

Contents

Acknowledgements	vii
EAMON MAHER AND EUGENE O'BRIEN	
Introduction	I
PART I Precursors of Change	
PART I	
JEANNE I. LAKATOS	
The Semiotic Theory of Iconic Realism and Cultural Dissonance in de Meun's and de Lorris's <i>Roman de la Rose</i> and James Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i>	13
CATHY MCGLYNN	
'In the beginning is the void': Creation, Paternity and the Logos in Joyce's <i>Ulysses</i>	29
MARY PIERSE	
The Donkey and the Sabbath	45
PART 2 Developments in the Irish and Irish-American Novel	
PART 2	
SHARON TIGHE-MOONEY	
Exploring the Irish Catholic Mother in Kate O'Brien's <i>Pray for the Wanderer</i>	69
AINTZANE LEGARRETA MENTXAKA	
A Catholic Agnostic – Kate O'Brien	87

JAMES SILAS ROGERS	
Edwin O'Connor's Language of Grace	105
EAMON MAHER	
Issues of Faith in Selected Fiction by Brian Moore (1921–1999)	125
PETER GUY	
'Earth's Crammed with Heaven, and every Common Bush Afire with God': Religion in the Fiction of John McGahern	141
PART 3 The Poets and the Playwrights	157
EUGENE O'BRIEN	
'Any Catholics among you ...?': Seamus Heaney and the Real of Catholicism	159
JOHN MCDONAGH	
'Hopping Round Knock Shrine in the Falling Rain': Revision and Catholicism in the Poetry of Paul Durcan	179
VICTOR MERRIMAN	
'To sleep is safe, to dream is dangerous': Catholicism on Stage in Independent Ireland	193
TONY CORBETT	
Effing the Ineffable: Brian Friel's <i>Wonderful Tennessee</i> and the Interrogation of Transcendence	213
Notes on Contributors	233
Index	237

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Introduction

In a country where Catholicism has played a prominent role for centuries, it is logical that our novelists, poets and dramatists should engage with its implications and ramifications in their work. For some it is a central motif, for others more of an inherited language and culture: what is indisputable, however, is the extent to which Irish literature is replete with Catholic imagery and references. The Catholic habitus, even for those who have abandoned their faith, flavours the speech of artists and their characters, many of whom regularly invoke God, the Virgin Mary, the saints, or else intone phrases from the Mass, prayers or other rituals, all of which inevitably impacts on the discourse employed in various texts. The priest is a significant presence also, regularly perceived as authoritarian and interfering, devoid of any real spiritual substance, more of a manager than a pastor. In Joyce's *Dubliners*, for example, priests function as signifiers of power, but are also pervasive iconic presences in pictures and images throughout the collection. Religious symbols such as the Sacred Heart, scapulars, pictures of the Pope (John the XXIII being especially popular), rosary beads and holy medals similarly abound. Reflecting on what being Catholic meant to her, the poet and novelist Mary O'Donnell observed:

I see myself as born a Christian and Catholic and still Catholic, though largely on my terms. [...] No thinking woman born in the 1950s who travelled the sometimes uncomfortable route from the 1960s and 1990s could retain an allegiance to the old, McQuaid- and, in recent times, Connell-dominated Irish form of Catholicism.¹

1 Mary O'Donnell, 'There is No going Back', in John Littleton and Eamon Maher (eds), *What Being Catholic Means to Me* (Dublin: The Columba Press, 2009), p. 61.

Issues like the 'undimmed interference' in the biological lives of women, and the Church's inability to accommodate the views of those whose approach to life does not match the official template, are cited by O'Donnell as major obstacles to her ever becoming a card-carrying Catholic. Nevertheless, and in this she echoes the views of a number of the writers dealt with in this book, something of the beauty of the ceremonies and rituals found its way into her artistic approach: 'I believe I would not be the writer I am today had I not experienced Catholicism.'² She pursues this point further when showing how her poetry in particular has a strong religious resonance:

In my poetry, which is the closest I come to true religious expression, I explore landscape, the senses, the history of women's lives, love, sexuality, childbirth, the challenge of family history. My deepest religious feeling arises through poetry, because only then do I feel reconnected to the cosmos. In beauty and the perception of beauty, I can feel myself re-attuned to the idea of the godly.³

In other words, both as an affirming presence and as a restrictive presence, Catholicism has been the hegemonic ideology which underpins the work of so many Irish writers of all genres. Our main concentration in this collection is on twentieth-century figures ranging from Joyce, through Synge and Paul Vincent Carroll, Maud Gonne and Countess Markievicz, right up to Kate O'Brien, Brian Moore, John McGahern, Brian Friel, Seamus Heaney and Paul Durcan. From the Irish-American angle, we have Edwin O'Connor, whose *The Edge of Sadness* is as good a portrayal of the daily struggles of a priest as you will find. The list is in no way exhaustive, but we feel that a good number of the canonical figures are dealt with and in a manner that brings to light the importance of Catholicism in the nurturing of their literary quest. To quote Jean-Luc Nancy: 'all our thought is Christian through and through', and whether we embrace this or rail against it, Christianity, and in Ireland Catholicism in particular, is foundational in the creation

2 O'Donnell, 'There is No going Back', p. 66.

3 O'Donnell, 'There is No going Back', p. 67.

of consciousness.⁴ In the case of John McGahern, literature replaced the priesthood as his life vocation. He broke the promise made to his mother that he would become a priest for reasons he explains in *Memoir*:

Instead of being a priest of God, I would be the god of a small, vivid world. I must have had some sense of how outrageous and laughable this would appear to the world, because I told no one, but it did serve its first purpose – it set me free.⁵

Literature as a source of liberation, the religion of art replacing that of Catholicism, is clearly a Joycean concept and two of our contributors deal with Joyce in their essays. In *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, we see the seminal stages of such a secularisation of the transcendental where Stephen, despite his cry of 'Non Serviam'⁶ and his refusal to accept the call to the priesthood, nevertheless describes his aesthetic purpose in terms that are suffused with Catholic imagery, as he describes how the image of the girl he saw coming out of Jacob's biscuit factory made him ponder the nature of women and of beauty and:

His anger against her found vent in coarse railing at her paramour, whose name and voice and features offended his baffled pride: a priested peasant, with a brother a policeman in Dublin and a brother a potboy in Moycullen. To him she would unveil her soul's shy nakedness, to one who was but schooled in the discharging of a formal rite rather than to him, a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life. The radiant image of the eucharist united again in an instant his bitter and despairing thoughts ...⁷

For all that he is clearly at variance with the Catholic worldview and vows not to serve it, his own signifiers are nevertheless invaded by a stream of Catholic imagery. His captivation by this discourse culminates in his vision-

4 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Translated by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 142.

5 John McGahern, *Memoir* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), p. 205.

6 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (Boston: Bedford Books of Saint Martin's Press, 1993), p. 131.

7 Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, pp. 248–249.

ing of the transformations of the aesthetic in terms of the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, with the artist now a priest of a more secular movement towards transcendence, with Jacob's biscuits seen as a secular form of the Eucharistic wafer.

It is important to note that a topic like Irish Catholicism comes with serious emotional and political baggage. Emer Nolan comments on how most commentators conceive of fiction written by nineteenth-century Catholic authors 'as governed by a didactic commitment to narrowly conceived political aims and thereby condemned to aesthetic failure'.⁸ Such an interpretation would also view twentieth-century Catholic novelists in Ireland as naturalists who were quite willing to offer a critique of the Catholic-dominated independent Irish State. In this type of reading, according to Nolan, 'it was not emancipation for but emancipation from Catholicism that would mark the beginnings of modernity in Ireland,'⁹ a view to which she does not fully subscribe.

Similarly, Augustine Martin maintained that many Irish writers since the time of Joyce suffered from what he described as 'inherited dissent'. This involved replacing their original faith with blends of the mystical and aesthetic: 'They seem to have been needled into apostasy by a Christianity which at that time ... appeared to be extremely philistine, anti-intellectual, disciplinarian and above all, anti-mystical. It was Christianity smug in the dry complacency of nineteenth-century apologetics, suspicious of everything outside devotionality and observance'.¹⁰ Some writers, although quite devout in their religious dispositions, fell victim to the ambient philistinism that made it hard for them to pursue their writing while remaining within the confining structures and strictures of Church. But Martin would argue that this reality hardened into a cliché that viewed Ireland as 'a backward, insanitary, inert, despairing country; a people priest-ridden

8 Emer Nolan, *Catholic Emancipations: Irish Fiction from Thomas Moore to James Joyce* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2007), p. x.

9 Nolan, *Catholic Emancipations*, p. x.

10 Augustine Martin, 'Inherited Dissent', in Anthony Roche (ed.), *Bearing Witness: Essays on Anglo-Irish Literature* (Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1996), p. 86.

and superstitious, which despises its artists and intellectuals, treats its autocratic, avaricious and crafty clergy with a sanctimonious servility; a people soaked in dreams and booze.¹¹

Like all clichés, the grain of truth contained in this impression conveniently ignores a lot of complex issues and fails to take note of the exceptions that disprove the thesis. This particular mindset can be detected in some of the pronouncements made by Seán Ó Faoláin (1900–1991) who, in an article 'The Modern Novel: A Catholic Point of View', stated that the Catholic writer chooses to see man as midway between everything and nothing:

I find in all of them [Catholic novelists] a painful self-consciousness, as if they could not forget they were Catholics, a timidity evident in their fear of the senses, a priggishness and a solemnity which has nothing to do with religion and for which there is no excuse, a lack of humour, and a tendency to underwrite about the emotions as if they feared to raise a storm they could not ride ... These tendencies, though highly laudable in the writer as a Catholic, are in the writer as a writer the signs of some basic weakness that is, apparently, fatal to his works.¹²

There is an evident risk for the writer who happens to be a Catholic of somehow corrupting both his readers and himself by delving into the psychology of human passion. If one displays sex in an attractive manner, for example, is there not a danger of leading people into sin? Catholic writers have always struggled with this aspect of their art – François Mauriac and Julien Green being two names that spring to mind immediately in that context – but often get over the obstacle by stating that they are artists first and foremost, and Catholics second. In the case of the Irish writers who appear in this collection, we do not encounter such dilemmas, as most of them do not see themselves as belonging to the Catholic fold. In an interview with Julia Carlson, John McGahern stated:

11 Martin, 'Inherited Dissent', p. 89.

12 Seán Ó Faoláin, 'The Modern Novel: A Catholic Point of View', in *Virginia Quarterly Review* 2 (1935), p. 345.

The amazing thing is that it's [Ireland] a Catholic country and nearly all the writers are not Catholics. They're lapsed Catholics. I think that the Church in Ireland is peculiarly anti-intellectual, say, compared to the French Church. People like Mauriac and Bloy could have no place here ... Nobody actually took any time to understand what to be Irish was. There was this slogan and fanaticism and a lot of emotion, but there wasn't any clear idea except what you were against: you were against sexuality; you were against the English.¹³

While agreeing with McGahern's thesis to a large extent, we would add that a lapsed Catholic is still a Catholic in the sense that his or her symbolic order is shot through with images, concepts and terminology that are Catholic in nature. McGahern himself always acknowledged a debt of gratitude to the Catholic Church for introducing him to the beauty of its ceremonies, the poetry of its prayers, the reassurance it brought in needy times.

In an article from *The Irish Times*, Fintan O'Toole argued that it was hard for Irish writers to give up on Catholicism. This does not, of course, have anything to do with religion, as most writers tend to be atheists, agnostics or, at best, unorthodox believers. It is the residual impact of Catholicism that feeds into their work. In O'Toole's view, 'the world in which Catholic beliefs and institutions played so central a part is too imaginatively rich to be dispensed with without deep regret.'¹⁴ Here we are coming to the essence of what the essays that follow seek to prove. In the wake of the Ryan and Murphy reports and the continuing scandal of the tragic consequences of clerical sex abuse, the once-powerful Catholic Church has been brought to its knees in Ireland. What Michel de Certeau has termed the 'very "pagan" alliance between power and religion' has now been subjected to critique, and the 'clerical, dogmatic, and sacramental power' of the Church in Ireland is in the process of deconstruction.¹⁵

13 In Julia Carlson (ed.), *Banned in Ireland: Censorship and the Irish Writer* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), p. 22.

14 Fintan O'Toole, 'Why artists can't quite give up on Catholicism', in *The Irish Times*, 5 December 2009, p. 9.

15 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 18.

Now that it is weak and vulnerable, it has an added attraction for the writer: 'any declining thing is an irresistible magnet for the writer's nib.'¹⁶ There is the nostalgia associated with the passing of something that played an important role in the lives of so many writers, and Irish people in general need to find something with which to replace it. Our experiment with high finance has proved an even greater disappointment than our centuries-long dalliance with religion. O'Toole offers the view that it is probably our creative artists who will provide some soothing words to a punch-drunk nation:

We need to live in a richly textured universe and as the layers of Catholic imagery and ritual are stripped away for many by the corrosive effects of corruption, they need to be replaced. The paradox is, of course, that it is the accursed breed so despised by the Church – the writers – who best appreciate the need and come closest to meeting it.¹⁷

The imagination of anyone brought up in the Catholic religion will inevitably be influenced by contact with that faith. As Paul Ricoeur has noted, there is a 'movement of transcendence by which every work of fiction, whether verbal or plastic, narrative or lyric, projects a world outside of itself'.¹⁸ And in the case of Ireland, the language of this movement, whether we like it or not, is very much Catholic in origin. Whether it be overtly in the symbolic order of their texts, or covertly and antagonistically, as the unspoken Lacanian real of those texts, the language and ideology of Catholicism is a pervasive trope in all Irish writing.

In the essays that follow, you will see the struggle for and against Catholicism, the dilemmas associated with sin and grace, the exposure to religious teaching, rituals and symbols. It is a rich tapestry that is assembled and a complex one. Some writers speak out eloquently against a repressive upbringing, others rejoice in the innocence of a former edenic existence, but all are aware of the role Catholicism has played in their lives. There is

16 O'Toole, 'Why artists can't quite give up on Catholicism', p. 9.

17 O'Toole, 'Why artists can't quite give up on Catholicism', p. 9.

18 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Volume 2. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985), p. 5.

also something alluring about the manner in which Catholicism, for all its faults, when experienced in its purest form, runs counter to secular society and its rush towards crass materialism, selfishness and greed. As pointed out by Mary Reichardt:

As such, the Christianity practiced by Christ and held up by the Catholic Church as the ideal is always countercultural, even as its more malleable teachings and expressions may adapt to particular times and places. Such tensions – being *in* the world yet simultaneously not *of* the world – have provided writers in the Catholic tradition with the kind of double sightedness that so often fuels artistic creativity.¹⁹

It is precisely this tension between the attraction felt for the best aspects of Catholicism and despair at the serious failings of the institutional Church that gives such a powerful resonance to how Irish writers approach the portrayal of religion in their works. In all sorts of ways, writing and religion are connected in terms of hope – of hope in a better future, in a better relationship with the world and with the other. To cite Ricoeur again, hope stresses that ‘the world is not the final home of freedom. I consent as much as possible but hope to be delivered of the terrible and at the end of time to enjoy a new body and a new nature granted to freedom.’²⁰ Catholicism in Ireland is in a parallel position to Nietzsche’s description of Christianity’s role in the West, in that we are experiencing the nervation of Catholicism. As Nietzsche put it: ‘the Buddha’s shadow remains for a thousand years before the cave in which he died,’²¹ and in Ireland today the same can be said of Catholicism. To paraphrase Nancy, we are in that shadow, and it is precisely that shadow that we must bring to light. This book will examine both light and shadow and will attempt to

19 Mary Reichardt (ed.), ‘Introduction’, *Encyclopedia of Catholic Literature* Volume I (Westport Connecticut/London: Greenwood Press, 2004), p. xviii.

