

Recovering the Archive and Finding Forgiveness in Park's *The Truth Commissioner*

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Aleksandra Hajduczek,

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Abstract: In her article "Recovering the Archive and Finding Forgiveness in Park's *The Truth Commissioner*," the author utilizes Jacques Derrida's theories about the function of archivization and the "impossible madness" of pure forgiveness to examine how these issues are addressed in post peace process Troubles fiction, focusing specifically on David Park's 2008 novel *The Truth Commissioner*. Park's text provides a particularly relevant example of the tension that Derrida outlines between the need for an unconditional, pure, and "hyperbolic" forgiveness and the conditional, judicial forgiveness that he associates with the truth recovery process.

Aleksandra HAJDUCZEK

Recovering the Archive and Finding Forgiveness in Park's *The Truth Commissioner*

With the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, the thirty-year span of violence known as the Troubles was ostensibly brought to a peaceful conclusion, and Northern Ireland has been tentatively established as a post-conflict society. Yet the social, cultural, and political ramifications of the Troubles, which left over 3,000 people dead, 40,000 wounded, and countless others suffering from ongoing psychological trauma, have only recently been explored in Northern Irish prose fiction written both during the peace talks and after the signing of the Agreement. As a historical event of trauma, the Troubles are inevitably connected with questions about articulation, representation, memorialization, and reconciliation. Thus, it is not surprising that one of the debates currently taking place in Northern Ireland revolve around how to address the past (if at all), how to forge a collective memory, and what kind of forgiveness, if any, can be achieved through institutional and non-institutional intervention. As Tom Herron has noted, "It is perhaps only when violence has ended that trauma suffered and perpetuated can begin to be more fully comprehended" (19). However, the question of how to begin to approach such comprehension remains a contentious and divisive issue, even after the peace process.

In part, the difficulty of locating a suitable means to confront the past stems from the fact that the Good Friday Agreement itself was notably vague in terms of how the nation should deal with past traumas in order to avoid repeating these same sectarian conflicts in the future. Therefore, while the Agreement sought to "acknowledge and address the suffering of victims" and to build a "peaceful and just society as a true memorial to the victims of violence," there was little attention given to the practical methods through which these admirable goals could be achieved ("Belfast Agreement" 6). In an attempt to address this oversight, various political and community efforts have been established that concentrate on the ongoing issues of victims, such as the formation of the Historical Enquiries Team, the Northern Ireland Memorial Fund, and The Victims Commission. Additionally, several cross-community projects and consultation groups have been formed, which endeavor to address historical traumas across the sectarian divide, such as Healing through Remembering and the Eames Bradley Commission. Despite these efforts, however, there has been continual tension and debate within Northern Ireland that centers on issues ranging from the public's access to archival records, the efficacy of inquiries, and the necessity of finally addressing certain unspeakable or contested topics that emerged following the Troubles, such as collusion, the fate of the disappeared, and the early release of paramilitary prisoners.

Colin Graham stated that "the beginning of the Troubles is the beginning of a lost narrative time, while the peace is the beginning of stories, testimony and tentative hopes for restitution" (180). This article will explore how the recovery of these "lost narratives" and their relationship to restitution is examined in David Park's novel *The Truth Commissioner*. In particular, Jacques Derrida's theories about the function of archivization and how pure forgiveness is a "madness of the impossible" are a useful framework through which to analyze this text, since Park specifically explores issues of collective amnesia, marginalized narratives, and the problematic concept of reconciliation when a nation has not fully dealt with its traumatic past (89).

Based on a lecture Derrida gave in 1994 and later published as "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression," Derrida begins his exploration of how we order, register, interpret and preserve the past by raising the issue of the term archive, which he argues has itself not been archived well enough to serve as an authoritative point of departure. Instead, he contends that the term bears the traces of its origin (*arche*) and "shelters itself from this memory which it shelters: which comes down to saying also that it forgets it" (9). As a result, Derrida suggests that the "radical evil (*mal*)" that can emerge in cultures that depend on archives originates from a failure to distinguish the trace from its original. In other words, such evil can emerge when we forget that, in the archive, "we have only an impression, an insistent impression through the unstable feeling of a shifting figure, of a schema, or of an infinite or indefinite process" (19, 24). Avoiding this form of "radical evil," therefore, relies on conceding that the *arche* is not something that can be accessed and in understanding that, likewise, the archive should not be conflated with living memory. Instead, the archive should be understood as a trace of both the *arche* and of memory, whether individual or collective. Thus, the archive functions much like Sigmund Freud's model of the Mystic Writing Pad, whereby a permanent trace of the original writing is retained and "is legible in suitable lights" (Freud 211).

