



SOLDIERS AND INDIANS: VICTIM AND PERPETRATOR TRAUMAS IN SEBASTIAN BARRY'S *DAYS WITHOUT END*

SOLDADOS E ÍNDIOS: TRAUMAS DE VÍTIMAS E PERPETRADORES EM *DAYS WITHOUT END*, DE SEBASTIAN BARRY

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RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é explorar a representação dos traumas de vítimas e perpetradores no romance *Days Without End* (2016), do irlandês Sebastian Barry (1955). O narrador-protagonista, Thomas McNulty, é um imigrante irlandês que foge da Grande Fome na Irlanda (1845-1852) para os Estados Unidos e, juntamente com seu parceiro americano John Cole, luta nas guerras indígenas e na Guerra Civil americana (1861-1865). Com base nos estudos de pesquisadores como Cathy Caruth (1996), Piotr Sztompka (2000), Jeffrey Alexander (2004), Bernhard Geiser (2004) e Roy Eyeran (2011), entre outros, neste artigo pretende-se demonstrar que a narrativa de *Days Without End* entrelaça traumas individuais do protagonista e traumas culturais da Irlanda e dos Estados Unidos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: literatura traumática; trauma cultural; Grande Fome irlandesa; diáspora irlandesa; guerras americanas.

ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to explore the representation of victim and perpetrator traumas in the novel *Days Without End* (2016), by the Irish author Sebastian Barry (b. 1955). The protagonist-narrator, Thomas McNulty, is an Irish immigrant who runs away from the Great Famine (1845-1852) in Ireland to the United States and, alongside with his North-American partner John Cole, fights in the Indian Wars and in the Civil War (1861-1865). Drawing from the studies of scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1996), Piotr Sztompka (2000), Jeffrey Alexander (2004), Bernhard Geiser (2004), and Roy Eyeran (2011), among others, this article seeks to demonstrate that the narrative of *Days Without End* intertwines the individual traumas of the protagonist to cultural traumas of Ireland and the United States.

KEYWORDS: trauma literature; cultural trauma; The Great Irish Famine; Irish diaspora, American wars.

INTRODUCTION

Days Without End is Sebastian Barry's ninth novel. Born in Dublin in 1955, the author has published fiction, poetry, and drama, having won the Costa Fiction Awards twice and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction.¹ With family roots in the Irish cities of Sligo and Wicklow, the author frequently explores stories he has heard from his family members in his novels, featuring the McNultys and the Dunnes as recurrent characters. Barry claims the gaps in the stories of these two families offer fruitful opportunities to give voice to silenced individuals in Irish history.²

The protagonist-narrator of *Days Without End* is Thomas McNulty, an Irish immigrant to America who narrates his years in the American army. Having left Ireland as a fifteen-year-old after the death of his family during the Great Irish Famine (1845-1852), McNulty befriends the American boy John Cole in Missouri. The boys get a job as dancers in women clothes in a saloon and spend two years entertaining miners. When they get too tall for disguising themselves as delicate women, McNulty and Cole enlist in the army, fighting Indians in the early 1850s and participating in the Union battalions in the Civil War (1861-1865).

McNulty and Cole develop a romantic relationship during the army service, get married and adopt a Sioux girl called Winona. Barry has maintained in interviews that

his son Toby's coming out as gay has inspired him to write a novel about two men in a relationship. The author has also stated that the Irish Same-Sex Marriage Referendum in 2015 also compelled him to write *Days Without End*.³

McNulty's narrative is filled with memories from Famine Ireland and his time in the army. The matters he chooses to share with the reader are as relevant as his silences, demonstrating that the trauma of hunger is juxtaposed with the trauma of being a perpetrator of violence in another country. This article aims at examining how victim and perpetrator traumatic experiences are portrayed in the novel. First, I investigate individual and cultural traumas of hunger and war. Afterward, I turn to the experience of perpetrator trauma in *Days Without End*. I intend to show that trauma influences the protagonist-narrator's choices of what to say and what to silence. Another goal is to demonstrate how Barry's novel is an example of historical novel that works with traumatic historical moments of Irish history as a means of exploring cultural wounds which have not been sufficiently worked through and discussed.