20 Paul Ricoeur, *Freedom and Nature: The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Translated by Erazim V. Kohak (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1966), p. 480.

21 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science, With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, edited by Bernard Williams, translated by Josefine Naukhoff (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 109.

examine the ‘hold’ of Catholicism on the literary imagination of modern Irish writing. We would hope, like Nancy, to set up a debate on the role and nature of Catholicism in the Irish imagination and, if we substitute the term ‘Catholic’ for ‘Christian’, we would hope to:

We must try to bring to light how we are still Christian without, perhaps, remaining pious; this cannot be said in Nietzsche’s terms (‘how we, too, are still pious’): to ask ourselves ‘how we are still Christian’ takes us to the very end, to the ultimate extremity of Christianity.²²

22 Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, p. 142.

PART I

Precursors of Change

JEANNE I. LAKATOS

The Semiotic Theory of Iconic Realism and Cultural Dissonance in de Meun's and de Lorris's *Roman de la Rose* and James Joyce's *Ulysses*

It is the middle of the thirteenth century, and Guillaume de Lorris has just completed his 4,000-line manuscript entitled *Roman de la Rose*. It is an ambitious undertaking, and he is lucky to possess a solid grounding in the Latin classics. The protagonist of his poem is a young man who dreams of entering a quasi-mythical garden, where he experiences both the impediments to, and joys of physical love. De Lorris captures the essence of these youthful experiences in the form of allegorical characters, such as Fair Welcome, Envy, Genius, Old Age, and Nature. Drawing from essential qualities, each of these characters advises the youth, who strives to attain his beloved as symbolised by a rose. In the end, the lover must seize the moment and claim his love. By the year 1280, Jean de Meun has furthered the tale, adding approximately 17,000 lines of action and advice. Even more ambitious than his predecessor, de Meun lengthens and broadens the narrative to reflect the human spirit, rich in allusions to classical authors and mythical figures, such as Aristotle, Plato, Cicero, Adonis and Aeneas. De Meun uses the garden and the rose to promote naturalistic doctrines of regeneration. This expanded version, along with de Lorris's original, is reproduced for over a hundred years. For the first time in textual history, images associated with the written text directly reflect the intensity of a tale. Through this unique expression of desire in the language of the vernacular and the vivid iconography, the authors juxtapose an iconic figure of young love, enchanted by a beautiful plant within a realistic setting in the middle ages. They apply the theory of iconic realism, varying reality in this scenario to engage the readers in an awareness of a specific cultural reform.

The theory of iconic realism, as a semiotic theory, demonstrates cognitive variation, for the placement of an iconic object or person in a unique realistic setting in which this icon does not usually appear creates a static coalescence of the icon with the designated realism. Since both the icon and the realistic setting represent an aspect of the culture, this unexpected juxtaposition results in a friction between these two entities and catalyzes a vivid awareness of cultural dissonance. Thus, using specific examples from the medieval poem, *Roman de la Rose*, written by Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris, particularly the reaction of Christine de Pisan, and *Ulysses* by James Joyce, this study will describe two processes: that with which an artist creates and that by which an audience subsequently perceives and interprets the artist's rendering of written or aural composition.

Iconic realism, as a semiotic theory, demonstrates cognitive variation. These processes involve symbolism and individual interpretation, which develop into a new consciousness from the audience having experienced and interpreted the work of art and the artist receiving new information emanating from the individual interpretations of the perceiving audience. Through a semiotic association, all parties attach an arbitrary set of signs with certain signifiers to create meaning that aligns itself with the perceiver's experience.

In his book, *The Child's Conception of the World*, Jean Piaget discusses concepts that surround iconic realism in reference to the cognitive association that children make when attaching meaning to a real figure.¹ However, the theory of iconic realism is based on the study of semiotics. It offers an adaptation of the term to explain the use of iconic figures by artists in the fields of literature, art and music, film and media, as they juxtapose these iconic figures with realistic settings.

Realism involves those authentic and independent aspects of a natural environment which individuals perceive as truth objectively experienced through human senses. As artists create images, they adapt their individual interpretation of reality to their art form. Each brain receives information

1 Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, translated by Joan and Andrew Tomlinson (New Jersey: Patterson, Adams and Co, 1960).

based upon an individual's physiology, which, along with the history of the individual directly correlates with interpretation of sensory stimuli. In the case of Irish Catholicism, realism involves the connection between the long history of the Church and its intense influence on the consciousness of the Irish. This intensity has led to literary artists expressing themselves through characters that bring into focus the political and social concerns of the Irish populace. In his novel, *Ulysses*, James Joyce chooses language, characterisations and settings that embrace the human spirit with all its flaws and juxtaposes them with beauty in an effort to educate the reader in the elements of both.

Thus, a creator of an art form does not experience the same reality as that exhibited within the art that she or he creates. However, the creator's experience can influence the artistic composition. For example, the representational realism in art and photography provides the audience with information in which the focal point rests; however, the audience will perceive the realism, recognise and then interpret the realism that the artist has represented. This new interpretation of realism may differ from that of the artist's.

In *Roman de la Rose*, Catholic scribes envelop the text with iconographic symbols to enhance recognition of plot, as well as to increase memory of the storyline, providing an intertextual feast for their medieval readers' senses. As Mary Carruthers points out: 'Just as letters, make present the voices and ideas of those who are not in fact present, so pictures serve as re-sent signs or cues of those same voices and ideas.'² In addition, the iconography of the Middle Ages provides an alternative storyline to the text, employing references to political and literary personalities to direct opinions to those with specific knowledge of the pictorial representation – most likely, the aristocracy and other Catholic readers. Thus, medieval interpretation of text originates in the clustering of the visual through formation of letters in conjunction with iconography in the margins of the written text. These texts contain one set of semantics associated with

2 Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 222.

the word, which in turn can support or conflict with the iconography, presented visually on the same page. This provides the medieval audience with a realistic viewpoint of the storyline.

In the twentieth century, James Joyce illustrates a viewpoint of parochial dissonance by means of Victorian feminine perceptions throughout Molly Bloom's soliloquy in the final chapter of his epic tale. Using stream of consciousness in a manner unparalleled at the time of this novel's publication, Joyce leads his audience to the entrance of the sphere of Molly's mind, taking the reader to every crevice of her feminine consciousness. Joyce defies the social stigma of women during this era as he interweaves Molly Bloom's expression of a unique feminine point of view. He utilises his rich, cultural history to illustrate the complexities in the social and linguistic strata, which are imbedded throughout *Ulysses*. Examples of this Irish influence include his allusions to politics, religion and social interaction. In this final category, the reader gains a unique access to Joyce's mind. He creates for the reader an insight into his Irish culture and his own personal interaction with the world through the contradictory characterisations of women, in particular, Molly Bloom.

Thus, the realism aspect of iconic realism draws upon those real features of the artist's culture, represented through the art form and presented within a new perspective of the artist's cultural reality. Audiences have the task of interpretation, based on their experience with those elements they have in common with the artist's reality and the recently created reality. The individual, then, interprets a work of art based on his or her perception of reality. Daniel Chandler explains:

Semiotics involves the study not only of what we refer to as signs in everyday speech, but of anything which stands for something else. In a semiotic sense, signs take the form of words, images, sounds, gestures and objects. Contemporary semioticians study signs not in isolation but as a part of semiotic sign-systems (such as medium or genre). They study how meanings are made and how reality is represented.³

3 Daniel Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics* (New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.

Recurrently, through placement of iconic figures interacting within a realistic setting, this semiotic association unites the writer, artist, poet or musician with the audience to help the audience become aware of its new perception of a specific cultural phenomenon exhibited through the work of art.

In the field of semiotics, an iconic structure contains a figure that resembles or imitates the signified. Language consists of individual associations of a consistent set of signifiers, which identify and label the signified. Through continued repetition of this signifier in its role as the signified, a community establishes this symbol as the accepted representation. Chandler suggests that the human species 'is driven by a desire to make meanings: above all, we are surely *homo significans* – meaning makers.'⁴ Humans attach meaning to signs in a unique manner, whether corporeal or intellectual, based upon individual interpretations of those signs in direct correlation to their unique experiences. Anthropologist, Steven Mithen, asserts: 'Cognitive fluidity [is] a consequence of language, spoken and imaginary utterances [act] as the conduit for ideas and information to flow from one separate intelligence to another.'⁵ The construction of a language, based on the experience of a particular population, depends on the accepted utterances and associations that are consistent and accepted within the linguistic parameters of a given community.

A single symbol from the collective associations can evolve independently, deriving characters unique to itself yet understood by the community as representative of its common language and experience base. Thomas Kavanagh points out:

The signified meanings, instead of being accepted as such, instead of taking us outside the text as text, become themselves the signifiers the iconic signs, of a continuing movement, of a second temporality definable only within the parameters of the text.⁶

4 Chandler, *Semiotics: The Basics*, p. 13.

5 Steven Mithen, *The Singing Neanderthals: The Origins of Music, Language, Mind, and Body* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2006), p. 264.

6 Thomas Kavanagh, 'Time and Narration: Indexical and Iconic Models', in *Comparative Literature. MLN*, Vol. 86, No. 6 (1971) p. 824.

Therefore, when one reads a piece of literature, views a work of art or listens to a musical composition, there is an association of the symbolic within the specific art form that correlates with the audience's experience and new information gained from having perceived the artistry of the writer, artist or musician within specified parameters of history and locale.

For example, Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris use poetics in *Roman de la Rose* to connect the medieval readers with intuitive thought by associating the visual iconography with the lexicon it illustrates, situating a sense of game playing with the semantics of the text and image, transporting the telling of tales as a primary source of entertainment for an aristocratic community and making the experience of reading their tales a source of pleasure for their audience while simultaneously awakening the audience to a cultural dilemma of misogyny.

Likewise, through Molly's voice, Joyce seeks answers to his own challenge with a feminine defiance of human weakness. The Ireland in which James Joyce lives is in the throes of revolution. As Joyce leaves his ancestral home, he allows his own genius to flourish. He sees the result of the male world's design for women and seeks to illuminate the world with its significance. His personal associations with women frame the female portrait of Molly Bloom, as he places her in the midst of the Victorian era, with its focus on proper placement of gender roles, customs and even nations. Thus, she carries the burden of living with this regimented philosophical point of view. Joyce designs the person of Molly to reveal traits that originate from conventional Victorian and Catholic masculine ideas of how a woman should act or think. Joyce writes Molly as one whose actions have a tendency to focus upon her sexual desires. Molly, like Ireland, is a contradiction of the human spirit. On the one hand, she is independent, wild, yet she also depends on the ruler of her heart for identity.

This newly gained insight establishes an entirely new structural perception of the symbol. W.J.T. Mitchell admits: 'Whatever our reading leads us to 'see' not simply in the visual sense but in the entire field of perception is

part of the field of descriptive space in literary experience.⁷ For example, interpretation of literature, in association with language, involves the reader attaching an arbitrary set of signs with the signifiers to create meaning that aligns itself with the reader's experience. The seventeenth-century English philosopher, John Locke, articulates: 'Whatsoever the Mind perceives in itself, or is the immediate object of Perception, Thought, or Understanding, that I call *Idea*, and the Power to produce any *Idea* in our mind, I call *Quality* of the Subject wherein that power is.'⁸ Hence, a work of art will illustrate *iconic realism* as a means of expressing a concept that challenges the audience to alter static interpretation. This enables the artist and the audience to become collaborators in the creative experience of semiotic acuity to impart a new perception of their realities.

The study of hermeneutics clarifies the concept of semiotic theory, the significance of meaning as interpreted by individual audiences and includes the concept of meaning with its relative interpretations. Based on its historical frame of reference, an audience engages in a variety of interpretations of any piece of literature. As Mario J. Valdés asserts: 'The meaning we construe to any statement or any text is tentative; indeterminacy is controlled by a system of signs we accept as determinate in order to establish a temporary identity to the text.'⁹ Therefore, the reader and the author interact with and interpret the material independent of each other yet inclusive of the history and culture of both parties.

For example, a reader will attach symbolic meaning to a linguistic arrangement, created by the author, who attaches his/her experience to the narrative. Now, two instances of historical perspective affect the interpretation of the written passages. That is not to say that the interpretations of the written material will be valid, based on historical perspective alone.

7 W.J.T. Mitchell, 'Spatial Form in Literature: Toward a General Theory', in *Critical Theory* 6. 3 (1980), p. 552.

8 John Locke, Peter H. Nidditch (eds), *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), p. 134.

9 Mario Valdés, *Hermeneutics of Poetic Sense: Critical Studies of Literature, Cinema, and Cultural History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), p. 15.

Errors in interpretations can drastically affect the audience's intellectual response to a piece of literature. Valdés agrees:

Questions being asked of the text can be muddled self-contradictory, or inconsistent with their own presuppositions, which can make them invalid. A second class of errors is the result of a lack of formal response to the text itself that is a failure to make sense.¹⁰

Therefore, any new awareness gained from having read a literary work depends on setting, characterisations and linguistic experience of both the writer and the audience.

The authors of *Roman de la Rose* place the woman as a central figure in the medieval consciousness of courtly love with human traits virtually nonexistent as they portray the ideal female as an untouchable rose. On the other hand, James Joyce presents the Sheila Ireland through his characterisation of Molly Bloom, who becomes, as Patrick J. Keane describes: 'the unfaithful Penelope to Bloom's victimized, cuckolded Ulysses, the adulterate Queen Gertrude to his proletarian King Hamlet.'¹¹ Joyce crafts the person of Molly to reveal traits that originate from the conventional Victorian model of female actions and thoughts.

Therefore, if the writer conveys a setting that is familiar to the reader, then the reader can associate personal experiences within these given parameters. This creates a knowledge base that opens the possibilities to interpret setting in a way that correlates directly with the writer's point of view. However, if the reader is not familiar with the setting, then the writer must formulate an introduction in a specific manner that will enlighten the reader to the nuances within the story's environment. In this way, the writer assists the reader in negotiating the narrative's terrain, based on the writer's experience. At this point, the reader interjects his/her personal experience and creates a new interpretation of setting. Considering the myriad of readers' interpretations of any given number of settings within

10 Valdés, *Hermeneutics of Poetic Sense*, p. 15.

11 Patrick J. Keane, *Yeats, Joyce, Ireland and the Myth of the Devouring Female* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1988), p. 55.

a novel, a writer's presentation of a particular setting can contain innumerable connotations.

