupidity and idiocy (Kitchin et al.; Maher and O'Brien; Morse; O'Toole; Smyth). In contemporary Irish literature the exploration of the Celtic Tiger and its aftermath has been the focus of authors such as Anne Enright, Donal Ryan, Roddy Doyle, Éillís Ní Dhuibne, Colum McCann, Peter Cunningham, Billy O'Callaghan, Trisha McKinney and Kevin Barry, among others (Altuna; Barros; Cahill; Elices; Estévez-Saá; Mianowski).

First, this article approaches McCormack's experimental writing and the modes for rendering consciousness in *Solar Bones*, drawing on foundational narratological theorists such as Genette, Cohn, Rimmon-Kenan and McHale. Their analyses of the narrative discourse (Genette, Rimmon-Kenan), the modes for presenting consciousness in fiction (Cohn) and the interaction between consciousness and the world outside consciousness (McHale) help in this approach to *Solar Bones*. McCormack makes extensive use of the interior monologue; the stream of consciousness—the “continuous outpour”—as he names it (Flynn). The novel presents paragraph breaks, repetitions, lists, enjambments, unconventional punctuation, irregular sentence construction and the disadjustment of narrative time, but no dividing chapters. These combine with McCormack's use of traditional tropes in Irish fiction, such as family, heritage, work and political ethics and community over individuality. In the novel, some of these become dysfunctional, corrupt, greedy and biased in a changing Celtic Tiger Ireland on the verge of collapse.

Second, McCormack develops his fictional strategy, a posthumous narration, with a *spectral* narrator, Marcus Conway's ghost, who speaks the novel into existence. The novel is analysed by applying the theoretical tenets of “spectrality,” in particular Jacques Derrida's “hauntology,” first coined in his *Spectres of Marx* in 1993. In *Spectres* Derrida introduces the idea of the ghost as a revenant returning to haunt us. Derrida calls on the living to listen to ghosts as elements of enquiry in times “out of joint” (1). For Fisher, Derrida's hauntology freezes a “zeitgeist . . . which demands critical commentary.” In her study on hauntology in twenty-first century English literature, Shaw draws on both

Derrida and Fisher to contend that hauntology “destabilizes space as well as time” (2) and profiles “the spectral and its capacity as a critical tool for comprehending the post-millennial period” (3). In *Solar Bones* Marcus’s spectre engages, following Shaw’s ideas, “with a range of social, political and economic discourses that continue to speak to the contemporary period” (3). McCormack favours the perspective of a ghost narrator returning to address Ireland’s Celtic Tiger. His choice follows Blanco and Peeren’s idea on spectrality in contemporary art, in that “notions of spectrality may facilitate the understanding and addressing of not only historical injustices and their commemoration in personal and/or collective memory, but also of situations of injustice and disempowerment” (19).

### **1. MCCORMACK’S EXPERIMENTAL WRITING: MARCUS CONWAY’S STREAMS OF POST-CONSCIOUSNESS**

In *Solar Bones* McCormack’s experimental writing represents thought and speech within post-consciousness, which allows him to contain the non-stop recall of Marcus Conway’s life “set over a few hours in a single day” (Gosling). The perspectives of the different characters are presented as: (1) free indirect discourse, described by Cohn as “a character’s mental discourse in the guise of the narrator’s discourse” (14); (2) psychonarration, or the narration of consciousness and the fictional psyche (Cohn 21–57); and (3) interior monologues with frequent use of the first-person pronoun, described by Cohn as a “modern ‘flowing’ variety of thought-quotations . . . associative, illogical, spontaneous” (12). These interior monologues turn into streams of consciousness (for this analysis, streams of *post*-consciousness), as the protagonist is dead. McCormack favours the “idiom” of streams of post-consciousness as they allow more lavish and rolling rhythms in a novel that is “rhythmic” and “on-running” (Maleney). The rendering of the ghost’s inner discourse is not mediated by graphic signs and gains in textual continuity (Cohn 62). The streams of post-consciousness entail fast narration, the twisting of grammar, the disadjustment of chronology and the avoidance of punctuation. As McCormack states, “a ghost would have no business with a full stop . . . it might fatally falter and dissipate” (qtd. in Jordan). The main character’s post-consciousness is narrated through the use of the first-person present tense, unquoted and, following Fludernik, “rendered as a flow of thought and associations” (81). McCormack’s writing aligns with experimental