FAMINE, WARS, AND TRAUMA

Three historical events are depicted in *Days Without End*: The Great Irish Famine, the Indian Wars, and the American Civil War. All three events seem to have a strong impact

1. Barry was awarded the Costa Fiction Prize for *The Secret Scripture* (2008) and *Days Without End* (2017), becoming the only writer to receive the award twice. He won the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction for *Days Without End* in 2017.
2. MOSS. "Costa winner Sebastian Barry: 'My son instructed me in the magic of gay life'".

3. JORDAN. "You get imprisoned in a kind of style, I could feel it leaning on me".

over the protagonist Thomas McNulty, his partner John Cole and fellow citizens and soldiers. In this section, I first refer to the historical events in question. Then, I analyze the representation of individual and cultural traumas in *Days Without End*.

The Great Irish Hunger haunts McNulty's stories. Throughout the narrative, he repeatedly recurs to images of starvation, dispossession, and death, which might be interpreted as signs of trauma. The Famine, a milestone in Irish history, was a series of potato crop failures in western Europe caused by the *Phytophthora infestans* fungus from 1845 to 1852. The results of infestation were far worse in Ireland, since the potato was the poor people's main source of nutrition. Precise numbers are hard to estimate, yet scholars have measured that one million people died of starvation or disease and another million have emigrated to countries such as the United States, England, Australia, Canada and Argentina.⁴ The Famine also represented a hard blow on the Irish language, as most of the victims were from Irish-speaking areas. These tragic consequences transformed the Famine in a historical landmark which "has scared the Irish national psyche through the present day".⁵

Despite the catastrophic outcomes, the Great Hunger remained out of the school and university curricula in Ireland until the 1990s.⁶ According to Christine Kinealy, only two

historical publications on the Famine were launched between the nineteenth century and 1990: Robert Dudley Edward's *The Great Famine: Studies in Irish History* (1956) and Cecil Woodham-Smith's *The Great Hunger* (1962). The revisionist movement in Ireland also contributed to the lack of publications and debates on the effects of the Famine; revisionists have argued that the Famine was an inevitable tragedy which was not exclusive to Ireland. Another issue was the fear that, during the conflicts in Northern Ireland,⁷ exploring the Great Hunger would trigger nationalist actions.

The Famine used to be a pungent affair in literature as well. Scholars have remarked the fact that creative works rarely approached the Famine until the 1930s. Terry Eagleton, for example, argues that few good quality literary works were published during and after the Famine.⁸ On the other hand, Melissa Fegan partly disagrees with Eagleton, demonstrating that poets and fictionists have written about the Great Hunger during and after the event: Oscar Wilde's mother, Jane Francesca Elgee⁹ and James Clarence Mangan¹⁰ for instance, dedicated poems and journal entries to the Famine years.¹¹ In the twentieth century writers also explored the Irish calamity: Liam O'Flaherty's (1896-1984) novel *Famine* (1937) and Seamus Heaney's (1939-2013) poems, specially "At a Potato Digging" (1966), work

4. WHELAN. "Pre and Post-Famine Landscape Change", p. 137.

5. NEAL. *Britain and the Famine Irish*, p. 1.

6. KINEALY. *The Great Irish Famine*, p. 2.

7. The Troubles were ethnic, political, and religious conflicts between the Protestant majority and the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland mainly from the 1970s to 1998, when a peace agreement was signed. Scholars often set the 1972 Bloody Sunday in Derry as the event which prompted the three-decade conflict. On Sunday January 30th, 1972, the British Army violently repressed a Civil Rights march, resulting in 14 deaths and many casualties. From that day on, bombing attacks against civilians and public figures and summary executions, by both Catholic and Protestant-related paramilitary groups, as well as imprisonment of individuals without trial, were recurrent pictures in Northern Ireland and other parts of the United Kingdom, until a ceasefire was negotiated and the Peace Agreement of 1998 was signed.

8. EAGLETON. *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger*, p. 1.

9. One of Elgee's (1821-1896) poems on the Famine is "The Famine Year", published in 1847.

10. Two examples of Mangan's (1803-1849) political poems on the Famine are "Dark Rosaleen" and "The Funerals".

11. FEGAN. *Literature of the Irish Famine*, p. 2.

with the Great Hunger as a metaphor for social and spiritual degradation in contemporaneity.¹² Hence, it is possible to notice the fascination that the Famine holds on Irish writers, which favor the argument that the Great Famine is a traumatic event in Irish history.