In addition, the characterisations of protagonist, antagonist and other narrative personalities have unique interpretations based on the writer's and the readers' experiences. Umberto Eco reminds readers: 'Familiar overcodings ... verge on the manneristic.'¹² In other words, readers will identify with familiarities in the characters' traits and attach new identities from similar personality traits that individuals maintain in their lives. Thus, the novelist and the reader invent an array of characterisations through their interpretations of the characters' actions in relation to responses from known experiences.

The term *iconic* expresses any aspect of a particular culture that represents the culture's consciousness, perceived by members for an extended duration of time. This duration can vary in length; however, an iconic figure is one that emerges through time as the community recognises this figure to reflect a relevant aspect of the culture, which influences the community. As Mary Carruthers comments: 'Recollection occurs consciously through association: one finds or hunts out the stored memory-impressions by using other things associated with it either through a logical connection or through "habit".'¹³ Thus, any representation becomes an icon when significant time passes for a community to recognise this figure as a representation of a specific aspect of the culture. Often, the media will portray a celebrity as an icon. However, in most cases, the celebrity's status is only temporary, which cannot determine its classification as an iconic figure. For example, the Madonna, mother of Jesus of Nazareth is an icon of the Catholic Church. She represents the perfect feminine role model of this religious culture, having the same characteristics for over two thousand years.

With regard to linguistics, the writer draws upon language that contains phonetics with associated semantic components of signal-signifier

12 Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 123.

13 Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*, p. 20.

connection that directly correlate with the characters and their settings. The reader, in turn, will interpret those linguistic features according to knowledge of the language and manner in which the semantic elements align with his/her personal experience. For example, the varied linguistic elements that Joyce employs throughout his novel, *Ulysses*, causes the reader to pause during Bloom's Dublin odyssey, attempting to fully grasp the context of the language. Since most of the main character's linguistic components of this work emanate from Leopold Bloom's point of view, the reader is more of a witness than a contributor to the semantic representation. If the reader does not comprehend the language in a literary work, references to the characters and setting remain meaningless. As with art and music, a reading audience depends on the artist to create parameters that the reader understands in order to extract meaning from the linguistic components establishing a literary work.

These parameters rest within the aesthetic reception of the audience concerning any art form as a means of establishing a sense of realism within its thematic representation. Hans Robert Jauss purports that through expression of literature, art and other modes of creative expression, significant variables affect the aesthetic reception that contains historical relevance. He asserts that literature contains:

A kind of grammar or syntax, with relatively fixed relations of its own: the arrangement of the traditional and the uncanonized genres; modes of expression, kinds of style, and rhetorical figures; contrasted with this arrangement is the much more variable realm of semantics: the literary subjects, archetypes, symbols, and metaphors.¹⁴

Thus, the audience receives this linguistic configuration through unique historical perspectives. Empathy with the artist creates another dynamic of communication between the artist and the audience, which establishes a necessary connection for new interpretation to unfold. For example, when a reader absorbs the written text, attaching symbolic images and

14 Hans Robert Jauss, *Toward an Aesthetic Reception*, translated by Timothy Bahti (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), p. 38.

feelings associated with the signifiers on the page, signifiers, unique to the individual, a new set of symbolic meaning is established.

The semantic component to phonology involves multiple meanings of the lexicon chosen for expression, as the interpersonal response links directly to verbal stimulation, contributes to the writer's choice of lexicon, and ultimately to the total communication of an idea. In choosing lexicon for expression, the writer makes a decision regarding specific words to describe a feeling or environmental experience, choosing words that not only express his/her emotions, but also connect with the reading audience, choosing a word or phrase that communicates with the widest range of readers, while simultaneously allowing unique interpretation of the original thought. Along with this semantic choice of lexicon is the phonetic factor. A writer will manipulate the pronunciation of language to make a specific point through examples of sound within word structure using literary devices. Familiarity with the semantics of a lexicon links with the overall comprehension of literary expression.

For instance, Joyce uses outspoken behaviour by Molly to reveal his personal hopeful desire for Ireland, one that seeks to declare independence from the established English Common law. This law states that 'a husband was responsible ... for the behavior and "discipline" of his wife and had the right, for due cause, to chastise his wife with a stick as thick as the thumb.'¹⁵ Because Joyce grew up amid this turbulent gender reconfiguration during the late nineteenth century, the residue of the strict, Victorian regulations of female behaviour appear within his characterisations. Tracy Schwartz asserts: 'Joyce engages these questions of gender not by constructing female characters that reflect nineteenth century typologies; instead, he creates women who refract them.'¹⁶ Molly is exotic, born of a British lieutenant and a Spanish Jewess and has a normal childhood, which is highly unlikely,

15 Henke, Suzette and Elain Unkeless (eds), *Women in Joyce* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1982), p. 120.

16 Tracy Schwartz, *Joyce and the Victorians* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), p. 123.

as this type of mixed marriage is not one, which would have survived in the late nineteenth century. As Phillip Herring states:

In reality, as the daughter of an Irish officer and a local Jewess, living contiguous with formidable Jewish community that considered mixed-marriage anathema, Molly would have had a curious relationship to all social groups.¹⁷

She moves to the mainland Ireland, where she meets and marries a man who is Irish-Hungarian. Joyce places Molly's birthday on the same day as the Virgin Mary's, 8 September. Herring figures that it may be an effort at 'balanc[ing it with] the scandal of Molly's affair with Blazes Boylan.'¹⁸ However, Molly becomes the antithesis of the Virgin Mary, pure of sin, for she is powerful in her earthly relationships but lacks the spiritual elevation associated with the Madonna. Obviously, Joyce cannot dissociate himself from the teachings of his Catholic faith. Several times during her soliloquy, Molly references Catholic traditions. In the following passage, she relies on the prayers of the rosary for consolation:

Yes because I felt tired myself and fell asleep as sound as a top the moment I popped straight into bed till that thunder woke me up as if I thought the heavens were coming down about us to punish when I blessed myself and said a Hail Mary like those awful thunderbolts in Gibraltar and they come and tell you there is no God what could you do if it was running and rushing about nothing only make an act of contrition the candle I lit that evening in Whitefriars Street chapel for the month of May see I brought its luck though he'd scoff if he heard because he never goes to church mass or meeting he says your soul you have no soul inside only grey matter because he doesn't know what it is to have one yes.¹⁹

In this passage, Joyce illustrates parochial dissonance through the character of Molly as a woman representative of the defiant nature of an Ireland in the growing industrial age. She embodies the elements of Victorian womanhood: beauty, talent, motherhood, faith, struggle, and even scandal,

17 Phillip F. Herring, 'Toward an Historical Molly Bloom,' in *ELH*, 45:3 (1978), p. 507.

18 Herring, 'Toward an Historical Molly Bloom,' p. 514.

19 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1939), p. 726.

yet she also explores the social and emotional complexities with which women must deal during this era. Joyce's depiction of Molly Bloom could be analogous to a linguistic symphony that resonates with the harmonics of psychological and cultural discovery. Joyce manipulates the language of Molly to open possibilities of reader interpretations of her character and her relationship with societal constructs.

Thus, semiotic constructs of symbolism, semantics and linguistic pragmatics provide the leverage for the creative ideas to manifest within each member of the audience. At this point, symbolism becomes a new association of the possibility for recognised imagery with unrecognised reality. A newly formed idea becomes the reality within the mind of the receiving audience, boundless in perception constraints. The audience member receives this reality and conceives the new idea through a multi-sensory experience. No longer associated with the original idea, the new concept emerges with an energy of its own, with which the audience member can now associate creative action, continuing the creative process of the original thought. Thus, iconic realism magnifies the elements of semiotic theory through renewed perceptions that the receptive audience experiences with an artist's rendering of reality.

This awareness can originate in the cultural literature through the lexical placement and an iconographic embellishment, where the reader encodes the information, recalls an experience associated with the image, and proceeds to attach new meaning to it. From this process, the reader can now recognise that the realism within the created image may or may not coincide with his own. At this point, the reader interprets the image in relation to the realism presented to him. If these two factors are in conflict, the new association that the reader makes may cause him/her to respond by elevating his/her consciousness to allow innovative interpretation to unfold, which creates awareness for change. Therefore, the created image takes on new life in the mental processing of the interpreted response by the audience through the artist's use of iconic realism.

Relevant to medieval interpretation of *Roman de la Rose*, Christine de Pisan places particular emphasis on her philosophical views and relates these to spiritual qualities of desire and curiosity in the aristocracy. In the poem, these concepts are expressed aurally and visually, according to the

medieval symbolism attached to the rose. To illustrate, the Biblical symbol of the rose was born in mythological ideals where the rose represented sensuality, a sign of Venus, and earthly love of woman. Christians transferred this to Mary, the mother of Jesus, as the red rose was a symbol of the bud that opened only to *le soleil*, the sun. Also, the mysteries of heaven are contained within Mary's Rose, for within her, came the Son of God, the embodiment of the Holy Trinity. In the Old Testament, the Rose of Sharon symbolises the Christ. Isaiah has a messianic prophecy that 'the wilderness shall blossom like a rose' (Isaiah 41:19). Barbara Seward agrees that the rose becomes the Christian symbol of love; God is love. Humans are created in the image and likeness of God. Therefore, humankind is akin to God in the ability to love.²⁰ Women, then, become the source of God's earthly presence through their biological decree to give life as a physical fulfillment of love.

Bringing attention to this, Christine de Pisan enlightens her audiences by reinforcing aurally and visually the principles of Christian ethics within the context of the *Roman de la Rose*. Her discourse relies upon the lexicon expressed on the page as written text and the allegorical images, situated with the semantics of the written word. Within the discourse of Christine de Pisan, a cultural dissonance of the feminine role in society transports the rose metaphor for the power/powerless dichotomy within the medieval aristocracy while Joyce configures highly structured features to create an image of a form of reality present in the artist's mind. When an artist juxtaposes an iconic image with a representation of a reality, which an audience would not associate with this figure, this iconic realism provides the audience with a new perspective of the iconic figure and the depicted realism.

This circuitous relationship between the audience and the artist continues to unfold as the audience adapts its consciousness to the art form. Once again, historical perspective is an essential element as Wolfgang Iser explains: 'Both participate in a circular relationship through which the one

20 Barbara Seward, *The Symbolic Rose* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 18–24.

conditions the other in a recursive movement that brings about an elucidation of the subject matter and a fine-tuning of the interpretive strategies.²¹ Thus, the individual receives the art form, moves into a consciousness that draws upon experience and re-interprets the art form. Although the art does not alter, the audience does, and with this change, innovative translations of the art form emerge.

The global network of intellectual thought feeds upon innovation within the consciousness of humanity. As one notion spirals to form a new idea, the resulting awareness creates new perspectives on issues not perceived within the current reality of some communities. Knowledge gained from sharing this new awareness provides more communities with intellectual capabilities to affect a positive change. Spherical influences of one's forefathers transcend the limitations of time. Similarly, the source of innovative thought processes can transcend aesthetic assimilation of concepts to generate definitive and relevant change.

As is obvious from the two literary works they produced, the French poets, de Lorris and de Meun and James Joyce, demonstrate how creative artists can affect their audiences' awareness of possibilities in cultural change through their use of iconic realism, representing concepts in need of transformation. Iconic realism resonates from the semiotics of cross-disciplinary trends in academic, economic, historic and aesthetic influences. Furthermore, the semiotic theory of iconic realism is relevant to cultural studies, for this aspect of semiotics provides an audience with the intellectual tools of cognitive stimulation that alert their consciousness to a tolerance for a different perspective. Once this mindset is activated, each person interprets the literature, music, art or film to form a unique association, which could lead to recognition of new perceptions and further explorations through aesthetic modifications of a traditionally held cultural belief. These beliefs, although appropriate for a certain culture during a prescribed moment in time, may benefit from a transformation

21 Wolfgang Iser, *The Range of Interpretation* (New York: Columbia University Press), p. 84.

of the community's position. Therefore, as a means of assimilating evolving concepts of artistic expression, the study of iconic realism opens the door to expanded exploration of semiotic theory and iconic structures within the fields of literature, art, music and film.

CATHY MCGLYNN

'In the beginning is the void': Creation, Paternity and the Logos in Joyce's *Ulysses*

My mind rejects the whole present social order and Christianity – home, the recognised virtues, classes of life, and religious doctrines [...] Six years ago I left the Catholic Church hating it most fervently. I found it impossible to remain in it on account of the impulses of my nature. I made secret war upon it when I was a student and declined to accept the positions it offered me [...] Now I make war upon it by what I write and say and do.¹

Joyce's rejection of Catholicism is well-documented, as evinced in the above quote, taken from a letter written to Nora Barnacle in August 1904. His fiction accordingly wages a symbolic 'war' upon the authority of the Catholic Church in Ireland; as Douglas Fairhill observes: 'the instrument of Joyce's rebellion was the written word.'² This rebellion is not confined to his rejection of the Catholic Church; indeed, as many critics have argued, his fiction persistently resists and challenges those modes of authority that oppress, in Joyce's view, the Irish race. Vicki Mahaffey observes Joyce's 'life-long, passionate resistance to coercion in any form, which prompted his famous evasions of the authority of church, state and marriage'³ and argues that Joyce developed in his fiction a 'vast repertory of stylistic techniques in order to attack the traditional, univocal model of authority reflected in the

- 1 James Joyce, *Letters of James Joyce* Vol. II., edited by Richard Ellmann (New York: Viking Press, 1964), p. 48.
- 2 James Fairhall, *James Joyce and the Question of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 57.
- 3 Vicki Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1995), p. xiii.

organizations of Church and State that he had been taught to serve.⁴ This ‘model of authority’ is, I will argue, equated with the patriarchal logocentric bias that has dominated the history of Western metaphysics and discourse and it is this very bias that Joyce attempts to subvert. Joseph Kelly notes that ‘Joyce committed himself to demystifying the Catholic, imperial and nationalist “truths”⁵ that informed his experience and identity in Ireland and the connection between the notion of ‘truths’ and logocentric discourse is the focus of this chapter. Stephen Dedalus in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* is representative of Joyce’s rebellion.

In the semi-autobiographical *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce creates, in his own image, as Richard Ellmann aptly observes, ‘the portrait of the renegade Catholic artist as hero.’⁶ This was a new departure in Irish literature as the nineteenth-century tradition was, as James H. Murphy notes, resistant to novel-writing. He explains: ‘[t]he Irish Catholic community generally had utilitarian ambitions when it came to intellectualism, higher education, the professions and the middle classes. Novel writing was an English or an Anglo-Irish business.’ Consequently, novel writing was a rarity in Catholic Irish circles, certainly before the fall of Parnell. However, the disgraced leader’s downfall precipitated a change in such attitudes, which can be discerned, as Murphy notes, ‘in the work of oppositional Irish Catholic writers after 1891, the year of the death of the disgraced nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell. Blame for that event [...] was laid by many at the door of the Church. Members of the small but vocal Catholic intelligentsia came to see the latter as a dominating and coercive social and moral force in society.’⁷ This change can be discerned in the literary output of ‘members of the small but vocal Catholic intelligentsia [who] used fiction in the period between 1891 and

4 Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce*, p. 1.

5 Joseph Kelly, *Our Joyce: From Outcast to Icon* (University of Texas Press, 1998), p. 56.

6 Richard Ellmann, *James Joyce* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 148.

7 James H. Murphy, ‘Catholics and Fiction during the Union, 1801–1922’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Irish Novel*, edited by John Wilson Foster (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 97–112, p. 98.