Additionally, according to Derrida, the meaning of the term "archive" is inextricably linked with exteriority, since it initially referred to a physical location corresponding to "the residence of the superior magistrates, the *archons*, those who commanded" (10). As a result, since there can be "no archive without outside," it always requires inscribing a trace of the past in some external space, which is, in

turn, controlled and interpreted by guardians (14). This fact is particularly relevant to the problem of the politics of the archive, since whomever controls it, usually the state or some institutional authority, shapes and promotes a certain version of the past, one that is often devoid of stories or memories that do not conform with, or that problematize, the official national record. Thus, as Derrida contends, "effective democratization" is wholly dependent on being able to participate in, have access to, and interpret the archive (11).

In its most extreme form, then, "archive fever" is the result of an overwhelming desire for authoritative control of the "official record." As such, this desire inevitably involves a coinciding urge to erase any traces of the Other, whose contributions to the archive, often in the form of a "spectral response" or a "spectral truth," represent a threat to the *archons'* ability to promote and control collective memory (42, 55). In this scenario, "the law of the archontic, the law of consignment which orders the archive" is always violent because, as Derrida notes, the attempt to establish an authoritative version of archival records (the One), at the expense of protecting it from the dangerous memories of the Other, inevitably results in "murder, wounding, traumatism" (51). What is excluded from the archive, therefore, is generally the result of promoting a unified national narrative that is based on eradicating or forgetting the stories of the marginalized or the silenced victims of the past, thereby promoting a kind of collective amnesia in the populace.

This tendency towards violence is, furthermore, linked to a simultaneous tension between the desire for conservation and the desire for destruction of the archive, a desire that Derrida links to the function of the death drive. According to Derrida, the death drive's calling is aimed towards destruction of the archive and the initiation of amnesia, ultimately "aiming to ruin the archive as accumulation and capitalization of memory on some substrate and in an exterior place" ("Archive" 15). This drive towards destruction, however, is always tied to its opposite tendency, since without the death drive, there could be no subsequent feverish desire for conservation. As a result, to suffer from "archive fever" is not merely to suffer a form of illness, but rather can be interpreted as "burn[ing] with a passion" for conservation of the archive, to "run after the archive, even if there's too much of it." Thus, as Derrida points out, "no desire, no passion, no drive, no compulsion, indeed no repetition compulsion, no 'mal-de' can arise for a person who is not already, in one way or another, en mal d'archive" (57). In this sense, the death drive presents an infinite threat to the archive, since its aim is towards amnesia and the eradication of memory; at the same time, Derrida argues that no "passion" for the archive, for conserving the traces of the past that challenge the "official record," can exist without this same destructive tendency.

Despite this inclination towards annihilation, Derrida does not suggest that the archive is inevitably doomed to merely replicate the past. Instead, he links the archive to the future; specifically, he argues that it raises the "question of the future... of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow" (27). In the sense that the archive is self-perpetuating and infinite, "the archivist produces more archives," it is never a closed system and, therefore, "opens out of the future" (45). Ultimately, it is this openness of the archive, its very infinitude, that confronts us with the ethical and political responsibility of constructing a responsible remembering, whose goal is, in Paul Ricoeur's terms, "to memorize the victims of history – the sufferers, the humiliated, the forgotten" (10-11).

Derrida's linking of the archive to a future "promise" and "responsibility" anticipates, in many ways, the central issues emerging in contemporary Northern Ireland regarding the need for a comprehensive archival record of the Troubles and, at the same time, the problematic relationship of counter-narratives (or counter-memories) to such a collective history.