fiction as it attempts to “subvert a sense of the normal, . . . experiment with form and typography, develop new ways of seeing, . . . imagine alternative realities, . . . deny closure” (Armstrong 5).

McCormack’s experimentation with streams of post-consciousness follows Genette’s concern with “the problems of narrative enunciating” (26). Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov, Genette classes the problems of narrative in three categories: tense, aspect and mood (29). To these Genette adds voice. In *Solar Bones* the time of the events and the time of Marcus’s remembrance and narration show “infidelities to the chronological order of events” (Genette 29). Marcus’s recall of his youth, family life, work and death is arranged depending, not only on indirect clues, but also on how the narrator/protagonist perceives the story or the type of discourse he uses. In so doing, Marcus’s interior discourse shows what McHale terms as “a finer-grained interaction between consciousness and the world outside consciousness” (45). For McHale, “mind is rendered more mobile by these strategies, quicker to seize on objects of external reality and then to abandon them for others, freer to digress” (45). At this stage, the term post-consciousness deserves fine-tuning. Objects, sounds and images trigger Marcus’s recall on a special day after his death. They are *post-* reality. Marcus’s streams of post-consciousness show that what happens in his mind and the outside world is brought into narrative existence after death. The beginning of *Solar Bones* introduces Marcus’s spectre coming to a liminal *post-* space and time, very much like purgatory, from where he recalls his past life in Celtic Tiger Ireland. Repetition (“the bell / the bell as / hearing the bell as”), passive and active voices (“hearing the bell as standing here / the bell being heard standing here”) and harsh enjambments (“hearing it ring out through the grey light of this / morning, noon or night / god knows / this grey day standing here and”) (7) abound when the Angelus bell repetitively tolls at 12 pm on All Saints’ Day. On awakening from his numbness, Marcus’s ghost—though at this stage the reader does not know the novel’s narrator is a ghost—feels that what is happening is real and strives to understand his surrounding liminal reality:

standing in the kitchen  
hearing this bell  
snag my heart and  
draw the whole world into  
being here

pale and breathless after coming a long way to stand in this kitchen  
confused (7–8)<sup>4</sup>

When in third-person, narration turns linear and devoid of experimental artifice. This happens when the ghost recalls past people and familiar places. This provides an idyllic idea of coherence of the individual and the collective imbued with ritual and a shared past in rural Ireland. McCormack's use of the parish bell, tolling ceremonially over a land containing the lives of the inhabitants of Louisburgh in Co. Mayo, on the West of Ireland, provides an insight into this collective reality, still rooted in traditional Catholic belief. Through references to local landscapes (schools, football pitches, bridges, graveyards, shops, pubs, health clinics, etc.) and their attached history—"which gathers this parish together through all its primary and secondary roads" (8)—, McCormack compares the time and space of collective history with those of a single person's existence. This frame of local landscapes provides a coherent and linear ancestry to a land and creed generations have clung to. Following tropes of land, heritage and family used by writers, such as Heaney and McGahern, and, more recently, Enright and Ryan, McCormack uses Irish landscapes to make a wider sense of things when linking collective and individual hi/stories. The Catholic parish bell—"ringing [and] drawing up the world again" (8)—acts as the organising prompter of events, such as Marcus's return in the form of a ghost and the functioning of local collective life.