Irish independence in 1922 to argue both against personal limitation and in favour of a more liberal society.’⁸ Joyce’s oeuvre should be situated and read within this context.

The Catholic Church is consistently portrayed as oppressive and domineering in Joyce’s fiction and this is often linked to its betrayal of Parnell, particularly in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. Indeed Stephen Dedalus’s *non Serviam*, and his determination to ‘forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race,’⁹ has links with Parnellism, as Andrew Gibson explains: ‘Joyce’s Parnellism was more than just a set of tactics. The emphasis on the refusal to serve, on the annihilation of the ruler within, on the forging or reawakening of an Irish conscience: Stephen Dedalus shares all of them with the mythic Parnell.’¹⁰ This refusal to serve can be read in the context of Joyce’s ‘rejection of the whole present social order and Christianity’ and this, I will argue, is further linked to Joyce’s deconstruction of logocentric discourse itself. This chapter will demonstrate how Stephen Dedalus’s rejection of Catholicism, which reflects Joyce’s own experience, is mirrored by his rejection of all modes of authority – the ‘nets’ that ensnare him – and will argue that the logocentric emphasis of Catholic doctrine is overtly linked to both spiritual and biological paternity. Stephen’s struggle with the rather complicated issue of paternity in all its forms can be read as a struggle with the authority of the logos itself, which is derived from the Word of God. God’s creation of the world is aligned with artistic creation, and I will conclude my analysis by examining how Stephen’s rejection of the former renders his attempt at the latter problematic.

8 Murphy, ‘Catholics and Fiction during the Union’, p. 98.

9 James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, edited with an introduction and notes by Seamus Deane (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 275–276. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *AP* followed by the page number.

10 Andrew Gibson, *Joyce’s Revenge: History, Politics and Aesthetics in Ulysses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 5.

The following quote offers a useful basis from which Joyce's resistance to logocentric authority may be examined:

A sense of fear of the unknown moved in the heart of his weariness, a fear of symbols and portents, of the hawklike man whose name he bore soaring out of his captivity on osierwoven wings, of Thoth, the god of writers, writing with a reed upon a tablet and bearing on his narrow ibis head the cusped moon. (*AP* 244)

Joyce's description of the fear that grips Stephen Dedalus in the aftermath of the realisation of his artistic vocation in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* provides an important starting-point from which Stephen's rejection of multiple modes of authority – Church, father and fatherland – may be read in conjunction with Joyce's subversion of logocentric discourse. It is Stephen's alignment with 'Thoth, the god of writers' that interests me here. Significantly in terms of the present argument, Jacques Derrida cites this very passage in his essay 'Plato's Pharmacy',¹¹ in which he identifies and problematises the logocentric bias that has dominated the entire history of Western discourse and this has obvious implications for theological discourse. In his essay, Derrida traces Plato's condemnation of writing and prioritisation of speech in the *Phaedrus*, which documents Thoth's offer of the gift of writing to King Thamus, the father of the gods. His use of the myth of Thoth as an illustration of the repression of writing throughout the history of Western philosophy provides an important link between Derrida and Joyce, as Thoth is a recurring figure in Joyce's work and appears in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, *Ulysses*, and *Finnegans Wake*.¹² Thoth claims the gift of writing is a 'pharmakon' and the King refuses the gift, and condemns writing, in favour of the spoken word. Derrida proceeds to deconstruct this speech/writing hierarchy through his observation of the ambiguous meaning of the word 'pharmakon', which denotes both

11 Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. Translated with an introduction and notes by Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *D*, followed by the page number.

12 Shem the penman in *Finnegans Wake* is frequently associated with Thoth. Significantly, he is the son who writes, and he is also linked to Joyce himself.

cure and poison simultaneously. It is the translation of this word and the resulting ambiguity that renders Plato's text unstable and consequently allows Derrida to dismantle the logic that governs the *Phaedrus*. He takes the translation of this word and uses it to overturn an entire philosophical tradition:

Hence, for example, the word *pharmakon*. In this way we hope to display in the most striking manner the regular, ordered polysemy that has [...] permitted the rendering of the same word by 'remedy', 'recipe', 'poison', 'drug', 'philter', etc. It will also be seen to what extent the malleable unity of this concept, or rather its rules and the strange logic that links it with its signifier, has been dispersed, masked, obliterated, and rendered almost unreadable [...] by the redoubtable, irreducible difficulty of translation. With this problem of translation we will thus be dealing with nothing less than the problem of the very passage into philosophy. (*D* 71–72)

If the paradoxical meaning of the word *pharmakon* is the concept which orders the binary oppositions in the text, then these binaries must be rendered unstable. The ordered hierarchical oppositions in Plato's text collapse due to the contradictory meaning of the *pharmakon*, and Derrida's dismantling of the speech/writing binary, which highlights difference at the origin of meaning, provides him with the means to overturn logocentric discourse itself. Therefore, Thoth becomes a subversive figure, or a rebellious son, in relation to paternal authority.

God-the-king Thamus, as a paternal figure, has the authority to privilege speech over writing, and thus the paternal figure is associated with, as Derrida contends, 'the origin of logos' (*D* 76), which signifies the divine and authoritative paternal word. In a Christian context, St John's Gospel opens with '[i]n the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God' (John 1: 1). Here origin and meaning are attributed to the language of God. Martin McQuillan elucidates this further:

The Greek manuscript here states 'logos' and so could be translated as 'word' but also 'meaning' or 'sense'. Such a translation is suggestive of the ways in which western thought is governed by an idea of stable or essential meaning, which is ultimately fixed by a 'transcendental signifier' (a signifier which escapes the play of meaning and against which all meaning is measured) such as God. [...] Logocentrism, and this

way of 'reading' is a theological activity because it presupposes and desires a single, fixed and authoritative centre.¹³

Logocentrism, in Derrida's view, is the centre of language and philosophy; it denotes ideal and divine truths that transcend human reasoning and is related to the word and speech and ultimate authority of God. Speech and authority are associated with the language of the father and writing is equated with absence and the supplementary son and this binary structure, according to Derrida, underwrites Western ideology. It is the notion of this 'transcendental signifier', which in the history of Western thinking is always equated with unquestionable truth and centres of meaning, which Derrida sets out to destroy.

What is significant in terms of this chapter is the connection Derrida makes between the Word of God, or the Logos, Father-Son relationships and the question of origins, as a similar connection can be discerned in the work of Joyce. Joyce's work insists on a resistance to fixed and authoritative centres and this is most obviously embodied in the character of Stephen Dedalus. Stephen acts as a disruptive Thoth who abandons his spiritual father (the God of his Catholic upbringing), his biological father (Simon Dedalus), and his fatherland (Ireland), to become father of his own artistic creation, as the son who writes.

Stephen is repeatedly characterised as Thoth himself; I have already noted the quote from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* that appears in Derrida's essay, and the following quotes, from the Scylla and Charybdis episode of *Ulysses*, reiterate this link:

Coffined thoughts around me, in mummycases, embalmed in spice or words. Thoth, god of libraries, a bird god, moony crowned.
Fabulous artificer, the hawklike man. You flew. Where to? [...] Paris and back.
Lapwing. Icarus. *Pater, ait.*¹⁴

13 Martin McQuillan (ed.), 'Introduction: Five Strategies for Deconstruction', in *Deconstruction: A Reader* (Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 1–43, p. 14.

14 James Joyce, *Ulysses*, edited with an Introduction and notes by Jeri Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 186 and p. 202. All subsequent references

The word 'artificer' here is a latent reference to the closing lines of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when Stephen appeals to 'Old father, old artificer', so it has paternal connotations, as does the hawklike man – the Dedalus of Greek mythology whose name Stephen bears. My juxtaposition of these two quotes is deliberate; it implies a connection between Thoth the scribe and the father figure, both of whom appear in Plato's *Phaedrus*, the latter in the guise of King Thamus. The figure of Thoth as it relates to Stephen in both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* effects a subversion of logocentric authority. This is played out in the familial relations that pervade the thematic content, in particular the relation between father and son, and this is inseparable from the father-son motif that dominates the Catholic doctrine of Stephen's upbringing. Indeed, whenever Stephen considers the unstable notion of paternity, it is usually couched in theological terms – his experience of paternity mirrors his experience of Catholicism, as both are informed by the logos, and both, as Karen Lawrence observes, 'posit an ultimate source of meaning.'¹⁵

Stephen's identity is from the outset constructed by the paternal, male logos. *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* opens with the infant Stephen's recollection of a fairytale narrated to him by his father and a link is immediately forged between language, identity, and logocentrism, as '[h]is father told him that story' (*AP* 3). Stephen's identity is thus informed and constructed by a male narrative. It is worth noting that the opening two chapters of the novel are littered with phrases such as 'his father had told him' and 'he had heard his father say'. The association of speech, narrative and fatherhood in Joyce's work points to Derrida's equation of the logos with the father figure in 'Plato's Pharmacy' and is the model of authority against which Stephen rebels. Furthermore, the paternal figure is repeatedly linked to Catholicism. Consider: 'he saw a likeness between his father's mind and this smiling well-dressed priest' (*AP* 89). As Stephen's

will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *U*, followed by the page number.

15 Karen Lawrence, 'Paternity as Legal Fiction in *Ulysses*', in *James Joyce: The Augmented Ninth*, edited by Bernard Benstock (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), pp. 233–243, p. 238.

conception of language and identity evolves, his distaste for traditionally logocentric models of authority deepens, and Stephen-as-Thoth rejects the logos in favour of writing.

Stephen's early rejection of models of authority may be read as a battle against the logocentric tendency to privilege the male spoken word. Significantly, the motif of the voice of the father permeates both *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses* and can be traced back to Stephen's earliest negative attitude towards patriarchal authority: he is 'wearied and dejected by his father's voice' and 'he had heard about him the constant voices of his father and of his masters, urging him to be a gentleman above all things and urging him to be a good Catholic above all things. These voices had now come to be hollowsounding in his ears' (*AP* 88). Note here how Stephen's oppression is associated with his father's voice, which urges him to 'be a good Catholic'; the biological paternal voice is aligned with the Word of God, and therefore by association, the logos.

Stephen's view of artistic creation, or 'artistic conception, artistic gestation, and artistic reproduction' (*AP* 227), is, as evinced by the terminology he uses, intricately bound up with his attitude to both spiritual and biological paternity, and his inability to reconcile himself with these paternal ties. It is in the absence of his father that Stephen hopes he can write and this writing-in-absence accords with Derrida's contention in 'Plato's Pharmacy' that '[t]he specificity of writing would thus be intimately bound to the absence of the father' (*D* 77). Stephen consequently abandons family, Church and homeland at the end of *A Portrait*, in order to escape the logocentric ties that paralyse him. After considering, then rejecting, the priesthood, he chooses the artist's vocation. Reiterating Lucifer's 'non serviam', he tells Cranly: 'I will not serve that in which I no longer believe whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church: and I will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can' (*AP* 268–269). Leaving Ireland for Paris, he eschews biological, spiritual and national ties – univocal models of authority – in favour of the liberating potential of art.

However, the death of his mother necessitates a return home and at the beginning of *Ulysses* we meet a world-weary disillusioned Stephen. The Stephen of *Ulysses* struggles to find a method of conceptualising a

notion of paternity that will allow him to be the father of his own artistic creation. From the outset of *Ulysses*, Stephen is preoccupied with, as Jean-Michel Rabaté notes, 'a central issue of paternity: the question of the origins and the endless aporias of artistic self-begetting'.¹⁶ This 'self-begetting' is dependent, for Stephen, on the absence of paternal authority, yet he cannot escape it. Equally, he is haunted by the God he has abandoned, and he has a tendency to interpret one in light of the other.

The connection between paternal authority and the Church is established in the opening episode of *Ulysses*, 'Telemachus', where a number of thematic motifs are set up. The opening sequence details Buck Mulligan's mock parody of Mass; thus, Catholicism's authority is undermined immediately. The *Hamlet* correspondences are also set up in this episode: Stephen is dressed in mourning attire and this has symbolic overtones as he is frequently associated with Hamlet in the text. Buck Mulligan is symbolically figured as Claudius, the father figure and usurper, and he tells the Englishman, Haines, that Stephen 'proves by algebra that Hamlet's grandson is Shakespeare's grandfather and that he himself is the ghost of his own father' (*U* 18), foreshadowing Stephen's sermonising in the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode. In a chapter that resonates with repeated allusions to the issue of paternity, Stephen is preoccupied with his forced servitude to 'two masters [...], an English and Italian', which he identifies as '[t]he imperial British state [...] and the holy Roman Catholic and Apostolic Church'. He adds a third master to this, 'who wants me for odd jobs' (*U* 20); here, he implies that Ireland is guilty of compliance and conventionality. So, the biological, spiritual and national ties that ensnare Stephen in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* have not yet been cast off, but he is still fixed in his refusal to serve the modes of logocentric authority that oppress him. Like Hamlet, however, he is haunted by this paternal authority, and this haunting manifests itself in the conflation of biological and spiritual paternity in Stephen's thought trajectory.

16 Jean-Michel Rabaté, *James Joyce: Authorized Reader* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 50.

This can be discerned in the 'Proteus' episode of *Ulysses*. Here, Stephen reveals his concerns about the notion of consubstantiality, which denotes the coexistence of the three figures of the Trinity in Christian theology, and the co-presence of Father and Son within the same medium. Stephen's estrangement from his father is marred by the biological ties which cannot be completely severed if consubstantiality is to be believed. Kevin Egan tells him '[y]ou're your father's son. I know the voice', and Stephen imagines his 'consubstantial father's voice' (*U* 43, 38). Leopold Bloom reiterates this notion of consubstantiality and links it with speech when he meditates on his dead son Rudy: '[i]f little Rudy had lived. See him grow up. Hear his voice in the house [...] My son. Me in his eyes' (*U* 86). Biological ties between father and son are associated with speech and the logos, and Stephen's inability to fully separate himself from his biological connection with Simon, the father of the logos, mirrors his inability to escape the confines of logocentric discourse.