The hindrance towards establishing and documenting a commonly accepted (and communally acceptable) collective history is not only rooted in continuous political disagreement over the past, but also in the difficulty of establishing anything resembling a shared narrative among the various groups of Northern Ireland. As such, many archival projects have chosen to focus on the collection of a variety of oral histories, reminiscent of the Shoah Foundation's compilation of Holocaust survival narratives. In other words, the possibility of a large-scale storytelling project is often posited as a viable alternative to more traditional forms of archivization, thus allowing for the "effective democratization" that Derrida advocates.

This introduction of personal memory into collective memory is also the focus of several post-Troubles trauma novels, specifically with regards to how such counter-narratives can challenge public amnesia and upset an established victim hierarchy. For instance, *The Truth Commissioner* also explores not only whether "effective democratization" is the inevitable outcome of such collective histories, but also how the intersection of the personal with the official or communal can problematize the notion of forgiveness. As such, it is worthwhile to briefly examine Derrida's theories regarding the paradox of "impossible forgiveness" as an extension of his concluding remarks about the "promise" of the archive.

In his 1999 lecture and subsequent essay "On Forgiveness," Derrida explores the contemporary tendency to conflate forgiveness with related, but distinct, terms, such as "excuse, regret, amnesty, prescription, etc." and to use it as a normalizing force that serves the interests of post-conflict societies (27). Derrida addresses what he sees as the "internationalization" of the term that divests it of its Abrahamic religious context and results in an effacement of its traditional assumptions. By contrast, Derrida argues for the inherent paradox found in the concept—namely, "forgiveness forgives only the unforgivable." He claims that true forgiveness is only achieved in forgiving what is akin to a mortal (rather than a venial) sin and it is, thus, "a madness of the impossible" since it is not tied to conditions of transformation or repentance of the guilty, or reconciliation between the victim and the accused (33). In other words, forgiveness, in Derridean terms, must remain "exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible" (32). Thus, just as there is a tension between the desire for conservation of the archive and a simultaneous drive towards its destruction, there is a similar tension between conditional and unconditional forgiveness and, likewise, ethical and responsible political action must acknowledge this dichotomy.

Using the Truth and Reconciliation Committee in South Africa as an example, Derrida goes on to argue that forgiveness must also remain apart from, or heterogeneous to, political and judicial rationality because forgiveness must involve a clear engagement between the self and other, the perpetrator and the victim. However, when there is a mediation of forgiveness (whether institutional or not), there is always the introduction of a third party, and this inevitably corrupts forgiveness. When such mediation occurs, Derrida claims, "one can again speak of amnesty, reconciliation, reparation, etc. but certainly not of pure forgiveness in the strict sense" (42). Therefore, while Derrida understands the need for nations to confront their pasts and offer conditional forgiveness in the name of justice and "moving forward," he argues that this trend cannot be considered as, and should not be conflated with, pure forgiveness; for him it, at best, only amounts "to a therapy of reconciliation" (41). Lastly, Derrida acknowledges that there will likely always exist a tension between conditional forgiveness, one that is closer to amnesty and reconciliation, and the form of pure and "impossible" forgiveness that he outlines. However, as he states, these two poles, while operating in separate spheres, are also reliant on each other. In other words, it is between these two extremes that "decisions and responsibilities are to be taken" because, despite their irreconcilability, the discourses concerning either pure or conditional forgiveness are dependent on each other if they are to have any meaning (44-45).

As a result of this *aporia*, forgiving, like the archive, has no finality; instead, it remains a permanent rupture or wound that continually cries out. According to Derrida, "a 'finalised' forgiveness is not forgiveness; it is only a political strategy or a psycho-therapeutic economy" (50). While Derrida ultimately does not offer a resolution with regards to the impasse between these two notions of impossible and possible forgiveness, admitting that he remains "torn" between an ideal model of pure forgiveness and "the reality of a society at work in pragmatic processes of reconciliation," he nevertheless concludes that an acknowledgement of both is necessary for responsible action to take place (51).