Metaphorically, the bell also stands for the rhythmic heartbeat Marcus's ghost needs to make his streams of post-consciousness real. Among constant references to heart illnesses,<sup>5</sup> blood pressure and cholesterol—suffered by Marcus and his father—the bell keeps tolling. This bumping and systolic thump of the "bell-beat," an example of interaction between the world outside and Marcus's consciousness, as McHale advanced, allows the remembrance of Marcus's former family and professional life. McCormack's writing represents his protagonist's ordinary life as an attractive elegy of a man that has lived during the Celtic Tiger years and whose life and memories are shared by many in

<sup>4</sup> Extra indentation and small case beginnings follow those in McCormack's novel.

<sup>5</sup> Illnesses of the heart are a constant motif in McCormack's fiction. As Jordan recalls, "when he [Mike McCormack] was 18, his father died suddenly of a heart attack, a propensity that runs in the family as well as throughout his fiction: all his books are obsessed with the miracle and the fragility of the heart."

rural Ireland.<sup>6</sup> As Blake Morrison, Chair of the Judges for the 2016 Goldsmiths Prize, states on announcing the award for *Solar Bones*, the novel inhabits the mind of a middle-age engineer and honours an ordinary working life in “a prose that’s lyrical yet firmly rooted in the domestic.” Through lyricism the novel depicts the particular, the collective and the universal. When referring to solar bones, those featuring in the novel’s title, Marcus’s ghost recalls in third-person narration how these hold society together in rural Ireland, also pointing to the universality of existence:

mountains, rivers and lakes  
and pulling with it also all those human rhythms that bind us together  
and draw the world into a community, those daily  
rites, rhythms and rituals  
upholding the world like solar bones, that rarefied amalgam of time  
and light whose extension through every minute of the day is visible. (77)

Much stream of consciousness literature “limits itself to the representation of the contents of consciousness, and thus is not subject to chronological analysis” (Bal 74–75). For Cohn, “psycho-narration has almost unlimited temporal flexibility” (34). Genette associates the idea of order in narrative discourse to narrative time (33–36) and argues that there exists a narratological opposition between story time and the order of events in reality. This shows a “logical position of narration as against a narrated ‘reality’” (Rimmon-Kenan 23), but also produces anachronies and discordance. Marcus’s ghost manages the temporal and spatial variations in the novel and, in so doing, overcomes the tension between fragmentation/collapse and coherence/organisation. Marcus’s ghost’s streams of post-consciousness recall the hubris of the Celtic Tiger in a narrative leap between the ghost’s linear narrative time and Marcus’s real lifetime. Narratologically speaking, the novel starts with the tolling of the Angelus Bell on 2 November and ends with the time signals for the one o’clock radio news. The latter coincides with Marcus’s fatal heart attack. But it is his heart attack, occurring seven months earlier, that prompts the

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<sup>6</sup> McCormack’s fiction is mostly set in Co. Mayo, on the west coast of Ireland. Although he was born in London, it is there that he grew up on a farm. His interest in the local and rural provides him with sound material for his portrayal of commonplace characters and their intricate or, as with Marcus Conway in *Solar Bones*, even quiet lives.

appearance of his ghost and, accordingly, narration. The end of Marcus's life causes, posthumously, the beginning of the ghost's narration, recalling and re-organising Marcus's life backwards during the Celtic Tiger. This post-perspective favours retrospective commentary. As Marcus's ghost states, "all this is only clear in hindsight" (30). The narrative coherence achieved when acting/recalling backwards is compared in the novel with the story Mairead, Marcus's wife, tells him of a Mongolian woman who does everything backwards as opposed to what everybody in her tribe does:

it's their belief that if everyone is walking and talking and doing things in the same direction then there is real danger that the whole world will tip over, so one person is needed to work the opposite way to keep the world balanced. (73)