The Indian and the Civil wars are equally contentious subjects in American history. On the one hand, the Indian Wars have not received great scholarly attention,¹³ despite conflicts between whites and Indians having been extensively depicted and immortalized in the western novel and film. On the other hand, the Civil War (1861-1865) is one of the most represented and discussed events in American history, being the subject of films, novels, documentaries, and poems since its occurrence.¹⁴ Although the Indian Wars were recurring disputes between white settlers or explorers and Native American peoples, they started soon after the discovery of the American continent and lasted until the early twentieth century.¹⁵

The conflicts between whites and Indians were briefly interrupted when the Civil War commenced in 1861. The link between Ireland and both conflicts on American soil resides in the participation of Irish immigrants, many of them Famine survivors, in both Confederate and Union armies. The estimated number of Irish soldiers in the Union battalions were 150,000, while almost 40,000 enlisted in

Confederate brigades.¹⁶ Irish military divisions often carried green flags with Irish symbols, such as the harp and the sentence “*Erin go Bragh*”, which in Gaelic means “Ireland Forever”.¹⁷

Days Without End intertwines the traumas of the Great Famine and the Indian and Civil Wars. One of the narrator’s first references when he begins to describe his time in the army is of hunger. McNulty constantly refers to his suffering years in Ireland before emigrating, and images of starvation recur in his account. The protagonist-narrator alleges he enlisted in the army because he was “sick of hungering”. His recollections bring back the memories of his family becoming bankrupt and dying:

All that was left in Ireland was the potato for eating and when the potato was lost there was nothing left in Old Ireland. She starved in her stocking feet. And she had no stockings. Rags. [...] We sent food to England and she sent rags and battered hats. I don’t know because I was only a child. In ’47 the harvest was so bad even my father had nothing then. My sister died and my mother, on the stone floor of our house in Sligo town, in a street called the Lungey. The Lungey meant in Irish Luaighne, which was the kingdom my ancestors was [sic] kings of, or so my father said. [...] Butter kept flowing in the time of hunger but how it happened that my father

12. FEGAN. *Literature of the Irish Famine*, p. 2.

13. HUGHES. *The American Indian Wars*, p. 13.

14. FAHS. *The Imagined Civil War*, p. 1-2.

15. For the purposes of this article, we use the term “Indian Wars” to label the period between 1850 and 1861, depicted in *Days Without End*.

16. RODGERS. *Irish-American Units in the Civil War*, p. 4.

17. RODGERS. *Irish-American Units in the Civil War*, p. 8.

fell out of life I do not know but he lost that business and then as I say my sister and mother perished. They perished like stray cats, no one caring much. But the whole town was perishing.¹⁸

18. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 28-9.

McNulty also refers to his fellow citizens in Sligo and the famished travelers who had to flee Ireland on coffin-ships, vessels in extreme conditions which most frequently carried poor and dispossessed passengers to the United States and other countries. In the aforementioned excerpt, as well as in other parts of the narrative, the narrator insists that hunger removes all the dignity of a human being, leaving him/her with nothing: “We were a plague. We were only rats of people. Hunger takes away what you are. Everything we were was just nothing then”.¹⁹

19. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 29.

The narrator’s constant reference to hunger may indicate that he is traumatized. “Trauma”, in this sense, is what Cathy Caruth defines as an “overwhelming experience of sudden or catastrophic events in which the response to the event occurs in the often delayed, uncontrolled repetitive appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena”.²⁰ Drawing her definition from Sigmund Freud’s studies on dreams and traumatic neurosis²¹, Caruth emphasizes that trauma is an unassimilated experience which repeatedly returns to the survivor. Consequently, for Caruth, traumatic neurosis is distinguished by its belated and repetitive character which

20. CARUTH. *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 11.

21. Caruth discusses Freud’s *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899) and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

haunts the survivor as an experience of “quasi-death”, that is, an experience of having survived after the unexpected event.²² For McNulty, having survived the Famine while his family perished is a traumatic experience of “quasi-death” which keeps returning to his psyche. Years later, when fighting in the Civil War, those images haunt him, leaving the fear of losing his new family. Trauma may be traced also in the things he does not say; at one moment he claims he is sad and lonely but leaves out the cause of his sorrow, opening ground for the interpretation of the reader: “There’s old sorrow in your blood like second nature and new sorrow that maddens the halls of sense. Causes an uproar there. I’m leaving Winona. I can never see John Cole again. [...] How would I find words to tell the story?”²³

22. CARUTH. *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 7.

23. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 253.