In *The Truth Commissioner*, David Park constructs an elaborate what-if exercise that imagines a Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), one that is modeled on the South African model, taking place in Belfast during an unspecified time in the future. Through a series of disjointed individual narratives, Park focuses his story around four different men, all of whom are, to varying degrees, implicated in the disappearance of Connor Walsh, a fifteen-year-old Irish Republican Army (IRA) informant whose case is one of the first to be presented at the commission. Thus, these narrative strands all eventually coalesce around the truth recovery process; it is what fundamentally links the lives of the various characters to one another and it is what holds the narrative together structurally.

However, Park's intentional fragmentation of the narrative, a stylistic choice that is meant to cause disorientation in the reader, also mirrors a fundamental problem that is inherent in the truth recovery process itself, namely, the attempt to archive and bring together a variety of diverse stories in order to construct a master narrative about the past. As Derrida notes, such attempts are a hindrance to forgiveness, since they attempt to impose normalization and, more problematically, are prone to excluding or marginalizing narratives that do not serve the nation's reconciliation process. Additionally, as he notes in "Archive Fever," "there is no political power without the control of the archive, if not of memory" (11). Therefore, Park's novel demonstrates both the ethical limitations of the archive, which, according to Paul Ricoeur, "the conscientious historian must open up... by retrieving the traces which the dominant ideological forces attempted to suppress," and the impact that this manipulation and lack of openness has on the commission's attempts to foster forgiveness and reconciliation across the sectarian divide (16).

The initial confusion of Henry Stanfield, the commissioner of the title and a "conscientious historian" almost against his will, reflects the confusion inherent to the truth recovery process itself. Stanfield confesses that, looking over the vast archives of material, "he feels a desultory randomness about it all, a sense of fragmentation that bodes badly for those charged with putting it all together, for those whose job is supposed to be to shape it into meaning" (24). Thus, while Stanfield might appear to be the quintessential *archon*, one who is tasked with ordering, interpreting, and preserving the influx of documents and testimonies from the conflict, he is continually faced with the problem that, in Derrida's words, "order is no longer assured" (11). Park similarly positions his readers as truth commissioners from the beginning of the novel, as they too attempt to shape the narrative into some meaningful whole, just as the truth-recovery process attempts to construct a cohesive national narrative out of individual cases. In essence, by uniting the reader with Stanfield's own uncertain position in the truth recovery process, *The Truth Commissioner* exposes how the claims and rhetoric associated with truth commissions, and by extension similar inquiries, come up against the limitations of both the archive and unconditional forgiveness.

Furthermore, Park deliberately chooses to focus on a case of the disappeared (albeit a fictionalized one), a particularly problematic aspect of Troubles history and a hindrance to both the archive and forgiveness, since, as Derrida posits: "who would have the right to forgive in the name of the disappeared victims? They are always absent, in a certain way ("On Forgiveness" 44). This inclusion of an aspect of Troubles history that is notably shrouded in secrecy and absence suggests the need for a shift away from stories that simply reinforce the overall master narratives of post-conflict nations and towards narratives that reflect the singularity of individual experience. By using the case of Connor Walshe as a unifying feature of his various narrative strands, Park highlights an absence that seems to make forgiveness impossible precisely because of the lack of closure. Therefore, the case of Connor Walshe represents one specific instance of both, in Derrida's terms, the lack of "finality" in forgiveness and the simultaneous infinitude of the archive itself.

From the outset of his novel, the most consistent attitude Park establishes towards the truth recovery process and its potential for pure forgiveness is a wary cynicism. This attitude is particularly attributable to Stanfield, who embodies the public authority of the law, but who continually stands apart from his work with a detached, but critical gaze; for instance, he believes, rather erroneously, that "an Irish Catholic mother and an English Protestant father allow him to straddle both tribes.... And he has no personal or political baggage to be unpacked by either side." Additionally, his motives for taking on the position are largely ones of self-interest, since "what he enjoys most is thinking of the book that will surely come out of it" (19). In fact, it is largely through Stanfield's perspective that Park is able to point to the questionable motivations, rhetoric, theatricality, and purpose that undermine the forgiveness that is possible in a juridical context. All of these are aspects of institutionalized reconciliation that Derrida claims corrupt pure forgiveness and promote collective amnesia through control of the archives.