This is further exemplified in Joyce's most extensive commentary on fatherhood and the logos which occurs in the 'Scylla and Charybdis' episode of *Ulysses*, when Stephen-as-Thoth attempts to subvert the logos in his analysis of the paternal authority that governs Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. The choice of *Hamlet* is significant as the play illustrates the disorder that ensues from acceptance of logocentric authority. Mahaffey notes:

Hamlet dramatizes the catastrophic results of accepting paternal authority – however reluctantly – to the exclusion of all other claims: at the behest of his dead father, the son is eventually alienated from all other human ties – lover, mother, uncle, friends – and all are destroyed in a climactic massacre. That final massacre, as Stephen might read it, suggests that traditional, patriarchal patterns of alliance and conflict are not only destructive of others, but apocalyptically self-destructive as well.¹⁷

Hamlet opens with the logos of the ghost-father and this structures the action of the play and results in the deaths of all the chief characters. Significantly, Stephen observes the ghost's status as a mere voice, and his theory is informed by the trinitarian analogy. He explains, '[h]e is a ghost,

17 Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce*, p. 47.

a shadow now [...] the sea's voice, a voice heard only in the heart of him who is the substance of his shadow, the son consubstantial with the father' (*U* 189). By obeying the spoken word, or logos from this ghostly authority, Hamlet retains his consubstantiality with his father. It is this consubstantial state that ties him to his biological father that Stephen attempts to evade. It is worth noting that Stephen's theory is framed by his parodic interpretation of the Apostle's Creed:

He Who Himself begot, middler the Holy Ghost, and Himself sent Himself Agenbuyer, between Himself and others, Who, put upon by His Fiends, stripped and whipped, was nailed like bat to barndoor, starved on crosstree, Who let Him bury, stood up, harrowed hell, fared into heaven and there these nineteen hundred years sitteth on the right hand of His Own Self but yet shall come in the latter day to doom the quick and dead when all the quick shall be dead already. (*U* 189)

Stephen's playful musings here reflect on a deeper level his persistent concern with consubstantiality; *Hamlet* is as much about the complex nature of paternity as Catholic doctrine and, again, one mode of authority is reflected in another. Furthermore, this echoes the opening of 'Telemachus', as Mahaffey argues: '[t]his parody of Christian belief acts as a Mulligan-esque "entr'acte" to Stephen's theory of *Hamlet*, which according to Stephen's theory tells a different version of the same story'.¹⁸ The story of Hamlet and the story of Christ are both stories about logocentric, patriarchal authority, which is reflected in the story of Stephen Dedalus in *Ulysses*.

Stephen's trajectory focuses on those negative aspects of paternity that persistently trouble him. From the outset, his argument is governed by the link he forges between paternity, God and the logos – all those modes of authority that threaten him. Stephen muses, in a typical parody of Catholic scripture: '[f]ormless spiritual, Father, Word and Holy Breath. Allfather, the heavenly man. Hiesos Kristos, magician of the beautiful, the Logos who suffers in us at every moment' (*U* 178). This parody of Theosophical beliefs suggests that Stephen suffers due to 'the Logos' that informs his identity and his argument is structured in part as a response and challenge

18 Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce*, p. 47.

to this. Stephen contends that *Hamlet* was written by Shakespeare in the months following the death of his father, John Shakespeare, and claims that the father then ‘rests, disarmed of fatherhood, having devised that mystical estate upon his son’ (*U* 198–199). Stephen’s point is that paternity begets paternity and that through this, the logos is reinforced and the son-as-supplement becomes the father, reinscribing himself in the position of the logos. His theory borrows largely from Catholic doctrine; again, biological, artistic and spiritual paternity are juxtaposed. John Shakespeare is the paternal creator, and in his death, or absence, his son takes over the role and artistic creation is born and Stephen’s artistic endeavour in the absence of his father mirrors this. His ensuing speech on fatherhood is worth quoting extensively:

Fatherhood, in the sense of conscious begetting, is unknown to man. It is a mystical estate, an apostolic succession, from only begetter to only begotten. On that mystery and not on the Madonna which the cunning Italian intellect flung to the mob of Europe the church is founded and founded irremovably because founded, like the world, macro and microcosm, upon the void. Upon incertitude, upon unlikely, *Amor Matris*, subjective and objective genitive, may be the only true thing in life. Paternity may be a legal fiction. (*U* 198–199)

Stephen’s treatise on fatherhood, replete with references to Catholic doctrine, illustrates that paternity is founded ‘upon the void’ and this implies Stephen’s awareness that the logos is based on absence. God-the-Creator and paternity are oppressive logocentric models of authority and here Stephen attempts to subvert the ontological grounding on which they are based. If God and fatherhood are founded on absence, then the presence associated with the logos is destabilised and paternity becomes ‘a legal fiction’. Stephen’s theory dispenses with the notion of a known and identifiable origin; if fatherhood is a fiction, then the logos cannot be traced back to a stable source of meaning.

Lawrence notes the affinity between Stephen’s and Derrida’s respective theories: ‘[Derrida] shares Stephen’s two basic ideas: that an ultimate and identifiable origin is a fiction, and that the fiction is very powerful precisely because it underlies Western culture and metaphysics, whether reflected in the paternity of God the father or in the analogy between

paternity and the act of authoring’.¹⁹ The ‘apostolic succession, from only begetter, to only begotten’ that constitutes paternity, is merely a process of supplementation, and in the context of logocentrism, true origin of identity and meaning cannot accommodate a supplement. Therefore, paternity is subverted by the process on which it depends and this prompts Stephen’s exposure of the lie that underlies logocentrism.

Stephen’s theory is largely related to his relationship with his own biological father and allows him the freedom to become his own creator. In the closing lines of *A Portrait*, Stephen eschews his biological heritage in favour of a spiritual father, and appeals to Daedalus, his mythical father, for inspiration: ‘[o]ld father, old artificer, stand me now and ever in good stead’ (*AP* 276). Stephen’s condemnation of biology allows him to pursue his artistic vocation without the threat of the authority he despises and he chooses aesthetic fiction instead of the legal fiction of paternity, on which, for Stephen at least, the Catholic Church is founded. Lawrence observes:

[Stephen’s] idea of paternity frees him from biology in a number of ways: he is free to invent his own spiritual father rather than reconcile himself with Simon Dedalus [...] Once dispossessing his real father, Stephen can trade filiality for fatherhood and biological paternity for literary paternity, being no more a son, he can imagine himself a father creator like Shakespeare.²⁰

By becoming father of his own creation, Stephen is free to develop his art outside the realm of logocentric authority. However, there is a central paradox inherent in Stephen’s theory and I want to conclude by addressing this. If, as Ellen Carol Jones contends, ‘[p]aternity as a metaphor for artistic creation’ is a theme that pervades *Ulysses*, then Stephen’s view of paternity as a fiction must be destabilised.²¹ Stephen’s theory displaces the notion

19 Lawrence, ‘Paternity as Legal Fiction in *Ulysses*’, p. 235.

20 Lawrence, ‘Paternity as Legal Fiction in *Ulysses*’, p. 234.

21 Ellen Carol Jones, ‘Writing the Mystery of Himself: Paternity in *Ulysses*’, in *James Joyce: The Augmented Ninth*, edited by Bernard Benstock (New York: Syracuse University Press, 1988), pp. 226–232, p. 227.

of origin and subverts logocentric authority; however, I would argue that it simultaneously returns paternity to its privileged position.

If Stephen, in rejecting the Church and his father, adopts the role of father of his artistic creation, then he is reinforcing that logocentric law which assigns the mystical estate of fatherhood to the son, and his desire for a paternal position in relation to his art cannot take place outside of the logos. Stephen may convince himself that he can pursue his art without the influence of the authority he rejects, but his adoption of the paternal position, albeit a metaphorical one, merely reinforces logocentric authority and logic. Significantly, his terminology for his art reiterates the paternal and theological metaphor – in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* he states that ‘the artist is like the God of the creation’ and he becomes ‘a priest of the eternal imagination, transmuting the daily bread of experience into the radiant body of everliving life’ (AP 233, 240). His freedom through art, therefore, can only be achieved through a dependence on the very logic it refutes. Indeed, Cranly tells him: ‘It is a curious thing, do you know, how your mind is supersaturated with the religion in which you say you disbelieve’ (AP 261). Mahaffey observes that:

Joyce presents Stephen’s perspective as engaging but naïve, marked by the same idealism and futility that marks the monasticism Stephen rejects [...] *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* focuses on the appeal as well as the comedy of Stephen’s inability to see that his obedient and his rebellious gestures are alternative, as well as alternating, movements within a single epistemological and political system.²²

In substituting the religion of art for the religion of Catholicism it can be seen that Joyce merely reiterates the logocentric discourse he is attempting to evade, and inscribes his identity as an artist within the system he rebels against.

While he retains an awareness of the absence of origin, he fails to recognise the confines of logocentric discourse to which he is bound, and that he is necessarily dependent on a father, whether real or symbolic.

22 Mahaffey, *Reauthorizing Joyce*, p. 28.

As the son of the logos, he must adhere to logocentric principles, and this foreshadows Derrida’s contention that, ‘[L]ogos is a son, then, a son that would be destroyed in his very *presence* without the present *attendance* of his father’ (D 77). Stephen’s art cannot be external to the logos because it is constituted by it just as the son is constituted by the father, and, as Derrida would have it, there is no place for language outside logocentric discourse. His chosen vocation then, as artist-creator, reinscribes him within the very system he refutes.

MARY PIERSE

The Donkey and the Sabbath

In 1905, the Italian novelist Antonio Fogazzaro published a new volume entitled *Il Santo* (*The Saint*). While Jesuitical influence ensured that the Vatican banned it in 1906, placing it on the infamous Index, a political party – the Italian Christian Democrats – took the book’s teaching as their model for practical charity. Theodore Roosevelt opined that it was a ‘good book for any sincerely religious man or woman of any creed, provided only that he realizes that conduct counts for more than dogma’; a contemporary critic described the central character, Benedetto, as ‘a mingling of St Francis and Dr Dollinger.’¹ These different reactions and opinions very clearly convey divergent understandings of what it might mean to be a Roman Catholic in that period. In Ireland too, similar conflicting notions were prevalent and they were not unrelated to two ideas enunciated by the fictional Benedetto: the greater importance of conduct over ritual, and the pernicious effect of clerical domination. Whatever about the varying beliefs of those born into Irish Catholicism, it is intriguing to explore the possible attraction of such a denomination for those who converted to its fold. Viewed from outside, what did they see that enticed them to change their religious allegiance? Can their decisions be viewed as in any way similar to that of John Henry Newman whose very public conversion coincided, to the week, with the departure of Ernest Renan from Roman Catholicism? If anything has been missing from the depictions of Irish Catholicism in the period of

1 The Roosevelt quotation comes from Italian Wikipedia: http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antonio_Fogazzaro, accessed 6 January 2010. William Roscoe Thayer is the critic who referred to St Francis and Dr Dollinger in his introduction to *The Saint*, translated by M. Pritchard-Agnetti (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1906), pp. viii, x.

the Irish Cultural Revival, it has been the voices and choices of women. Some fictional treatments cast light on the conversion and ‘perversion’ controversies of the period but rather interesting insights into the beliefs and practices of Catholics can be found in the real lives of Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz, and of some of their co-workers in nationalist and social causes in the early decades of the twentieth century. At an initial glance, their actions indicate a code that impels them, without hesitation and with clear conscience, to prioritise charitable action over restrictive rule systems; they would rescue any donkey from a well on the Sabbath, regardless of regulations that forbade such intervention.

Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz were strong and determined women who played important roles in Irish national life and both were converts from Anglicanism to Catholicism. Gonne’s change of allegiance in 1903 was the earlier of the two and it was preceded by Catholic baptism of her daughter Iseult in July of the previous year, about which she wrote to W.B. Yeats:

I have been staying a week at Laval in the Carmelite Convent there, the superior is a great friend of mine. It is such a wonderful quiet restful place with an immense garden with huge cedar trees & fountains & all a tangle of roses & lillies. Iseult was with me, in fact she was the cause of my visit for she was baptised a Catholic. I felt a little inclined to be also but felt it would mean limitations of thought so didn’t. Iseult looked too lovely in her white veil & wreath of white roses.²

However, peace and beauty would not be the sole motivations for Gonne’s own reception into the Catholic Church. This ceremony occurred just prior to her marriage to John MacBride and, writing to her sister, she declared that she wanted to look at the truth ‘from the same side as the man I am going to marry’.³ Her letters to Yeats reveal more:

2 *The Gonne–Yeats Letters 1893–1938*, edited by Anna MacBride White and A. Norman Jeffares (London: Hutchinson, 1992), letter 115, pp. 155–156.

3 In a letter to her sister, Kathleen, quoted in *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, p. 491, note 124/2.

About my change of religion I believe like you that there is one great universal truth. God that pervades everything. I believe that each religion is a different *prism* through which one looks at truth. None can see *the whole* of truth. When we do we shall have merged in the deity, & we shall be as God but that is not yet. In the meantime (my) our nation looks at God or truth through one prism, the Catholic Religion –

What may be nearer to the kernel of Gonne’s choice emerges in the next paragraph:

I am officially a protestant & supposed to look at it from another & a much narrower one which is moreover the English one. I prefer to look at truth through the same prism as my country people – I am going to become a Catholic. It seems to me of small importance if one calls the great spirit forces the Sidhe, the Gods & the Arch Angels, the great symbols of all religions are the same – But I do feel it important *not* to belong to the Church of England. You say I leave the few to mix myself with the crowd while Willie I have always told you I am the voice, the soul of the *crowd*.⁴

In a subsequent missive sent barely two weeks later, and just three days after her marriage, it is clear that Gonne perceived the conversion ceremony as one that she would order according to her conscience:

I had a fearful rush last week & no time for anything thank goodness ceremonies of all sorts abjurations baptism, marriage are over – I hate having to abjure anything – I refused completely to do so in the form presented to me. In it I was to declare hatred of all heresies. I said I hated nothing in the world but the British Empire which I looked on as the outward symbol of Satan in the world & where ever it came in I was to declare hatred of heresy I declared hatred of the British Empire & in this form I made my solemn Abjuration of Anglicism & declaration of hatred of England.⁵

Three months later, a further elaboration on Gonne’s decision is articulated in another letter to Yeats:

4 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 124, p. 166 (10 February 1903).

5 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 125, p. 167 (24 February 1903).

I find the Ritual of the Catholic Church beautiful & inspiring. It has greater & more ancient tradition than the English Church & as the head of one's church I prefer the pope to Edward the 7th. The great reason the real reason I think though I don't think I reasoned much, I followed as usual inspiration, was that I felt for my work it was necessary for me to become more completely united to the soul of my people so that I could more completely understand their thoughts & help them better.⁶

In whatever combination, peace and beauty, inspiring ritual, marital unity, and national and political allegiances, clearly overcame any hesitation over 'limitations of thought' and her actions in the abjuration ceremony demonstrated that such issues had been dealt with effectively and to her satisfaction; moreover, it is apparent that Gonne perceives and rejects the Yeatsian snobbery concerning 'the few' and 'the crowd'.

Thus far, for Maud Gonne, the Irish Catholic Church would appear to be an abode in which she might feel at home and receive spiritual inspiration and sustenance, where she was not oppressed, and yet again a place where, in rejecting minority elitism, she sensed herself at one with Irish nationalists of all classes, both to share their lives more closely and to provide them with leadership. The spiritual aspect is a complex one, given that Gonne and Yeats exchanged dreams and occult experiences over many years and Gonne took part in séances.⁷ However, Gonne saw no conflict between her Catholicism and psychic involvement, rather they were intertwined: 'Today I just received a telegram from Millevoeye his son is killed – and I knew it two days ago, at prayer in Passy Church I saw him dead but I did not dare say it to anyone'; and, 'I can get it (concentration) in the extraordinary atmosphere of peace & purity & effort which surround the Mass.'⁸ From as far back as 1897, she and Yeats had worked on Celtic rites to 'unite the radical truths of Christianity to those of a more ancient world.'⁹ As she explains:

6 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 127, p. 170 (7 May 1903).

7 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 283, p. 328 (November 1913).

8 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 310, p. 359 (1 October 1915); letter 321, p. 369 (21 March 1916).