This idea of the disadjustment between the ghost's time of narration and the real past events also follows a Derridean understanding of time within hauntology. For Derrida, a ghost's comings and goings are not ordered according to the "succession of a before and an after, between a present-past, a present-present, and a present-future, between a 'real time' and a 'deferred time'" (48). Marcus Conway's ghost returns as a revenant to re-tell Marcus's life and, as with Derridean ghosts, "one cannot control its comings and goings because it *begins by coming back*" (Derrida 11). Marcus's ghost's narration progresses forward based upon recalling. As with the story of the Mongolian woman, the ghost needs this recalling "backwards" to produce a narrative setting from where to open a site of commentary on the strain between the coherence of Marcus's professional life and the economic and ideological wrongdoings that contributed to the collapse of Celtic Tiger Ireland. After his awakening to his new state, it is not coincidental that Marcus's ghost's first reference to this reality of collapse is through the reading of the two newspapers his wife had bought and left on the kitchen table. Among references to wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and issues between Israel and Palestine, Marcus's ghost highlights one inside article which outlines "the causes and consequences of our [Ireland's] recent economic collapse . . . on the night of September 29th . . . the night the whole banking collapsed . . . the indices and magnitudes of a new cosmology" (13).

As for what is familiar, McCormack represents most of Marcus's interaction with his family—his wife, Mairead, a local schoolteacher; his

daughter, Agnes; and his son, Darragh—through experimentation with the use of the interior monologue, free indirect speech and psychonarration. These narrative techniques, which are used to characterise the presentation of consciousness (Cohn), dramatise “relations among voices or positions” (Rimmon-Kenan 3) and show the mental processes of all the family members. Marcus’s ghost recalls how “Mairead wailed, when she stumbled upon all this” (McCormack 23) as Mairead’s response to his affair with another woman in Prague before they got married. Likewise, in one of the many dad-son virtual conversations on the state of corruption in Ireland, Marcus’s spectre recalls how “Darragh’s voice had that note of hysteria to which it is prone whenever he has to grapple with the human slobberishness of the world” (31). The impact on Marcus of one of Agnes’s experimental exhibitions made her “anxious to give clear evidence of both her commitment to the idea and her wish to set my [Marcus’s] mind at rest” (51). Although Marcus’s is “the rarest of fictional entities: a happy family” (Wallace), his family shows some contemporary signs of dysfunction. His children epitomise the younger generations in an Ireland within a discourse of globalisation. Agnes becomes a popular experimental painter. She has successfully secured her first exhibition with her latest works, whose title was “The O Negative Diaries,” as they had been painted with litres of her own blood. Darragh lives in Australia and only communicates via Skype. He leads the life of a globetrotter and gets a round-the-world ticket to find real meaning in life. Narration in all these instances shows “the problematics of reconstructing the past and retrieving memory and the problematics of representation and subjectivity” (Rimmon-Kenan 4). Even if all these point to dysfunctionality, Marcus’s ghost recalls Marcus’s attempts to maintain understanding and normality within his family, and he succeeds in keeping these tensions under control.

The final moments of Marcus’s life in the novel follow along lines of collapse, although from a more personal perspective. Marcus’s ghost recalls Marcus’s final hours leading to his death on Friday, 21 March, seven months earlier. He dies listening to the secular time signal, “the pips” (219), for the one o’clock radio news bulletin. With the background of the radio news “pips” and, encapsulated in interior monologue and enjambment, the novel ends with Marcus’s realisation of his death deprived of all the former references to firmly rooted nature, ritual, creed,

local surroundings, collective lineage and ancestry. Marcus's death<sup>7</sup> also implies he will no longer work as an engineer dedicated to his profession and the common good of Irish society. Marcus's ghost envisages the final moments of Marcus's life with fear towards individual and common collapse in an unavoidable way:

there is nothing else for it but to keep going, one foot in front of the  
other  
the head down and keep going  
keep going  
keep going to fuck (223)