Therefore, while Park, like Derrida, suggests that the impetus for instituting a truth commission can be undeniably noble and even justifiable, he is likewise careful to avoid idealizing a process that is inherently flawed in terms of its motivations for wanting to mete out forgiveness in the name of national unity. Thus, Stanfield's view of the entire process questions the necessity of digging up the nation's sordid past, likening it to the memorable image of "an old manged, flea-infested dog returning to inspect its own sick" (25). Similarly, all of the other characters connected to Connor's disappearance suppress, repress, or sublimate their guilt onto either a fictional past or a utopian future, tactics that serve to avoid their own culpability. For instance, Michael Madden, a former IRA member who was present during Connor's death and who has since fled Ireland, suppresses any vestiges of his former life in his quest for the American dream and his belief that this dream affords the possibility of starting anew. Additionally, James Gilroy, the man who Madden will ultimately accuse of committing Connor's murder (and, ironically, the current Minister for Children and Culture), projects himself into a nostalgic, idealized past, where he is a simple family man, devoid of responsibility for his former actions as an IRA leader. Lastly, James Fenton, a former Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC) detective who initiated Connor into the world of informants, attempts to sublimate his feelings about past culpability through alternative forms of atonement, such as volunteering at an orphanage in Romania (itself a site of problematic reconciliation with its own past). In other words, as Herron points out, none of the men responsible for Connor's fate consciously think about the incident or experience any clear sense of guilt or responsibility until the TRC begins its investigation (25). All of them, instead, either mythologize the past, excuse their individual roles through conventional rhetoric (such as claiming to have been "soldiers" fighting in a war), or imagine for themselves a future that, as Madden puts it, will allow him, without admitting culpability, to "start afresh, step into the future clean and entitled to the happiness that it promises" (228). In essence, none of these men ask for forgiveness and, therefore, according to Derrida, this

should disqualify them from receiving conditional forgiveness, which is reliant on repentance and conversion.

However, as the novel suggests, politics and truth seek radically different ends when it comes to forgiveness. This fact is reflected in the text with the sardonic treatment of the rhetoric associated with the truth recovery process. This rhetoric, at least according to Stanfield, largely consists of empty phrases about healing and national unity, as well as endless meetings in South Africa to learn about the "need for ubuntu, the African philosophy of humanism" (11). As Derrida and Park suggest, this rhetoric serves two problematic functions. First, as Derrida notes, it has a tendency to conflate forgiveness with related concepts, such as amnesty and regret, which should remain distinct. Second, as Park points out, such rhetoric has a tendency of oversimplifying the truth recovery process, of reducing it to clichéd slogans, such as the South African TRC's motto of "revealing is healing."

Additionally, Park, like Derrida, links the issue of political power to the control of the archive and, thus, to control of collective memory, as several attempts are made throughout the novel to suppress Gilroy's name from the commission's investigation into the Walshe case. Stanfield, in particular, is forced to face this conspiracy when confronted by two mysterious individuals who are presumably representatives for some special interest in the British government. While Stanfield rather tentatively asserts that the commission "stands free from political bias and pressure from any source," he is quickly disabused of this idealistic notion when he is blackmailed, using pornographic photographs of himself with a prostitute, and urged to "understand the broader picture" in terms of how these various secretive political entities wish to shape Northern Ireland's future (257). As one of these men reveals to Stanfield at this meeting, "the one problem I find here is that they will give up anything—their wives, their money, their self-respect—before they'll give up their past. And this makes constructing the future a little difficult, as you can imagine" (256). In essence, this desire for control of the archive is inextricably tied to a control of the national narrative, since the inclusion of certain memories and the exclusion of others will have a bearing on how the future of Northern Ireland is constructed. Thus, Stanfield's role as an *archon* becomes increasingly problematic throughout the text, as his ability to control the archive is repeatedly challenged by competing forces, whether from the government or the victims' families.