Hunger and suffering are again mentioned when McNulty and Cole’s battalion is ambushed by a Confederate contingent during the Civil War. The treatment of war prisoners is torture through hunger and deplorable conditions, forcing McNulty to relive his Famine experiences once again:

The winter drear with her icy soul’s come in now and there ain’t a stick of wood. Half the prisoners don’t got no shoes no more [sic] and all of us is missing bits of clothes. We ain’t got [sic] a coat between us being summer and fall soldiers. That’s the cold then eating your skin like rats. They’ve opened a

wide long put in the east corner and every day the dead are tipped in there. Maybe thirty a night. Maybe more. We ain't got [sic] no goddamned food except that lousy cornbread. We get three fingers of that a day. Swear to the good God no man ever conceived could live on that.²⁴

In this quote, McNulty describes the life in the Confederate prison camp with terms that resemble his description of Famine Ireland: people wear rags, weather conditions make their lives worse, there is barely any food beyond a portion of dry corn bread, and dead people are buried in ditches. Likewise, journalistic and literary accounts of the Famine often describe Irish peasants, most frequently women,²⁵ in rags, begging for a parcel of food from relief authorities, and bodies half buried in the streets because there were not enough strong people to bury the dead.²⁶

Another character who seems to be traumatized in the novel is John Cole. During the Indian Wars, Cole shows symptoms of a mysterious disease whose name is not mentioned in the novel. The narrator tells that Cole “was obliged to lie quiet for days because there weren't [sic] one cup of steam in him. Doc had no name for it. A rattlesnake could of [sic] railed across his breast and he couldn't a [sic] done nothing about it”.²⁷ Repetition also marks Cole's ailment, for he recovers and falls ill recurrently. This causes

his release from the army because his superiors “couldn't feed a man through illness time and again”.²⁸ The cause of Cole's problems seem to be the atrocities of war, as the following excerpt exemplifies:

Down from the burning lodge the smoke had plundered everywhere, into the corpses, into every cranny, so that it was nigh possible to see and our eyes smarted horribly. We saw the shapes of Indians and stabbed them with our bayonets. We worked back and forth through the milling bodies and tried to kill everything that moved in the murk. Two, three, four fell to my thrust, and I was astonished not to be fired on, astonished at the speed and the horror of the task, the exhilaration of it, my heart now racing but burning in my breast like a huge coal. I stabbed and I stabbed. [...] We wanted the enemy stilled and destroyed so that we could live ourselves. [...] Then all the work seemed done and all we heard then was the crying of survivors, the terrible groaning of the wounded.²⁹

The references to sensory impressions, such as smells and noises, may be signs of traumatic experiences typically lived by soldiers in warzones. Although terms such as “shell-shock” and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) did not exist in the nineteenth century, individual and historical accounts from the Indian and Civil wars include graphic

24. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 195.

25. See KELLEHER, *The Feminization of the Famine*, p. 1.

26. The University of Virginia has set up a website to share newspaper articles from the time of the Famine: *Irish Views of the Famine*. It is possible to read constant reference to multiplying bodies in the streets.

27. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 69.

28. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 118.

29. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 36-7.

descriptions of former soldiers dreaming with warzones, hearing the noise of bombs, or even reviving the wars. In Barry's novel, the narrator is clear about the marks left by the war, but he also feels the necessity of repeating that, at the time of the war, they were unaware that they were instruments of violence against other human beings. He says, "A man who comes through murder and horror is a special man, men look at him as he passes and they say such and such about him. [...] Stories that tell another story just the whole while they are being told".³⁰ McNulty reinforces once more that they did not know the meaning of their actions, that is, the soldiers could not have known they were perpetrators: "I ain't [sic] saying we knowed [sic] what we knowed [sic]".³¹ This might be explained by Caruth's Freudian theorization about the impossibility of understanding a traumatic event at the very moment of experience: the "unassimilated nature" of a trauma resides in the fact that "it is precisely *not known* in the first instance".³² Caruth understands that only through narrative can someone make sense of trauma.