## 2. MCCORMACK'S USE OF SPECTRALITY: MARCUS CONWAY'S GHOST'S PERSPECTIVES

The ghost-protagonist/narrator in *Solar Bones* provides perspectives of remembrance within his streams of post-consciousness. As Maloney states, "*Solar Bones* is told from the perspective of a ghost, the ultimate outsider. Who else could see 'all of life'?" The ghost's perspective of *all of life* favours the narration of Marcus's personal and professional life. McCormack's novel follows what hauntology scholar Shaw contends lies behind the use of the ghost in literature as it "confronts the contemporary with the necessity of participation, encouraging the realization that we must engage with it in order to create meaning" (3). The tenets of hauntology were first introduced by Jacques Derrida in his 1993 *Spectres of Marx*,<sup>8</sup> in which he wonders whether the Marxist tradition can still respond to the winds of change after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Derrida engages with the many spectres that haunt not only Marxist texts but also other political, economic and literary texts in order to provide commentary on various discourses of the time. Derrida designs his analyses in *Spectres of Marx* as conversations about ghosts as he finds it necessary "to speak of the ghost, indeed to the ghost and with it" (xviii). For Derrida, the presence of ghosts haunts those alive so as to alert them to their existence.

Many scholars have applied hauntology since then. In her approach to Derrida's defence of spectres as critical tools, Loevlie believes that

<sup>7</sup> See Pietrzak's analysis of *Solar Bones* from Heidegger's perspective on death.

<sup>8</sup> *Spectres of Marx* originated in a series of lectures delivered by Derrida at the University of California at Riverside.

“we are always caught up in invisible and intangible webs of the past, of the Other, of the future, of death” (337). In *Solar Bones* Marcus’s ghost’s narration is enmeshed in these webs of reference, and his existence in a liminal “purgatory” corroborates Loevlie’s reworking of Derrida’s idea that “our existence is therefore always *in-between*, defined of course by the materiality of our present being, but also by the immaterial flux that surrounds and situates us” (337). Recent work on spectrality engages with the figures of ghosts, haunting, the return, visibility and artistic representation and draws heavily on “Derrida’s rehabilitation of ghosts as a respectable subject of enquiry” (Davis 8–9). For Blanco and Peeren, spectral theory addresses “the temporal and spatial sedimentation of history and tradition, and its impact on possibilities for social change; the intricacies of memory and trauma, personal and collective” (2). In *Solar Bones* Marcus’s ghost returns in order to bring to the forefront unfinished business with the living and to demand reflection. For Davis, in Derrida’s hauntology, the spectre “does not return to deliver a message as such; nevertheless Derrida calls on us to endeavour to speak and listen to the spectre” (11).

At the beginning of the novel Marcus’s ghost cannot comprehend what occurs and there are constant references to dislocation in setting and time within his streams of post-consciousness. He finds,

something different about moving through the house today  
a feeling of dislocation as if some imp had got in during the night and shifted things around just enough to disorientate me, tables, chairs and other stuff just marginally out of place by a centimetre or two, enough to throw me so that now. (33)

Marcus’s ghost sees himself in a liminal space he cannot understand and feels “some twitchy voltage cutting across me [him] so that it’s hard to focus properly on anything” (3). Marcus’s ghost needs to focus on actual objects in his kitchen. He finds his wife, Mairead, had even left him “a sandwich on a side plate, covered with a napkin and a glass of milk beside it” (34).<sup>9</sup> McCormack introduces with this episode the idea that those alive need to speak to the dead, to ghosts, too. In Derrida’s hauntology there is a need to allow ghosts to roam so that they can

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<sup>9</sup> References to objects, feelings and events are actually happening in November, “these grey days after the Samhain” (81). According to local Irish folklore food and drink were left for the dead who returned from purgatory.