Yet perhaps the biggest issue with the conflation of pure forgiveness with the rhetoric of truth-recovery is that it exposes a gap between the idealized national narrative that the commission establishes and the more complex and fragmented reality of individual victims and their families. This paradox is poignantly expressed in Park's novel when comparing the "official" language of the Truth Commission with the reality of the proceedings, which tend to devolve into a ritualized formality or a barely contained spectacle. Stanfield's scripted opening speech before each case, for instance, hits all of the familiar and contrived buzzwords for post-conflict transitional nations: "societal healing," "confronting our past," "reconciliation and understanding," "building a better future," "communal atonement" and "closure" (316). By contrast, the actual perpetrators in the proceedings, like Madden, are subject to a variety of interventions and preparations, from memorizing scripts that downplay their responsibility to following the advice of experts in courtroom presentation, thereby reducing the seemingly noble endeavor into what one of the characters calls, "a ritual, a quick appearance" while another compares to being "a bit like the dentist's" (237, 313). The theatricality underlying these procedures recalls Derrida's point that, despite the best intentions, "the simulacra, the automatic ritual, hypocrisy, calculation, or mimicry are often a part, and invite parasites to this ceremony of culpability" (29). In other words, these proceedings give a whole new meaning to the phrase "show trial."

Thus, there clearly exists a gap between the ideal and the real, between the ritual of forgiveness and the reality of the unforgivable, and between the possibilities and the limitations of the archive. This gap, or tension, then, begs the question of how it affects the bereaved victims who take part in this "ceremony of culpability." As Stanfield is drawn deeper into the process of truth recovery, his cynicism is transformed into outright disillusionment. Specifically, he notes that what the victims and their families desire is a kind of justice that is beyond the jurisdiction of the truth commission, which is predicated on "formulaic, pre-learned responses" and "get-out-of-jail cards that avoid personal guilt or moral culpability." As a result, Stanfield notices "the void" that engulfs the bereaved, "when they understand that this is all they will be given and they realize it's not enough" (246). With this observation, Park criticizes superficial notions of conditional forgiveness implicit within an uncritical interpretation of the past that renders victims further marginalized or silenced.

This realization is particularly true in instances in which the bereaved have no desire to forgive, a fact that amnesty easily elides. One of the most compelling moments in the text that highlights Derrida's ideas about the tension between conditional and unconditional forgiveness occurs with just such a marginalized figure. As Stanfield hears the scripted testimony of an unnamed perpetrator, where there has been the standard "admission of responsibility, an apology, and even a seemingly sincere little

appeal for forgiveness," the deceased victim's wife lunges forward with a knife in her hand, a knife that "Stanfield can't be sure but thinks... comes from inside her Bible" (243). While the attack is quickly dispelled, this disruptive moment is representative of what Derrida calls "the enigma of the forgiveness of the unforgivable, there is a sort of 'madness' which the juridico-political cannot approach, much less appropriate" (55). In other words, the literal chaos that erupts and disrupts the commission is expressive of the fact that certain forms of forgiveness remain inaccessible to law or politics, a fact that is reinforced by the final image of the woman standing "perfectly still, the knife dropped to the floor, with the appearance of the catatonic, unseeing, unhearing, unresisting as she's led away" (243).

The image of the knife contained inside the woman's Bible is perhaps the clearest metaphor Park employs to express Derrida's admission that conditional and unconditional forgiveness must always exist as "irreconcilable but indissociable" poles. If, as Derrida claims, the concept of forgiveness is based on an Abrahamic religious heritage, then it seems at odds with the forms of reconciliation the commission is asking the woman to give, in essence to "sum up her feelings about her husband who on a summer evening twenty years earlier opened his front door to his killer" (242). Thus, as both Park and Derrida seem to acknowledge, on the opposite spectrum from a pure forgiveness that is based on pardoning the unforgivable lies a more primitive conditional forgiveness that can only be sated with a punishment of the guilty. The ritualistic atonement offered by the truth recovery process, however, fails to offer its victims access to either form.