9 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, p. 63.

to me it seems the spear of the soldier piercing the side of Christ & letting the essence of God flow into the Graal cup is the same symbolism as the spear of Lug piercing the night & letting the essence of God the spark of fire of the soul flow down into the Cauldron of regeneration & rebirth & the font of baptism & the & rebirth, & holy water seem to me the same as the purifying Cauldron of Dana which begins initiation, or the deep well by the tree of knowledge!¹⁰

To Gonne it did not matter 'if the Great Mother is called Mary or Dana or Bridget or the Captain of the Armies of Heaven is called Lug or Michael.'¹¹ Her interest in Bridget/Brigid as Celtic goddess or Christian saint would continue and when she returned to painting, one of her projects was a series of pictures on the Meditation of St Bridget.¹²

In tandem with these beliefs that would be deemed rather unusual ones for an Irish Catholic, Maud Gonne embraced more conventional iconography and devotional practices. Worried about the health of Yeats in the summer of 1913, she told him that she 'prayed hard at mass for you this morning' and, disregarding the effect her encouragement might have on the poet's wellbeing, she continued: 'This is June, the month which the Catholic Church consecrates to the Sacred Heart, Divine Love which gives Divine Wisdom, to know how to love & make our love Divine.'¹³ In 1914, she went to Lourdes for a Eucharistic Congress where all present came 'to affirm their belief in the supernatural & in the highest form of manifestation of spiritual life.' Gonne found it 'wonderful & very beautiful. I & Helen (Helena) Molony as Catholics were deeply moved & Mr Mukerjea, who is a Brahmin, was equally so.'¹⁴ When her former husband, John MacBride, was executed in 1916, Gonne wrote that 'he entered Eternity by the great door of sacrifice which Christ opened & has therefore atoned for all so that praying for him I can also ask for his prayers & "a terrible beauty is born".'¹⁵ She encouraged her daughter Iseult to engage in translation of the works of

10 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 127, p. 270 (7 May 1903).

11 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 127, pp. 169–170 (7 May 1903).

12 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 261, p. 308 (9 June 1912).

13 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 276, p. 321 (June 1913).

14 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 299, p. 345 (July 1914).

15 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 333, p. 384 (8 November 1916).

the French Catholic writer Charles Péguy.¹⁶ If justifiably perceived as not perhaps a very orthodox Catholic, Gonne's Catholicism rather surprisingly included membership of the Third (secular) Order of St Francis which she joined in 1910.¹⁷ Iseult's account of her mother's last days underscores the comfort that Maud Gonne derived from the religion to which she had converted: 'after she got the last sacraments, she had some kind of mystical experience, and looked radiantly happy young. One of the last words she spoke was: "I feel now an ineffable joy"'.¹⁸

In the light of Church rules, Gonne's prioritisation of pragmatism over dogmatism is informative; it would be her pattern in numerous instances. In 1898, she and James Connolly circulated leaflets that encouraged the starving people of Kerry and Mayo to seize food from wherever it could be got in order to feed their children. That advice would be construed both by civic authority and by many church dignitaries as incitement to theft, a denial of property rights, and a danger to the stability of the realm; however, to justify their recommendation, the leaflets quoted from the opinions of two popes, St Thomas Aquinas and Cardinal Manning in support of such emergency measures.¹⁹ The passage from Manning's writings was especially clear: 'In case of extreme need of food, all goods become common property.'²⁰ It is thought that Connolly was the main author of the document but Gonne would become adept at using 'scripture' and Church authority in pursuit of humanitarian goals, as she did when persuading the archbishop of Dublin to support Westminster legislation extending school meal provision to Ireland.²¹ When her marriage to John MacBride ran

16 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letters 332 and 334, pp. 383, 385 (3 November 1916 and 4 December 1916).

17 Elizabeth Coxhead, *Daughters of Erin* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1979), p. 55.

18 Letter from Iseult Gonne Stuart to Francis Stuart, 2 May 1953. Quoted in Samuel Levenson, *Maud Gonne* (London: Cassell, 1977). Original letter in Morris Library, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale.

19 Levenson, pp. 133–137.

20 Maud Gonne, *A Servant of the Queen*, edited by A. Norman Jeffares and Anna MacBride White (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1994), p. 217.

21 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 282, p. 327 (November 1913).

into trouble, she looked initially for either divorce or separation, 'Which ever is easiest to obtain, as I believe both give me complete security for the control of the children.'²² Gonne was fully aware of her Church's rulings on divorce but the children would come first. After Canon Dissard (the French priest who had encouraged her conversion to Roman Catholicism) had heard Gonne's reasons for seeking divorce, he no longer advocated the Church-approved separation *a mensa et thoro* but backed the unparalleled divorce option and wrote a supportive letter to provide moral validation for that choice, one which she might show to any clergy in Ireland.²³ Given Gonne's common sense on the matter, it is more than ironic that Yeats could write the self-deluding lines: 'We are divided by her religious ideas, a Catholicism which has grown on her – she will not divorce her husband and marry because of her Church.'²⁴ But then WBY could also write to Florence Farr that: 'She belongs now to the Third Order of St Francis and sighs for a convent', an alleged Gonne disposition not recorded by anyone else.²⁵ Pragmatism also lay behind Gonne's flying of a black flag at her house at the time of the death of Pope Leo XIII: she might not have mourned the pope but since the time coincided exactly with the visit of Edward VII to Dublin, the opportunity for protest was too good to miss.²⁶ It is probable that her practicality prevented her from having the 'zeal of the convert' in any religious context and there is no evidence that she possessed such a quality; however, this did not preclude her from recognising that phenomenon in others. In commenting on disputes in 1903 over religious discussions concerning production of *The Lost Saint* by the National Theatre

22 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 136, p. 186 (January 1905).

23 *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, letter 158, p. 210 (30 September 1905).

24 Quoted in *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, p. 257, and in Nancy Cardozo, *Maud Gonne: Lucky Eyes and a High Heart* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1970), p. 263.

25 Letter of William Butler Yeats to Florence Farr on 18 August 1916, quoted in Margery Brady, *The Love Story of W.B. Yeats and Maud Gonne* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1990), p. 104.

26 Cardozo, pp. 235–236; *Gonne–Yeats Letters*, p. 172.

Company, Gonne adverted to the determination of the Fay brothers who 'being converts have all the zeal of a convert for unbelief'.²⁷

The reported remarks of Maud Gonne on ideology are few, but one of her written contributions on the subject was stimulated by a 1924 article in which George Russell condemned communism. In her response, Gonne was as sharp and vigorous as she had been in her early journalistic forays in *L'Irlande Libre*:

In Ireland an obscure prejudice, born of slave teaching, surrounds the words Socialism and Communism, which even the clear thought and noble life and death of James Connolly failed to entirely dispel. Humanism in this case would be a true title, for Communism is the apotheosis of Christ's teaching of the brotherhood of man and the uprising of humanity. As a triumphant world wave, it will eventually reach Ireland and will find no contradiction in the Republican ideal.²⁸

This is perhaps as clear a statement of her Catholicism as could be made: the brotherhood and sisterhood of mankind, and the advancement of all humanity, came first for Christ and she espoused those high ideals. Her judgment was that the preaching and practices of religious bodies had strayed far from such standards and, in doing so, had become inflexibly class and rule-bound.

The phrase 'to help them better', used by her in justification of her conversion, is a telling one in that it reflects the life-long concern of Maud Gonne with assisting the needy. From preventing evictions in Donegal to organising school meals for children in the slums in Dublin, from nursing the war-wounded in France in 1914 to her ongoing campaigns for prisoners and their dependents, Gonne was ever active in altruistic work and she mingled these undertakings with her political pursuits and with family involvement. In her own words, 'one cannot remain with hands folded before suffering'.²⁹ Starting in 1911 when she set up a school meal system in St Audoen's parish in Dublin, Gonne pursued the cause of feeding starving children. She lobbied M.P.'s in London, studied the *Soupes Communales*

27 *Gonne-Yeats Letters*, letter 123, p. 163 (January 1903).

28 Quoted in Cardozo, p. 365.

29 *Gonne-Yeats Letters*, letter 305, p. 354 (3 January 1915).

system in Brussels, wrote on the *Cantines Scolaires* in France, and sold her diamond necklace, 'the last jewel I have left to keep up & increase the number of dinners for the children'.³⁰ Despite her reservations about conservative bishops (as opposed to activist, socially-aware priests she had encountered in Donegal and in St Audoen's), she sought and enlisted the necessary support from Archbishop Walsh in November 1913 for extension to Ireland of the Free Meals Act. It was finally passed in September 1914, mainly due to the unrelenting campaigns of Gonne and Inghinidhe na hÉireann. In relation to her Catholicism and its religious teaching, Maud Gonne abided by the commandment to love others as herself (John 15.12), and her actions confirmed that she recognised that the greatest commandment was to love. (1 Corinthians 13). In this she identified with a form of Christianity that often seemed to diverge considerably from hierarchical pronouncement and societal practice. Her faith emerges as distant from rigid rules and closer to the practical Christianity recorded in Luke 13.15 and 14.5, Mark 2.23–25, 27, and Matthew 12.11–12: she would undoubtedly rescue the donkey, ox or sheep from a well on the Sabbath. According precedence to the essence of the biblical message, and rejecting male clerical domination are hallmarks of Gonne's Catholicism. Neither facet was commonly accepted as part of the Victorian religious atmosphere that prevailed in Britain and Ireland at the time. The mixture of St Francis and Dr Dollinger (the prominent German theologian who rejected the notion of papal infallibility and so was excommunicated in 1871) which was identified as the nature of Fogazzaro's fictional Benedetto, would seem to chime perfectly with the beliefs and practices of Maud Gonne.

Preoccupation with quality of life and unprejudiced justice are also the burning concerns of other prominent nationalist women of the period – and, as was the case with Maud Gonne, nationalism is closely intertwined with religion for many of them. Given some of the detail in Esther Roper's account, one might well ask what constituted Catholicism for Countess Constance Markievicz (formerly Gore Booth) when she converted to that faith in 1917. Roper reports the comments of the chaplain to Mountjoy

30 *Gonne-Yeats Letters*, letter 281, p. 326 (November 1913).

Prison who was instructing Markievicz in 1916 prior to her formal reception into the Church:

I can't understand Countess Markievicz at all. She wants to be received into the Church, but she won't attend to me when I try to explain Transubstantiation and other doctrines. She just says 'Please don't trouble to explain. I tell you I believe all the Church teaches. Now, Father, please tell me about the boys.'³¹

However, in her Aylesbury prison cell, Markievicz gave considerable thought to the mystic and the ascetic:

To develop it [the 'subconscious self'], it is necessary to cut yourself off from a great deal of human intercourse, to work hard and eat little, and as our subconscious self emerges, it comes more and more in tune with the subconscious soul of the world, in which lie all the beauties and subtleties you speak of.

That understanding allowed her to say that she was no longer puzzled by people becoming Carmelite nuns, that she now understood it absolutely and that 'for people with a vocation the compensation far outweighs the things you give up.'³² Markievicz's later ruminations on churches and church structures show her ongoing interrogation of what it might mean for any person to be part of a Church:

For every church and every sect is but an organisation of thoughtless and well-meaning people trained in thought and controlled by juntas of priests and clergy who are used to doing all the things that Christ would most have disliked. And yet I don't know how this can be avoided, for without organisation Christ would be quite forgotten, and all organisation seems in the end to go the same road: and if it does not go in for graft and power it just fizzles out. [...] what the world has got to think out is some scheme by which power can be evenly distributed over every person in the world and by which the foolish and uneducated can no longer be grouped in unthinking battalions dependent on the few pushers, self-seekers and crooks and made slaves of and exploited.³³

31 Esther Roper, 'Biographical Sketch', in Constance Markievicz, *Prison Letters of Countess Markievicz* (London: Virago, 1987), p. 74.

32 Markievicz, *Prison Letters*, 9 June 1917, p. 173.

33 Markievicz, *Prison Letters*, in a letter to Eva, 1923, p. 303.

Markievicz's religious instruction had continued when she was moved to Aylesbury Gaol and, not wishing to have a religious ceremony in prison, she delayed the final move to the Catholic Church until she came back to Dublin in 1917. However, she was entered in the Aylesbury Prison records as a Roman Catholic and so was permitted to look after the chapel flowers.³⁴ Hanna Sheehy Skeffington's account of Markievicz's conversion motivation shows how much it resonates with that of Gonne:

Impressed by the great devotion of the boys of Fianna Na h-Eireann, and by the heroic ease by which simple unlettered men of the Irish Citizen Army went to meet their deaths, Constance Markievicz declared her desire to become a Catholic, to be with the boys in death by a baptism of desire, if need be. She asked the Rev. T. Ryan, then Chaplain of Kilmainham (who told me the story), to promise to be with her at the end.³⁵

Unlike Gonne who had converted prior to marriage with a Catholic, Constance Gore Booth's marriage to Casimir Markievicz, a Polish Catholic, took place in an Anglican church in London fourteen years before she became a Catholic herself. Nonetheless, she gave assurances to her mother-in-law that the national and religious affiliations of the son from her husband's previous marriage would be respected and fostered, and these promises were honoured faithfully. Staskow was sent to school in Mount St Benedict's in Gorey, Co. Wexford. On the other hand, Maeve, the daughter born subsequently to Constance and Casimir, was brought up in the Church of Ireland and later became very much part of the Anglican community where she settled in the south of England.³⁶ There were, of course, additional similarities between the religious attitudes of Gonne and Markievicz and some are apparent in Roper's assessment that 'The clergy generally never quite approved of such an independent rebel

34 Anne Marreco, *The Rebel Countess* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967), p. 225.

35 Esther Roper, 'Biographical Sketch', in *Prison Letters*, p. 73.

36 Anne Haverty, *Constance Markievicz: An Independent Life* (London: Pandora, 1988), p. 55. See also Clive Scolar, *Maeve de Markievicz: Daughter of Constance* (Killyleagh, Co. Down: Scolar, 2003).

as Madame' and that 'she belonged to the church of St Francis of Assisi, rather than that of St Paul'. Roper also considered that Markievicz was drawn to the ritual, music, art and culture of the Catholic Church while being very quick to disagree with individual clerics. Those disagreements were directly connected to judgments on the morality of armed struggle but also to Markievicz's socialist views for she was clear that Socialism was compatible with Catholicism.³⁷ That latter viewpoint was one that Markievicz would argue forcefully, and equally one that would meet with strong opposition from the civil and religious hierarchies that, following the Russian Revolution, were only too quick to link republican or nationalist ideology to communism.