respond to our invocations and maintain a certain type of dialogue. As Davis states, “if the dead come back, it is because our belief systems allow for their return” (4). For Davis, “maintaining a dialogue with the dead means keeping their texts alive, which entails preserving them from premature closure” (138–39). In *Solar Bones*, this interaction between presence and absence, recalled by the spectre but also by the living, with the character of Marcus’s wife and her leaving food and drink—following local Irish folklore and superstition—favours remembrance and commentary of private and collective perspectives. Marcus’s ghost finds that his situation facilitates the clearer vision of a whole past life:

the light is awash with ghouls and ghosts and the mearing between this world and the next is so blurred we might easily find ourselves standing shoulder to shoulder with the dead, the world fuller than any other time of the year, as if some sort of spiritual sediment had been stirred up and things set adrift which properly lie at rest, the light swarming with those unquiet souls whose tormented drift through these sunlit hours we might sense out of the corner of our eye or on the margins of our consciousness

where you need to have faith in these things, a willingness to believe and elaborate on them so that it always gladdened me to find that part of me that was always a true believer has not died. (81–82)

With the choice of a ghost-engineer, McCormack favours the commentary on the economic, political and ideological mindset that contributed to the particular version of Irish capitalism: The Celtic Tiger. As a civil engineer in Celtic Tiger Ireland, Marcus seeks coherence and organisation as part of his professional praxis, which contrasts with tensions and representations of collapse, corrupt practices and environmental disregard during the Celtic Tiger. Working for the welfare of Ireland, Marcus recalls how the importance of civil engineering and public works in the progress of the Celtic Tiger years developed differently. The rapid development and progress experienced by Ireland during the boom years had been unequal: “most of the boom money went into bypassing or linking major urban centres” (56), as remarks Mairead, ironically, when she complains to Marcus about the state of local bog roads. Marcus’s ghost also recalls the cases of the uncontrolled installation of wind turbines and the “future of these wind turbines, weighing their environmental impact against whatever their energy efficiency was” (28). He also remembers the spread of “viral infection

and contamination” caused by “the coliform *Cryptosporidium*, a viral parasite which originates in human faecal matter” (30–31) in the water supply<sup>10</sup>—with which Mairead becomes seriously ill. In addition, the ghost’s references to the corrupt practices in the building of both the Keeva Bridge and the new national school in Derragarramh—which had been stopped because of the fraudulent use of concrete in its foundations—represent disregard for environmental issues and a worrisome expansion of public works at any cost during the Celtic Tiger years.

It is not coincidental that engineering, public works, and the collective welfare are topics referred to by Irish modernists of the beginning of the twentieth century, a source of reference for McCormack in *Solar Bones*. In *Public Works. Infrastructure, Irish Modernism, and the Postcolonial* (2010) Rubenstein analyses how the modernity of public works during the first years of the Free State—the time of the post-colonial, independence and new needs—made James Joyce, Flann O’Brien or Denis Johnston engage in their writings with aesthetic reactions in form and content to the “expansion of public utilities” in Ireland. Rubenstein refers to the first state-controlled national electrical grid, the Shannon Hydroelectric Scheme, and the extensive sewage schemes in urban centres in Ireland so as to “sketch a brief history of what made public utilities so prominent in the minds and works” (3) of Irish modernists. For Reynolds, this proves the importance of public works and civil engineering in the formation of modern Ireland. However, whereas the ambitious infrastructure projects designed to modernise Ireland referred to by Joyce, O’Brien or Johnston reflected a time of collective excitement in the progress of the recently created Irish Free State, the ghost-engineer of *Solar Bones* regrets the loss of this collective ethos during the Celtic Tiger years. Unlike the booming effects of the economic miracle praised by many, Marcus’s ghost deems the atmosphere apocalyptic: “it was now the case that the citizens were consuming their own shit” (108), when he refers to the contamination of the water supply. The ghost extends the situation to that of the whole country as “history and politics were now a severe intestinal disorder” (120). References to corruption, environmental intrusions and delays in public works by institutions are framed by Marcus’s ghost within the

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<sup>10</sup> McCormack hints at the water contamination outbreak with the same cause in Galway in 2007.