Yet despite the various attempts to manipulate, control, and impose an interpretation on both the commission and, by extension, the archive, the novel does suggest that a reciprocal influence occurs, one whereby access to the archive infiltrates collective memory or contaminates those associated with it. Specifically, from the beginning of the TRC, there is a sense of these proceedings evoking a return of the repressed for those who are present or called before the commission and this return can be linked to the tension between the simultaneous impulse to preserve and destroy the archive. One of the most obvious examples occurs to Stanfield, who states that "each day as he sits in the chamber he feels himself imbibe some more of the toxins that seep from the buried corrosive and carcinogenic emotions that have been given permission to come to the surface" and fears that the continuous exposure to communal trauma will "insidiously take up permanent residence inside his head" (247, 249). Likewise, Fenton, who initially feels angry that the request to appear before the commission has "intruded on his privacy," has repeated visions of Connor's face "swooping towards him out of the darkness" (284, 289). Similarly, Madden, when summoned before the TRC, relates a "letting loose the spores of the past" to "the anthrax scare, of envelopes seeping with white powder. Of contamination" (229).

This contamination is linked to a certain hauntedness, embodied by Connor, who is a spectral figure throughout the novel, but one who exerts an increasingly powerful force as the narrative progresses. Specifically, Connor's position as a ghost that haunts the various other characters is tied to his story as a spectral truth that haunts the "official record" of the archive itself. As Derrida notes, it is "as if one could not, precisely, recall and archive the very thing one represses, archive it while repressing it (because repression is an archivization), that is to say, to archive otherwise, to repress the archive while archiving the repression..." (43). Thus, Connor's story, while repressed from the "official record" remains archived in both the memories of the individuals connected to his death and in the "unofficial" traces of his presence that defy the limits of archivization.

Park further problematizes this relationship between the specter and the archive towards the end of his novel when, during the hearing about the Walshe case, the family's advocate plays a tape of the boy's final interrogation by IRA members. Here, Connor is momentarily transformed from a specter, an absence, into a powerful presence in the courtroom and the effect is palpable. This moment highlights Derrida's assertion in "Archive Fever" that "the phantom continues to speak. Perhaps he does not respond, but he speaks... this means that without responding it disposes of a response, a bit like the answering machine whose voice outlives its moment of recording" (42). However, rather than the communal atonement that the commission strives for, Connor's tape brings about "a collective embarrassed shame" for the listeners, who merely "want the tape to stop" (328). The reintroduction of Connor's voice at this moment, coupled with the spectators' response, highlights one paradox of the relationship between trauma and language; namely, as Barry Stampfl puts it, "evocations of the unspeakable often give rise to paradoxical attempts to speak the unspeakable" (22). One way to resolve this paradox is to examine the role of place and culture in relation to the experience of trauma. Specifically, as Michelle Balaev notes, trauma novels often move beyond the abreactive model of trauma, which situates traumatic experience within a pathological individual response, by locating such responses within political, communal, and cultural models that dictate "what is socially possible to speak of and what must remain hidden and unacknowledged" (156). By unsettling the script, or the ritual, of the proceedings in this way, Park highlights the need for alternative narratives that take into account

the disempowered and disaffected in this process, while indicting Northern Ireland as a site of culturally pathological responses to such individual and historical events, a response that promotes not only aporia but also repression of narratives that exist outside the normalizing and official narrative of institutional truth recovery.

Ultimately, one must ask what Park's novel suggests about the nature and possibility of forgiveness. In particular, does Park reflect Derrida's oscillation at the end of his essay between the possibility of unconditional, pure forgiveness and the reality of conditional forms of repentance? I would argue that the many ambiguities and the open-ended nature of the narrative seem to suggest so. While Connor's family does attain some degree of truth (regarding the identity of his murderer and the possible location of his discarded body), neither conditional nor unconditional forgiveness is extended. As Madden notes, after his unscripted testimony implicates himself in the death of the boy, the family's faces "are closed to him and give no response or recognition to his words" (331). Rather than experiencing a sense of closure or healing, Madden comes to the realization that there is no "casting off" his culpability, but only a "sense of shame" that will brand him wherever he goes (351). In this same vein, the narrative withholds closure, even after all four narrative strands coalesce around a single case. While Gilroy is fingered as the murderer, his version of the truth differs drastically from Madden's and he never appears before the commission in the timeframe of the novel. Similarly, Fenton is left contemplating suicide in his car after giving his testimony, wondering what it is like "to sleep in a secret place that no one else can find," thus connecting his fate to Connor's own (357).