The understanding that trauma emerges from representation is also pertinent to the theory of cultural trauma, when individual experiences become collective memories. Cultural trauma as a concept might explain the fascination that extreme historical events seem to hold on contemporary writers as traumatic memories are transmitted to new

generations. According to the sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, cultural trauma is what occurs when "members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways".³³ Cultural trauma is a socially constructed phenomenon, "a meaning struggle where the individual and collective actors attempt to define a situation by imposing a particular interpretation on it".³⁴ Consequently, cultural trauma is not "imposed" to a group; on the contrary, it emerges as a result of representation and interpretation. To become a trauma, an event must follow what Alexander calls a "spiral of signification", that is, traumatic meaning must be attributed to a sudden and extreme event and answer four questions: what happened? Which group was affected? What is the connection between the carrier group (i.e., the agents of meaning attribution), the victims, and the audience? Who is the perpetrator?³⁵

Hence this collective construction of meaning interprets an event transforming individual experiences into a collective pathology. Piotr Sztompka suggests that trauma is imposed as such when an exterior sudden event is so extreme that it causes shock and desolation. The Polish sociologist warns that cultural trauma is more likely to evolve when a society is destabilized, that is, experiencing war, hunger, occupation, or displacement.³⁶

30. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 84.

31. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 85.

32. CARUTH. *Unclaimed Experience*, p. 4, author's emphasis.

33. ALEXANDER. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma", p. 1.

34. EYERMAN. "Intellectuals and Cultural Trauma", p. 456.

35. ALEXANDER. "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma", p. 13.

36. SZTOMPKA. "Cultural Trauma", p. 452.

Such perspectives on language and trauma might illuminate the shifts in interpretation of the Great Hunger and the American Indian and Civil wars. As I mentioned earlier, the Great Famine was virtually undiscussed in historical works published in Ireland for most of the twentieth century. The meanings of the Civil Wars have changed since its occurrence, depending on the carrier group and their interpretation of the event.³⁷ The understanding that the Irish have moved from victims of a humanitarian calamity in Ireland to perpetrators of atrocities in another country may be attributed to a resignification of Irish diaspora history and of the Indian Wars. In the next section I explore how the trauma of the perpetrator is represented in Barry's novel.

THE IRISH AS PERPETRATORS

McNulty faces an experience shift in *Days Without End*. Once a victim of hunger and forced emigration, he becomes a perpetrator when working as a soldier of the United States. The fact that he chooses to describe military actions against Indians and insist so much that he did not understand the gravity of his and others' actions may indicate that he also suffers from perpetrator trauma. While there is a common belief that only victims suffer from trauma, several studies have shown that perpetrators are also susceptible to trauma for their actions.³⁸ According to Bernhard Giesen, perpetrators are

human subjects who, by their own decision, dehumanized other subjects and, in doing so, did not only pervert the sovereign subjectivity of the victims but challenged also their own sacredness. Every subject needs the recognition of others for its own self-consciousness, and it is exactly this recognition that is denied to perpetrators [...]. If a community has to recognize that its members, instead of being heroes, have been perpetrators who violated the cultural premises of their own identity, the reference to the past is indeed traumatic. The community can cope with the fundamental contradiction between identity claims and recognition only by a collective schizophrenia, by denial, by decoupling or withdrawal.³⁹

In the American case, the white soldiers who were ordered to clear Indian lands for miners and settlers, especially in the West, followed orders. They might not have acted "by their own decision", as Giesen puts it, but once in the army, followed the official ideology of the "Frontier Myth". This myth guided the capitalist expansion to the West, justifying atrocities and alleged necessary actions towards progress. The move westward was about the values of individualism, achievement, white solidarity, and community.⁴⁰ In *Days Without End*, however, the narrator struggles to conform to this ideology, resisting the realizations that a soldier cannot choose but to follow orders. At

37. BLIGHT. *Race and Reunion*, p. 2.

38. See Dominick LaCapra's *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (1998), Stanley Cohen's *States of Denial* (2001) and Bernhard Giesen's "The Trauma of Perpetrators" (2004).