“incompetence or willful disregard on the part of the authorities” (123). But the blame is also extended to the Irish electorate. For the ghost, they become “complicit in this disaster . . . by way of whatever electoral foolishness they had wittingly or otherwise participated in” (124). McCormack’s ghost represents many qualities Katy Shaw attributes to spectres as they are “profoundly social, understood as a call to social action . . . [and] function to highlight future potentialities and, in turn, demand actions and decisions from the living” (12).

Marcus’s ghost offers a site of reflection between former and present realities. As hauntology scholar Davis contends, the ability of spectres to “generate fresh insight is not yet exhausted . . . [and] can still surprise us with unexpected potential for meaning” (139–40). Marcus’s ghost recalls in his streams of post-consciousness why he had chosen his profession, and compares it to the present corrupt behaviour in Ireland. In his case, his aims and ideals served collective welfare and honesty in his daily practice:

although I was young at the time I already had a keen sense that engineering was a high and even noble calling, firmly on the side of human betterment where it stood with a host of other values loosely grouped at the social democratic end of the political spectrum as I understood it then. (22)

McCormack contrasts a former mindset—recalled with references to Marcus’s father’s former traditional, humble and honest work habits in Ireland in “an age when the world understood itself differently” (23)—with the practices of the Celtic Tiger years about to collapse. Marcus’s ghost prompts the reflection of social behaviour during the Celtic Tiger. The ghost brings back from memory how Marcus witnesses political and economic corruption but maintains his integrity before the powerful local councillor. McCormack uses this episode to represent local clientelist politics in Celtic Tiger Ireland. The metaphor of the unfinished national school in Derragarramh needing solid foundations and not cheap concrete—as the contractor intended to please the politician against Marcus’s orders—points to a society ruled by the immediacy of results and quick profit. Marcus faces the county politician and makes a clear difference between their styles of undertaking public work, which, in the long run, will make everybody accountable:

the difference between a politician and an engineer, your decisions have only to hold up for four or five years—one electoral cycle and you are acclaimed a hero—but my decisions need a longer lifespan than that or my reputation is in shreds. (167)

For Rubenstein, public works and utilities at the beginning of the twentieth century in Ireland provided “supplemental and utopian aspects”; and more importantly, a “story about the development of public utilities as the development of the common good” (7). This idea points to the collective project of building a national community of welfare. In *Solar Bones* all the contemporary projects under construction envisage a better future in Celtic Tiger Ireland. However, how they are carried out or brought to completion, if ever, reveals parts of an Irish capitalist mindset during the Celtic Tiger veering towards clientelism, corruption and individual wealth, far from a collective project (Kicthin et al.; Morse). Marcus remains true to his profession as his ghost reflects on the excitement of working towards an ideal Irish society which progresses towards the common good:

there is still something to wonder at in the pouring of a concrete foundation, the way it draws so many skills and strengths together, the timing and cooperation needed and the way the rising and spreading tide of concrete itself demarks, as no other stage in the building process can, the actual from the theoretical, makes the whole thing real . . . the building at last beginning its rise out of the ground and seeing it for so many years on so many public buildings—libraries, water-purifying plants and so on—twenty years of this still had not taken the excitement out of it for me, that uncanny sense of a building beginning to take on mass and shape in the blue light of the world where so many things can go wrong. (173)

Doyle believes that in *Solar Bones* “collapse is the leitmotif of this novel: economies, infrastructures, the human body, the very machinery of the stars and galaxies—all of it is unstable, the careless work of a long absent-minded engineer. The rural West is just one grim shard of a universe in dereliction.” However, Marcus’s ghost establishes a contrast between the thematic tension of the collapse of Celtic Tiger Ireland and the coherence Marcus seeks professionally. As with other spectres in literature, and following Derrida’s idea of the agency of ghosts, Marcus’s ghost “functions to highlight what has gone before us, to remind us of our responsibility to live consciously of this, and to use this knowledge to

inform the future” (Shaw 12). Absent-mindedness and carelessness are not part of Marcus’s professional practice of honesty and work ethics, as his ghost remembers:

I sometimes allow myself the belief that I have given my life to something which has been on the side of human betterment, an idea which takes hold of me with such insistence that the part of me which needs to have faith in things starts seeing it as a religious vocation with its own rituals and articles of faith not to mention a reckoning in some vaulted and girdered hereafter where engineers’ souls are weighed and evaluated after a lifetime’s wear and tear in the friction of this world, standing before some tribunal where you point to your works and say

these are the things I have signed my name to, these are the things to which I have given my best energies and inspiration. (174)

McCormack’s use of interior monologue as the main method for the ghost-protagonist’s utterance addresses the need to understand who the recipient of Marcus’s ghost’s memories is. Could this be a frantic, corrupted, individualistic, money-minded Celtic Tiger Ireland? For Epinoux, during the booming years of the Celtic Tiger many leading leitmotifs had to do with “new,” “global,” “modern” and “affluent”; however, the recall of the past was not envisaged (4). The use of a ghost in *Solar Bones* articulates the advocacy of a need to recall and reflect upon individual and community practices so as to understand reality during the Celtic Tiger years. In so doing, McCormack addresses the tensions between coherence and collapse in the transformation of contemporary Ireland and provides references to former landmarks that have either disappeared or changed completely. McCormack’s enterprise in *Solar Bones* corroborates what Epinoux states in her study on the exploration of new cultural spaces and their representation after the booming years:

In the post Celtic Tiger era, a need has developed to study the past, particularly the recent past, in order to avoid making the mistakes which led to the crisis. Artists excavate the past to provide different understandings and to highlight a shared history and a common future. They also use it as a means to link past, present and future. (4–5)

## CONCLUSIONS

*Solar Bones* explores an individual's organisation and collective collapse of the Celtic Tiger years through the use of spectral streams of post-consciousness. McCormack's writing shows a clear quest for meaning, for an ultimate voice, through the experimentation with form and content, and pays tribute to "the resurgence of the experimental Irish novel" (Boland). McCormack's *Solar Bones* becomes comprehensible after its experimental "unfamiliar structures, forms and content have been conventionalized over time" (Armstrong 1). In form, McCormack uses the interior monologue, the stream of consciousness, paragraph breaks, swift lists, lack of punctuation, time disadjustment but no dividing chapters in his narrative. Thematically, the novel refers to the loss of a more just society and the socio-economic disruptions during the Celtic Tiger times. Celtic Tiger capitalist modernity and rural community traditions are key contrastive characteristics in the novel. The use of ghosts, religion, folklore, an individual's family life and profession is set against the particular version of Irish capitalism. For Deckard, "*Solar Bones* is a novel of collapse; the collapse of an individual consciousness after death, the collapse of the Tiger economy and its attendant lifeworld." To this collapse Marcus's ghost provides coherence and the need of reflection in McCormack's experimental novel. That several recent winners of the Goldsmith Prize are Irish somehow points to a lineage and invocation to earlier experimentation and modernism. Reynolds believes that the recent afterlife of modernism, as implemented by these Irish writers, "testifies to the enduring potentiality of modernist forms, themes and practices, as evident in the upsurge of Irish fiction by Eimear McBride or Sara Baume—fiction that overtly and knowingly recapitulates modernist technique" (4). It also suggests, for Reynolds, "that the modernist project is not complete, its quest to 'make it new' lives on in a present-day Ireland" (4). Boland believes that "McCormack's writing is the latest in a growing canon of literature which draws self-consciously on an Irish modernist heritage to tackle contemporary concerns." Modernist echoes of formal strategies of inwardness, together with a character's mediating consciousness through spectral streams of post-consciousness, and thematic reactions to utopian aspects of common good and welfare against a backdrop of corruption, clientelism and aggressive capitalism, are used by McCormack in *Solar*

*Bones* to respond with valid aesthetic mechanisms to Celtic Tiger realities.

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