Markievicz told Dáil Éireann in 1920 that her first 'realisation of tyranny' was in connection with women's suffrage and that she moved from that to freedom for the nation and freedom for the worker.³⁸ Freedom of religious belief and practice are not mentioned but their concomitant existence is obvious. Celtic spirituality was frequently evoked by nationalist women in the period from 1880, not just to underscore the high status of Irish women in former times but also to emphasise its positive freedoms in comparison to the religions of imported protestant sects, or of an ultramontane Roman Catholicism. It is therefore no coincidence that although Markievicz often chose to write under the name of Armid, an ancient Celtic goddess of healing, her Catholicism could be read as Celtic and also as having had much in common with the liberation theology of more recent decades. This return to basics is apparent in her pamphlet, *James Connolly's Policy and Catholic Doctrine*, a forty-six-page document that painstakingly deals with the prejudice and unfounded fears that led to the idea of socialism being demonised. Markievicz carefully identifies the core concepts of socialism with the gospel, wraps the implications of its practical code with papal approval, and furnishes the alignment of religious

37 Esther Roper, 'Biographical Sketch', in *Prison Letters*, pp. 74–75.

38 Quoted in Brian Farrell, 'Markievicz and the women of the Revolution', in *Leaders and Men of the Easter Rising: Dublin 1916*, edited by F.X. Martin (London: Methuen, 13 April 1967, pp. 227–238.

and social teaching with strong nationalist endorsement. Her prose is, as always, strong and clear:

The majority of the people of Ireland are very Catholic, and many of them shudder at the word 'Socialist', and some of them would seem to vision a dim form with hoofs and a tail leading each Socialist firmly down a broad path to a terrible and fiery end; there having found that James Connolly gloried in the name of Socialist, we will see what one of the most Gaelic among the spokesmen among our priests, as well as Pope Leo XIII, have to say for the social system advocated and the policy adopted by James Connolly.³⁹

Markievicz quotes Rev. P. Coffey of Maynooth College who acknowledges that Connolly's Socialism was not state Socialism. Coffey opined that 'Catholic social reformers nowadays are intent in advocating schemes of profit sharing and co-partnership and co-operative ownership for workers' and he also cited the example of American bishops who supported such a course. In case such backing lacked sufficient persuasion, Coffey weighted it by reference to 'Connolly's conception of group ownership in the old Gaelic State' and the explanation that it was just 'an industrial guild system under which the producers of the nation's wealth would have real and effective control of the material and the machinery for the products of their industry.'⁴⁰

While defending Connolly and promoting his socialism, Markievicz can still be critical of Connolly's loose use of the expression, 'attitude of the Church'. In this she displays an acute discernment with regard to what that word should mean and she accords dignity, as of right, to lay members of a Church. Markievicz would have preferred if the word 'clergy' had been substituted since Connolly's text had attacked 'political activities of certain clergy, hierarchies and popes.'⁴¹ In choosing to quote particular lines from the Foreword to Connolly's pamphlet *Labour, Nationality and Religion* (1910), Markievicz aligns herself with their viewpoint:

39 Constance Markievicz, *James Connolly's Policy and Catholic Doctrine*, p. 6. There is no publishing detail on pamphlet but it is generally supposed to date from 1924.

40 Constance Markievicz, *James Connolly's Policy*, p. 9.

41 Markievicz, *James Connolly's Policy*, p. 10.

Should the clergy at any time profess or teach doctrines not in conformity with the true teachings of Catholicity it is not only the right, but it is the absolute duty of the laity to refuse such doctrines and to disobey such teaching. Indeed, it is this saving clause in Catholic doctrine which has again and again operated to protect the Church from the result of the mistaken attempts of the clergy to control the secular activities of the laity. [...] in so far as true religion has triumphed in the hearts of men it has triumphed in spite of, not because of, the political activities of the priesthood.⁴²

What this means for Markievicz (and for Connolly) is that good Catholic Socialists must now stand for, and act for, a better society, even if the clergy persisted in defending an indefensible *status quo* wherein the lot of the poor is:

[the country's] slums, its tenement houses, its high rent and taxes on food, with low wages; unhealthy schools, inadequate and understaffed, with their sweated teachers; which are some of the factors responsible for the huge death rate of the children of the poor, and the large percentage of people who grow to maturity uneducated, helpless and incompetent, their health broken; their minds stunted, and who fill our jails and work-houses.⁴³

In the course of making her case in this pamphlet, Markievicz also dwells on the purpose of banks, linking Connolly's belief that they should be run for the purpose of helping to develop the country for the good of all its people, to the encyclical of Leo XIII in which he denounced the evils of capitalism. She identifies Connolly's ideals as 'the principle that was striven for by the early Church at its noblest and best' and, in the wake of World War I, she extends the scope of its application to a wider world than the immediate Irish society:

to avoid wars. To settle disputes between countries by Christianity and common sense instead of by force of arms. Again and again this has been given lip service to by politicians, both the Holy Alliance and the League of Nations are modern expressions of the idea, both work out the one way – smoke screens of high sounding ideals, behind which the Juggernaut of Imperialism advances.⁴⁴

42 Markievicz, *James Connolly's Policy*, p. 13.

43 Markievicz, *James Connolly's Policy*, p. 34.

44 Markievicz, *James Connolly's Policy*, p. 46.

Imperialism is patently in Markievicz's sights and, in contrast to that tyranny as she terms it, she opposes Connolly's belief in, and admiration for, 'the sagacity of his Celtic forefathers, who foreshadowed in the democratic organisation of the Irish Clan, the more perfect organisation of the free society of the future.'⁴⁵ Obviously and inextricably, Markievicz's Catholicism is egalitarian; it is Irish with a nationalist basis, practical in its actions, articulate in expression of its argument, international in its breadth, thoughtful in its economic and social concern, and confident in moral judgment. In referring to 'the early Church at its noblest and best', she obviously intimates that the later official Church might be found wanting but she does not need to wait for any order from prelates or institution when core tenets of Christianity demand that individual intervention is required to alleviate social hardship. Her record shows that she took that duty seriously: in the soup kitchens at Liberty Hall during the 1913 lock-out, in her advocacy for prisoners, in her care of the tenement poor, in her involvement in St Ultan's hospital for children, in personally providing winter fuel for old people during a strike, and in innumerable other instances.

There is a question that must be posed in relation to the Catholicism of Constance Markievicz: just how closely did it mirror that of James Connolly with whom she worked at the head of the Irish Citizen Army, in trade union matters, and in planning for the 1916 Rising? Was it true that 'he kept a simple Catholic faith to the end'? Or, was there any basis for the reports that 'many believed [him] to be an atheist'?⁴⁶ In 1908, Connolly set out a different picture. In a letter to J. Carstairs Matheson, and quoted by Ruth Dudley Edwards, he wrote:

For myself, tho I have usually posed as a Catholic I have not gone to my duty for 15 years, and have not the slightest tincture of faith left. I only assumed the Catholic pose in order to quiz the raw freethinkers whose ridiculous dogmatism did and does

45 Markievicz, *James Connolly's Policy*, pp. 45–46. Here Markievicz takes the particular angle expressed by Connolly in his pamphlet *Erin's Hope*.

46 Haverty, p. 102 and p. 166.

annoy me as much as the dogmatism of the Orthodox. In fact I respect the good Catholic more than the average freethinker.⁴⁷

As Dudley Edwards notes, Connolly appreciated Irish Catholicism as a defining element of Irish race consciousness but was as willing to defend Catholicism against socialists as he was to shield socialists from clerical attack. Perhaps it was in the latter action, and particularly in his response to the 1910 assault on socialism in lectures given in Dublin by Fr Robert Kane S.J., that Connolly expressed a Catholic outlook that could fit that of Constance Markievicz. He stressed that an important part of Catholic belief was:

the almost forgotten, and sedulously suppressed one, that the Catholic Church is theoretically a community in which the clergy are but the officers serving the laity in a common worship and service of God, and that should the clergy at any time profess or teach doctrines not in conformity with the true teachings of Catholicity it is not only the right, but it is the absolute duty of the laity to refuse such doctrines and to disobey such teachings.⁴⁸

In her own pamphlet on Connolly's teachings, Markievicz points out that the institutional Church was not compelled to support capitalism but did so even though its own teachings would not back that position nor did its own members.⁴⁹

As a convert to Catholicism, Markievicz arrived with the conviction that charity took precedence over dogma; if in no other field, as President of Cumann na mBan she *knew* the wrongs of clerical decisions, and the refusal of a priest to give communion to a Cumann member while she

47 Quoted in Ruth Dudley Edwards, *James Connolly* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1981), p. 74.

48 Connolly's response was given in his pamphlet *Labour, Nationality and Religion* (1910). The quotation is taken from Ruth Dudley Edwards, *James Connolly* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1981), p. 75.

49 This point is also made by Diana Norman *Terrible Beauty: A Life of Constance Markievicz* (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1988) p. 252.

wore her uniform was just one prominent example.⁵⁰ On the decision to send children from starving families to England during the lock-out of 1913, her distance from the viewpoint of Archbishop Walsh was total.⁵¹ On that occasion, James Larkin, a man with whom Markievicz worked closely, said that they wanted to eliminate sectarianism, they were against intolerance.⁵² Like Maud Gonne, and like Benedetto, Constance Markievicz would not see that rules should or could prevent her from rescuing donkeys on the Sabbath. That did not necessarily make her Catholicism into the false front that Connolly claimed to put on; it merely emphasises that her religion was a less rule-bound one than any hierarchy would tolerate, that it returned to gospel values. It was a faith that embraced the rosary and Botticelli;⁵³ it allowed her to accompany Eamon and Sinéad de Valera in welcoming Cardinal Mannix at Dun Laoghaire in 1925 although she would not have assented to some of Mannix's opinions;⁵⁴ equally, it included reading, on her deathbed, the bible given to her by her grandmother and wherein she used as a marker the poem she had written for her mother and Eva after their deaths in 1927: 'They are not dead, they do not sleep/ They have awoken from the dream of life.'⁵⁵ She continued

50 Haverty, p. 224. Similar clerical disapproval was felt by other Cumann na mBan members and was dismissed by many as anti-nationalist sentiment rather than authoritative religious judgment.

51 Archbishop Walsh had asked if Irish mothers had lost their sense of duty when they contemplated putting their children in the care of faithless people.

52 Anne Pons, *Constance ou l'Irlande: une biographie de la comtesse Markievicz* (Paris: Nil éditions, 1997), p. 181.

53 In a letter to Eva on 23 May 1921 (from Mountjoy Gaol), she wrote: 'It was such a joy getting the rosary and a visit from Father Sweetman the other day'; she went on to express similar delight in a postcard featuring a Botticelli Madonna (*Prison Letters*, p. 270). Fr Sweetman was the abbot of Mount St Benedict's school where both Staskow Markievicz and Seán MacBride had been pupils. It is possible that the rosary is the one that Eva Gore Booth and Esther Roper managed to get blessed by Pope Benedict XV in the Vatican (*Prison Letters*, p. 104).

54 Anne Marreco, *The Rebel Countess* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1967) p. 296.

55 Pons, *Constance ou l'Irlande*, p. 291.

to go to mass when her presence or absence would not have raised any comment.⁵⁶ In fact, her religious persuasion seemed totally invisible, or irrelevant, to Seán Ó Faoláin when he wrote her biography, as it was to Brian Farrell some thirty years later.⁵⁷ It is exceptionally apt and reflective of Markievicz's religious belief that, on conversion to Catholicism, she took the name Anastasia, since amongst the many legends surrounding St Anastasia, there is the persistent belief that she was of noble birth and was good to the poor.

It is a generalisation containing a large amount of truth to say that, in the final decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century in Ireland, the labels protestant, unionist, prosperous and respectable tended to be linked; the corollary was that there was similar correlation between catholic, socialist, poor and rebellious. Conversion from Anglicanism (for example, by Maud Gonne, Constance Markievicz, Charlotte Despard and Grace Gifford) frequently led to ostracisation and disinheritance of the one who had 'turned'; those who changed allegiance from unionism to nationalism commonly felt equally unwelcome in their family and social circles, and if Catholic, they risked additional condemnation by bishops and clergy which in turn augmented family displeasure. Thus, despite the position in Britain at the period when Anglo Catholics enjoyed relatively high social standing, and the eminence of those who changed from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism was recognised (while their move might be regretted and the consequences feared), the situation in Ireland was quite different for converts. The tone of Yeats's communications to and about Gonne and Markievicz conveys the underlying class and religious prejudices. The inter-religious tension is depicted in several novels, amongst them *Dark Rosaleen* (1915) by M.E. Francis, and George Moore's *The Lake* (1905) and *Celibates* (1895). Those fictional treatments cast light on the raw hostility that existed between adherents of different

56 Markievicz mentions attendance at Mass on the previous Sunday when writing to Esther Roper, the partner of Eva Gore Booth, following Eva's death in June 1926. *Prison Letters*, p. 312.

57 Seán Ó Faoláin *Constance Markievicz* (London: Sphere, 1934); Farrell 'Markievicz and the Women of the Revolution'.

faiths and paint a picture of what Irish Catholicism (and, of course Irish Protestantism) meant in some communities. Thus they furnish a backdrop against which the faith choices of Gonne, Markievicz and others may be viewed, and they suggest a scale by which their Catholicism can be measured.

As I have argued elsewhere, conversion to Catholicism by the central character in George Moore's story of Mildred Lawson in *Celibates* draws attention to contemporary fashion, belief and religious prejudices at the end of the nineteenth century.⁵⁸ Although the story is set in England and France, the author's acute familiarity with Ireland makes his observations relevant to the land of his birth. Mildred's brother suspects the Roman Catholics of luring his sister into their fold for the purposes of grabbing her money for a convent or for church building; for Mildred herself, conversion seems just her latest whim. She states that 'I was received into the Church before I ever heard Mass. I am not interested in the externals; I think of the essentials, and Catholicism seems to me to be essentially right.'⁵⁹ Mildred looked for 'a more intimate consolation than Protestantism can give us' while her brother is sure that her 'version' is just to be 'gratified by music, candles, incense, gold vestments and ceremonial display. It is not love of God, it is love of the senses.'⁶⁰ As her participation in religious practice declines, Mildred claims that 'I am a Catholic, but my Catholicism is my own: I am a Newmanite'. She defines this as being 'more concerned with the essential spirit of Catholicism than with its outward practice.'⁶¹ Expressing scepticism about the reasons for her change of religion, her brother further claims that 'some women do not understand religion ... They have never originated any religious movement.' In Moore's depiction of this fickle Englishwoman, her fads, and her less than theologically-solid opinions, he intimates that there was more than one

58 See Mary Pierse, 'A Rather Religious George Moore?', in *A New Ireland in Brazil*, edited by Laura P. Izarra & Beatriz Kopschitz X Bastos (Sao Paulo: Humanitas, 2008), pp. 291–292.

59 George Moore, *Celibates* (London: Walter Scott, 1895), p. 250.

60 Moore, *Celibates*, p. 243.

61 Moore, *Celibates*, p. 250.

vision of what constituted Catholicism for those who saw themselves as within that church. In different tales in *Celibates*, Moore's portraiture of Mrs Olive Lahens and of John Norton and his mother provide yet more variations on interpretations of Catholicism.