39. GIESEN. "The Trauma of Perpetrators", p. 114.

40. SLOTKIN. *The Fatal Environment*, p. 34.

one point he says: “the Indians had no place no more there. Their tickets of passage were rescinded and the bailiffs of God had took [sic] back the papers for their souls”.⁴¹ In an earlier passage he argues that “we knew in our hearts our work was to be Indians. People in California wanted rid [sic] of them. Wanted them routed out”,⁴² adding that “there was two dollars per scalp for a civilian”, that is, each Indian killed resulted in monetary reward for the killer. The narrator attempts to convince the reader and himself that the soldiers were just following orders:

We were about the people’s business, we had done something for the people, something like that. Put a fire into your belly somehow. Sense of rightness. Not justice exactly. Fulfilling the wishes of the majority, something along those lines, I don’t know. That’s how it was with us. I guess it’s long ago now. Seems to sit right up in front of my eyes just now though.⁴³

In Giesen’s view, the trauma of perpetrators also requires some time to be recognized as such and worked through.⁴⁴ McNulty’s assertion that his violent acts seem “to sit right up in front of my eyes just now though” may indicate that, after a time of latency, he has recognized his own trauma. The narrator adds:

Who will tell you the reason of that day? Not Thomas McNulty. Guess what’s savage in men was in our men that morning. Men I knew from aforesaid and the new men I knew just days. Rushing down on the village like an army of coyotes. Braves fetch their guns and come bursting back out of their wigwams. Women crying and calling. The soldiers hollering like demons. Firing and firing.⁴⁵

Unlike a war between two countries, American soldiers did not attack only warriors in the Indian Wars, but also women and children who lived with Indian men. After the battles, McNulty notices that they had exterminated whole Indian camps, and the realization of his own evil disgusts him:

The smoke cleared and we saw at last something of our battlefield. Then my heart shrank and its nest of ribs. It was just women and children all around us. Not a brave among them. We had torn into the little hiding place of the squaws, where they had to take refuge from the burning and the killing. I was affrighted and strangely affronted, but mostly at myself, because I knew I had taken strange pleasure from the attack. It was as if I had drank [sic] six whiskies in a row. Watchorn and Pearl were dragging a woman from the ground and into the trees. I knew they were going to take their pleasure from her. I knew well. Babies that had spilled from their mothers’ arms were now stabbed and killed with the rest.⁴⁶

41. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 45.

42. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 20.

43. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 45.

44. GIESEN. “The Trauma of Perpetrators”, p. 116.

45. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 258.

46. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 37.

Giesen, analyzing the case of Nazi officials, writes that one of reactions of perpetrators is to deny their actions. Another tendency is to do a “coalition of silence” where all the perpetrators or bystanders – even further generations – avoid touching the subject.⁴⁷ McNulty’s decision to speak about the matter could therefore be a manifestation of his own guilt, an attempt to work through his own trauma. He acknowledges that the war against the Indians had altered him and the other soldiers; they had ceased to be law men and became assassins:

We were different then, we were other people. We were killers, like no other killers that had ever been. [...] Then the walls of the building tumbled, and fierce in the dark worst flames burned the bodies, brave upon brave piled six deep, you could see the ruined faces and smell the roasting flesh, the corpses twisted strangely in the heat [...]. I could think no more, my head bloodless, empty, racketing, astonished. Troopers wept, but they were not tears I knew. Others threw their hats as if they had just heard the death of their own loved ones. There didn’t seem to be anything alive, including ourselves. We were dislocated, we were not there, now we were ghosts.⁴⁸

