Chapter 1

What Danger Can There Be in Being the Shadow of a Gunman in Dublin, at Easter, in 1916? Political Hauntologies in Joyce, O’Casey, and Yeats

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ABSTRACT
As the centenary of the events of the Rising that took place in Dublin in Easter week 1916 revolves around us, this article revisits the period, and its before and after, through the lens of three literary works – James Joyce’s Dubliners (1914), Sean O’Casey’s The Shadow of a Gunman (1923) and W. B. Yeats’ ‘Easter, 1916’ (1916, pub. 1921) – employing theorisations of temporality set out in Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx (1993), and a concentration on ideological messaging in the forms of hauntological ellipses and spectral insignias, to analyse the events and map their potentials, then, and their effects on the present day.
What Danger Can There Be in Being the Shadow of a Gunman in Dublin, at Easter, in 1916?

History, Stephen said, is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake...
(Joyce 1922, 34)

INTRODUCTION

The suffix of an ellipsis is applied to this epigraph, taken from James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), so as to force us – in Jacques Derrida’s words in *Specters of Marx* (1993) – ‘to reflect again […] on what happens and deserves the name of event after history’ (17). Derrida’s long-in-coming political intervention presciently responds to Francis Fukuyama’s utopic statement on ‘the end of history’, made in his book of that name (1993), which he believed at the time of the two works’ appearance was to come about in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.1 Rather, in recent times – our very recent history – nightmarish and catastrophic economic upheaval and violence has swept the globe.2 100 years on from the Easter 1916 Rebellion, in Ireland’s recent history, the seventh of March 2009 in Massereene, in the North, saw the shooting dead of two soldiers, followed two days later by the further killing of a police officer: ‘the first murders of security forces since the Good Friday Agreement was signed in 1998’ (Darby 2009). These events were succeeded by subsequent incidents of disruption: for example, police officer Ronan Kerr was killed in April 2011 by car bomb, and this was followed in June by street violence in Belfast; civil unrest and rioting occurred again in the city in late 2012, erupting over the decision taken by the city council to stop flying the union flag all year round. Marking the centennial Rising anniversary, a bomb was exploded in east Belfast on the fourth of March 2016, around which the terror alert was heightened and security tightened.3 Such violent nationalistic resurgences – and both Irish and British nationalisms are bearing out in these – thus beg again Derrida’s cautionary question ‘whither history?’ and re-evoke Stephen Dedalus’ ‘big words that make us so unhappy’ (Joyce 1922, 31).4

Derrida’s question is one particularly pertinent to the country of Ireland, in which nationalism is not something simply synonymous with imperialism, but at times rather a force in opposition to that particular mode of domination, and to social factors that have come about in its wake; facts which a utopic conception of the ‘end of history’ might risk too easily papering over. Indeed, as Aijaz Ahmad reminds us:

What role any given nationalism would play always depends on the configuration of the class forces and sociopolitical practices which organize the power bloc within which any particular set of nationalist initiatives become historically effective. That position cuts against both Third-Worldist nationalism and poststructuralist rhetorical inflations [for one such inflation, see the disagreement with Derrida in note 5 below], and implies at least two things. It recognizes the actuality, even
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