The bringing to light of trauma, therefore, and the subsequent forgiveness and closure deemed necessary to move forward (both as an individual and as a nation) is withheld and Park instead ends his novel with images of both destruction and silence. Following the explosive revelations at the commission hearing, the archives literally collapse, being set on fire by an unknown assailant in a symbolic gesture that highlights the limitations of institutional truth recovery, recalling Derrida's point that there is always a desire to reduce the archives to ash in order to both eradicate dangerous memories and to begin anew without the constraints of the past. As Stanfield muses about the cause of the destruction, he tellingly suggests that perhaps it is the "collective fusion of so much smoldering pain in some kind of spontaneous combustion" (369). While the act of destruction is ultimately meaningless in a practical sense, since all the files have been digitized, the open-endedness and ambiguity which mark the final moments of the text suggest that while some degree of "truth" recovery is possible in such an official context, it is not an ideal model for forgiveness to take form.

Thus, the novel chooses to end in silence, at the bog where Connor's body is supposedly interred before the bulldozers arrive to locate his remains. Notably, this is a place that "is not somewhere that humans ever come," one that will only accommodate "the liquid burble of some invisible tongue" (371-2). While Connor's case has been made public, and his own words have brought his spectrality into the collective memory of the commission, Park suggests that this revelation is not necessarily adequate when dealing with Northern Ireland's tumultuous past. After all, as Derrida points out, simply entering the archival record does not eradicate the mysteries and secrets of the past: "The dwelling, this place where they dwell permanently, marks this institutional passage from the private to the public, which does not always mean from the secret to the nonsecret" (10). In this way, *The Truth Commissioner* functions as trauma novel by situating the traumatic experience within "the place of its occurrence, which highlights the available culturally informed narrative structures for expressing the experience" (Balaev 161-2). With regards to Northern Ireland, Park suggests such narrative structures have proven inadequate to give voice to individual or communal suffering.

In the decades during and following the Troubles, a common view regarding the output of Northern Irish novelists has been that they have become simultaneously obsessed with resurrecting the traumas of the past, whereas their texts, in general, have been seen as largely inadequate in terms of dealing with the ongoing effects of the sectarian conflict. Such a view is exemplified in Mick Heaney's 2010 assessment of Troubles fiction in *The Sunday Times*, which recycles the familiar argument that, while poetry has proven capable of capturing the complexity and nuance of the conflict, "novelists have been defeated by the Troubles" (14). However, I would argue that contemporary writers such as Park are not merely interested in replicating a literary repetition compulsion in their explorations of historical traumas; rather, they are keenly aware of the need to address and critique "the deliberate injunction to move on" that manifests itself throughout the language of the Good Friday Agreement (Lehner 273).

Thus, novels like *The Truth Commissioner* excavate the past as a means to reflect on the issues that this "injunction" and the language of reconciliation in general tend to evade: the suppression of narratives that problematize the image of national unity; the propensity for collective amnesia that "moving on" engenders; and the need for a dissolution of a victim hierarchy. In other words, rather than being obsessed with any one particular version of history, novelists like Park, by focusing on archive

fever and the paradox of impossible forgiveness, adhere to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's contention that the invisible and the unspeakable must be acknowledged: "You crave to let history haunt you as a ghost or ghosts, with the ungraspable incorporation of a ghostly body, and the uncontrollable periodicity of haunting. It is not, then, a past that was necessarily once present that is sought. The main effort is to compute with the software of other pasts rather than reference one's own hallucinatory heritage" ("Ghostwriting" 70).

In this sense, Park's text interrogates all totalizing versions of history, including the one that presents the Troubles as simply another cycle in the continuous and reciprocal pattern of violence that has marked Ireland and Northern Ireland for centuries. Instead, it opens up the possibility for multiple variations to exist simultaneously, thus giving voice to narratives that have been repressed or forgotten in an attempt to foreground a unified, nationalist message.

Ultimately, while there are no easy solutions for reconciliation posited in the novel, Park's combined explorations of addressing problematic issues in Irish history, such as the limitations of the truth recovery process, reveal a shared understanding of the fact that, as the Commission for Victims and Survivors (CVSNI) puts it, reconciliation is "a hard process rather than a warm slogan" (CVSNI 12).

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