The narrator suggests that their violent acts have altered the victims as well as the perpetrators. If the Indians had

lost their land, their families, and their lives, the soldiers had succumbed to cruelty and inhumanity. Nevertheless, the representation of the Indian Wars as traumatic demonstrates Alexander’s “spiral of signification” through which any event must be interpreted as traumatic by a carrier group. As Hughes (2001) advocates, history books have tried to minimize the consequences of the Indian Wars by depicting the Natives as “easy targets” and the war maneuvers as simple missions which did not require “any tactics”.⁴⁹ Yet, Slotkin argues that the Indian Wars have set a pattern of representation of American soldiers and Indian warriors, where the former are brave and conscious of their duty, while the latter are a sub-race.⁵⁰ The Indian Wars have been interpreted as a conflict between the good (the whites) and the bad (the Indians), but their traumatic aspects have risen only recently in twentieth-century novels and western movies. The arts have offered an alternative interpretation which focuses on the weak and the dispossessed side of the story, revealing the ordeals and the suffering imposed on the native peoples of America during the expansion to the West. In this spiral of signification, Indians are portrayed as traumatized victims of atrocities by white perpetrators, transforming the Indian Wars in a cultural trauma. In *Days Without End* the spiral of signification goes even further; it depicts traumatized perpetrators, focusing on the Irish protagonist and adding another layer of meaning. If we

47. GIESEN. “The Trauma of Perpetrators”, p. 115-116.

48. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 38-39.

49. HUGHES. *The American Indian Wars*, p. 13.

50. SLOTKIN, *The Fatal Environment*.

consider the recent past of the narrator in Ireland during the Great Hunger, we notice a shift in his portrayal as a victim of a failed project of modernization by the colonizer⁵¹ into an instrument of colonization of natives in America. Thus, Barry's choice of setting his novel in the American Great Plains in the nineteenth century may be a conscious approximation of Ireland and America, a juxtaposition of traumatic pasts.

This approximation becomes even clearer when McNulty mentions Oliver Cromwell, the English general who subdued Ireland in the seventeenth century.⁵² Thomas compares Cromwell's soldiers to American soldiers in the West, with the same goal of "pacifying" the land. At this time of his life, he does not believe in goodness anymore, like Winona, who had seen her people be swept away:

The other silent creature be Winona. I keeping [sic] her stuck close to me. I don't trust anyone. What we walked through was the strike-out of her kindred. Scrubbed off with a metal brush of strange and implacable hatred. Even the major. Same would be if soldiers fell on my family in Sligo and cut out our parts. When that old ancient Cromwell come to Ireland he said he would leave nothing alive. Said the Irish were vermin and devils. Clean out the country for good people to step into. Make a paradise. Now we make this

American paradise I guess. Guess it be [...] strange so many Irish boys doing this work. Ain't that the way of the world. No such item as a virtuous people.⁵³

In this quote Thomas refutes the depiction of soldiers as good and brave. Irish soldiers, more specifically, are stripped of the adjectives usually attributed to them for the fight in the Civil War: in Barry's novel, the Irish are neither "brave" soldiers who cleared the way to victory, nor are they a virtuous people. On the contrary, the Irish are depicted as a suffering people who, having emigrated due to hunger and dispossession, became instruments of colonization in a new land, the perpetrators of atrocities against the natives, reverberating Cromwell's soldiers in seventeenth-century Ireland. Thomas McNulty, John Cole and Winona are traumatized individuals haunted by violence they suffer and/or inflict, illustrating the complex coexistence of white Americans, Irish immigrants, and native peoples.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have attempted to offer a reading of *Days Without End* as a trauma narrative which demonstrates the complexity of the historical traumas of hunger and war. The novel can be read as an attempt to address the still pungent wounds of the Great Famine, the Indian and Civil wars,

51. LLOYD. *Irish Times*.

52. Oliver Cromwell (1599-1658) was the commander of the English campaign in Ireland which defeated the coalition of the Irish Confederate Catholics and English supporters of the king, finally subjugating the island. Cromwell's acts involved torture, massacres and dispossession of Irish Catholics and members of Protestant religions other than Anglicanism. He was also the Lord Protector of the Commonwealth of England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1653 to 1658, following the death of Charles I.

53. BARRY. *Days Without End*, p. 264.

opting for the perspective of the victim and of the perpetrator. Barry's novel is successful in its depiction of historical periods which remain controversial in both Ireland and the United States, challenging a recurrent tendency to show the Irish only as victims. Another realization of *Days Without End* is the broadening of the focus of the Irish historical novel; instead of opting for representing solely Irish political events, Barry's novel may indicate that contemporary Irish historical novels are exploring transnational links between Ireland and the destinies of the Irish diaspora.

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