Similar visceral tribal responses to perceived triumphs of a rival religious grouping are found in Moore's *The Lake* and in *Dark Rosaleen* by M.E. Francis. In *The Lake*, a baby is snatched in turn by each of its two grandmothers and rushed to their different Protestant and Catholic churches so that it might be claimed for their sect by baptism. An analogous baby kidnapping occurs in *Dark Rosaleen*, with the added violence of the baptising Catholic priest being shot. The plausibility of the fictional depictions was not disputed. It was a world away from the faith concerns of such as Renan and Newman. In allowing a character like Mildred Lawson to declare herself a Newmanite, Moore evokes not only some of the contemporary antipathetic reactions to Newman's conversion but also hints at the opposition to Newman's position in the university in Dublin; he further insinuates the alterations in Newman's reasoning and mindset. Newman had converted to Roman Catholicism because he saw that Church as providing certainty and infallibility. He could write in his diary:

Protestantism is the dreariest of possible religions; that the thought of the Anglican service makes me shiver, and the thought of the Thirty-nine Articles makes me shudder. Return to the Church of England! No; 'the net is broken and we are delivered'. I should be a consummate fool (to use a mild term) if in my old age I left 'the land flowing with milk and honey' for the city of confusion and the house of bondage.⁶²

However, by 1870, he viewed the infallibility declared by Pius IX as 'a climax of tyranny'.⁶³ Ernest Renan had left Roman Catholicism precisely because he could no longer believe in the possibility of certainty in the

62 As in Newman's *Letters and Diaries*, Vol. XX, p. 216, quoted in John Beaumont 'Cardinal Newman on the Church: A Guide for the Perplexed', on www.culturewars.com/CultureWars/archives/cw_feb98/Newman.html. Accessed 6 January 2010.

63 Quoted by Peter de Rosa on www.liberalsthechrist.org/Catholic/papal_infallibility.html. Accessed 22 January 2010.

Bible or in his church's interpretations. Both at the levels of baby snatching and of arguments over infallibility and biblical exegesis, the era exhibited several different 'Catholicisms' and those of Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz have little in common with the extremes of intellectualism or peasant simplicity; neither do they convey any sense of belonging to a faith in which their moral judgments are dictated by a patriarchal hierarchy. Their choices and actions suggest a liberated belief system, whose independence was anathema to church authorities and whose existence seems to have been erased from records that insist on depicting all Irish Catholicism of the period as clerically dominated.

Some people turned towards Catholicism because they experienced spiritual aridity or lack of comfort in another Church; some were swayed by art and by incense; others were persuaded by theology, dogma or biblical interpretation; yet more asserted their difference and nationalism by converting to a faith that was different to that of their conquerors, on occasion seeing in it a community that prioritised care for the disadvantaged. Shades of any of those factors may have added to the impetus that steered Maud Gonne and Constance Markievicz towards Roman Catholicism but, in living their new religion, they stripped away layers of ecclesiasticism that had been imposed over the core message of Christ and they accorded primacy to charitable conduct over institutional rigidity. Unburdened by inherited adherence to practices that were 'ossified organisms',⁶⁴ and strongly committed to equality and democracy, they presumed an equality with clergy for lay women and men. That freedom determined that donkeys could and should be rescued from wells on the Sabbath. In addition, their Catholicism owed much more to the heritage of Brigit than to the patriarchal conservatism of Maynooth or the Vatican. Interestingly, they neither embodied the zeal of converts in strict adherence to institutional regulations nor any evangelical drive to sway others. They had made personal choices but they accorded equal respect to the different religious

64 The phrase is attributed to Fogazzaro by William Thayer in his introduction to the American edition of *The Saint*. <http://www.fullbooks.com/TheSaint.html>. Accessed 9 January 2010.

options of individuals. For themselves, their Catholicism was a salutary and constructive religion that presupposed their own intrinsic worth and definitely recognised the equal rights and entitlements of others. Moreover, it was an Irish Catholicism that has, for too long, remained unknown and unsung.

PART 2

Developments in the Irish and Irish-American Novel

SHARON TIGHE-MOONEY

Exploring the Irish Catholic Mother in Kate O'Brien's *Pray for the Wanderer*

In order to orientate the reader to the discussion that follows, a brief introduction to Kate O'Brien's novel, *Pray for the Wanderer*, published in 1938, will serve to sketch the key characters and relationships in the plot. In addition, the historical context to the composition of the novel is also pertinent, as it was written during the unveiling of the 1937 Irish Constitution. Significantly, too, the novel was written after the banning of O'Brien's previous novel, *Mary Lavelle*, and the fact that the main character in *Pray for the Wanderer*, Matt Costello, acts as a mouthpiece for O'Brien is attested to by her friends, the critics Vivian Mercier and Lorna Reynolds. Mercier wrote: 'Miss O'Brien has clearly made her hero an author – and a banned one at that – so that through his mouth she may register her protest against modern Ireland's love of censorship'.¹ In a similar vein, Lorna Reynolds in *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, remarked: 'The author herself is present ... as a man, a famous author back in Ireland on a visit to his brother and sister-in-law'.²

Matt Costello, a successful writer, retreats to his ancestral home in Mellick, O'Brien's fictional Limerick, after the ending of a passionate affair with a married actress in London. Weir House is now occupied by his brother, Will, who is married to Una, and their five children. Much to Matt's surprise, he becomes involved in the lives of this family, is temporarily soothed by their tranquil lifestyle, and finds himself attracted to Una's sister, Nell, who teaches world history through the Irish language. Matt's thoughts

1 Vivian Mercier, 'Kate O'Brien', in *Irish Writing*, 1 (1946), pp. 94–95.

2 Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), p. 76.

and feelings on the Ireland he has returned to are expressed throughout the novel in sustained discussions about the social and religious atmosphere of Éamon de Valera's idyllic Ireland. These debates are conducted mainly with Tom Mahoney, the urbane solicitor who represents the authority figure of the community, and Father Malachi, the educated, intelligent spokesman for the Catholic Church. Although temporarily seduced by the peace and tranquility of what Matt calls 'Lotus Land', he realises ultimately that Ireland is no place for artists. The term 'Lotus Land' is significant in the text, as the lotus is a mythical fruit which when eaten induces a state of lazy and luxurious dreaminess.³ The use of this mythological reference, therefore, indicates a lack of realism in relation to the Costello family in Weir House as well as to the country in general. Matt's inability to 'fit' into the cultural ethos is made clear by Nell, who rejects his proposal of marriage and tells him: 'Go back to your own world, Matt.'⁴ Matt finally quits Mellick, having been defeated in his efforts to settle there. The ultimate irony is that he has, as Eibhear Walshe notes, left behind 'a community largely untroubled by its rejection of artistic freedom.'⁵

For the purposes of this chapter, the focus will be on the portrayal of the matriarch of the family at Weir House, Una Costello, with some reference later to a second matriarchal figure, Hannah Kernahan, in *The Last of Summer*. The sense of 'luxurious dreaminess' induced by the lotus fruit is personified in the representation of Una, and I argue that she can be read as a symbol for the 'ideal' Irish woman as described in the 1937 Irish Constitution, as well as an example of the cultural ethos needed to sustain that idealisation. In order to contextualise the discussion, I will briefly con-

3 See 'The Cyclops' (9.84–96) in Homer, *The Odyssey*. Translated by E.V. Rieu (London: Penguin Books [1946], 1991). When Odysseus's companions eat the lotus fruit in the country of the Lotus-eaters, they lose any wish to leave or to return home.

4 Kate O'Brien, *Pray for the Wanderer*, 2nd edition (Harmondsworth: Penguin [1938], 1951), p. 160. All subsequent references will be denoted by the abbreviation *PW* followed by the page number.

5 Eibhear Walshe, 'Lock up your Daughters: From *Ante-Room* to Interior Castle', in Eibhear Walshe (ed.), *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), pp. 150–166, p. 155.

sider the Articles of the Constitution that drew on Papal Encyclicals⁶ in order to position O'Brien's representation of Una Costello as an example of the dramatisation of the lives of women that were determined by the particular modes of femininity advocated both in the Constitution and in Catholic Church teaching.

The development of Catholicism as a central element of Irish nationalism by the 1930s underpins the incorporation of Catholic social teaching tenets into the 1937 Constitution. Two clerics, among the many contributors, are credited with helping Éamon de Valera compose the sections of the Constitution relevant to women and the family; the Jesuit, Edward Cahill, and the Holy Ghost priest, John Charles McQuaid, who later became Archbishop of Dublin. De Valera also read the writings of Irish exponents of Catholic social teaching. Dermot Keogh, in an account of the drafting process, explains that de Valera invited Cahill to come up with draft articles, relevant to the Church's interests.⁷ Keogh writes: 'When Cahill brought the matter to the attention of his superiors, they decided to set up a committee of some of the best minds in the Jesuit province to comply with de Valera's request.'⁸ Although quite altered from the original draft material provided by the Jesuits, the finished articles were heavily based on the topics debated by the committee. McQuaid, as de Valera's friend and

6 Papal encyclicals are letters addressed by the Pope to the Catholic bishops throughout the world and through them to the whole Church. They are used as a mode of papal teaching to apply Catholic Church beliefs to the contemporary world in the religious, social, economic or political spheres. For a description on the origin and practice of the issuing of encyclicals, see the Introduction to J. Michael Miller (ed.), *The Encyclicals of John Paul II* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996). See also <http://www.papalencyclicals.net>.

7 In order to avoid repetition, the term, 'the Church', is used to denote the Roman Catholic Church in the Republic of Ireland, without prejudice to the ecclesiastical status of other denominations.

8 Dermot Keogh, 'Church, State and Society', in Brian Farrell (ed.), *De Valera's Constitution and Ours* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1988), p. 103–122, p. 109.

advisor, as well as the Holy Ghost Order, played a more direct role. The result became Articles 41 to 45 of the Constitution.⁹

The early twentieth-century onset of communism, secularism and materialism in Europe had given a new impetus to discourse on Catholic social teaching, which had been formulated in 1891 by Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) in his encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* (Of New Things or Of the Conditions of the Working Classes). The remit of Leo's encyclical, according to Anne Fremantle, was the 'Church's complete answer to Karl Marx' *Das Kapital*, and, indeed, to Communism and Socialism in whatever forms.¹⁰ In addition, Tony Fahey asserts that from the beginning of the nineteenth century, in a reaction to the new emphasis on individualism, the Church's 'pastoral, educational and social services were focused very much on the family'.¹¹ As women were deemed responsible for the home and family, they became the targets against which all critiques of modernity were directed. Papal rhetoric on women's 'nature' and women's roles implied that because women give birth to children, they are biologically the natural carers of those children. In this influential encyclical, Pope Leo used the expression 'the law of nature' repeatedly, and quoted extensively from St Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), who had integrated into Christian thought the philosophy of Aristotle. Aristotle's Natural Law Theory understood world order as a well-regulated, patriarchal, and hierarchical world order, with the community having a more privileged status than the individual. Adherents believed in a fixed divine plan and a static worldview. As a result, knowledge was perceived, in Louise Fuller's view, 'as existing outside, independent of, and in a sense, superior to, the person. People were supposed to

9 For a detailed account of the drafting of the 1937 Irish Constitution, see Dermot Keogh and Andrew J. McCarthy, *The Making of the Irish Constitution 1937* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2007).

10 Anne Fremantle (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals in their Historical Context* (New York: Mentor, 1956), p. 166.

11 Tony Fahey, 'Catholicism and Industrial Society in Ireland', in J.H. Goldthorpe and C.T. Whelan (eds), *The Development of Industrial Society in Ireland* (London: British Academy, 1992), pp. 241–263, p. 263.

conform to a ready-made corpus of knowledge, rather than question it'.¹² This method of teaching, called the Thomastic or Scholastic approach, was the type used in Maynooth seminary, and a perspective that infiltrated crucial areas in which Catholicism held sway, such as education, health and issues of morality. As a result, in the opinion of Georgia Masters Keightley, Pope Leo's views on women's place, revealed his assumption that a woman's activities were 'defined as well as circumscribed by her nature'.¹³ Moreover, Keightley argues that Papal teachings ensured that the notion that human experience could be divided into two spheres, 'public' and 'private', would become central to Catholic social thought. With this influential encyclical, women's role within the home was cemented, a role that continued to be promulgated in subsequent encyclicals.

The purpose of Pope Pius XI's (1922–39) encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno* (On the Restoration of the Social Order), published in 1931, was to adapt and develop the doctrine outlined in *Rerum Novarum*. The close relationship between this encyclical and Articles 41.2.1 and 41.2.2 of the Constitution, can be seen when placed side by side. In *Quadragesimo Anno*, Pius wrote:

Mothers, concentrating on household duties, should work primarily in the home or in its immediate vicinity. It is an intolerable abuse, and to be abolished at all cost, for mothers on account of father's low wage to be forced to engage in gainful occupations outside the home to the neglect of their proper cares and duties, especially the training of children.¹⁴

Article 41.2.1 states: 'In particular, the State recognises that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the

12 Louise Fuller, *Irish Catholicism since 1950: The Undoing of a Culture* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 2004), p. 12.

13 Georgia Masters Keightley, 'Catholic Feminism's Contribution to the Church's Social Justice Tradition', in Francis P. McHugh and Samuel M. Natale (eds), *Things Old and New: Catholic Social Teaching Revisited* (Maryland: University Press of America, 1993), pp. 333–363, p. 340.

14 Claudia Carlen (ed.), *The Papal Encyclicals 1903–1939*, Vol. 3 (Ann Arbor: Pierian Press, 1990), p. 426.

common good cannot be achieved', while Article 41.2.2 goes further: 'The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obliged by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home.'¹⁵ The import of the words 'by her life within the home' is particularly striking, as is how the terms 'woman' and 'mother' are used interchangeably. In this way, to be the Irish woman described in the Constitution and in Papal Encyclicals, one must be a mother and at that, a particular kind of mother. Moreover, the ideology implicitly demands a selfless dedication on the part of women to the service of others in a private domestic space.

The promotion of large families was a significant facet of the lives of Irish Catholic mothers. Una, in *Pray for the Wanderer*, is expecting her sixth child. Her feelings on this matter echo those of Father Malachi, who expresses the Church's position in the novel, and who tells Matt: '[T]here is a clear faith, a definite duty to God, in the raising of a family' (*PW* 119). Similarly, Una explains her perceived duties to Matt: '[W]e're still Catholics here, you know, and believe that man is a spirit, and that it is our duty to go on propagating him to the glory of God' (*PW* 139). Una's sentiments reflect Leo XIII's views, as expressed in *Rerum Novarum* where he wrote: 'No human law can abolish the natural and original right of marriage, nor in any way limit the chief and principal purpose of marriage, ordained by God's authority from the beginning. *Increase and multiply*'.¹⁶ The situation must be viewed in context, however, as at that time: '[T]he Catholic view that God and nature intended sexual intercourse to be fruitful was quite widely held as a correct principle, even if it was not always practiced or observed'.¹⁷ This ambiguity is also expressed by Una's sister, Nell Mahoney, in *Pray for the Wanderer*. Nell 'could not admit, any more by her fastidious nerves than by her religious training, the pitiful exigencies or crude materialistic ethic of birth control – though baffled indeed, too, by the appalling

15 *Bunreacht na hÉireann*. Second Amendment Edition (Dublin: Government Publication Office [1937], 1942).

16 Quoted by Fremantle, p. 171.

17 Mary Kenny, *Goodbye to Catholic Ireland*. Revised and updated edition (Dublin: New Island, 2000), p. 127.

problems and horrors of unchecked fecundity' (*PW* 109). In the context of Catholic teaching however, any frustrating of the 'chief and principal purpose of marriage' could only be deemed unnatural, as argued in the 1930 encyclical, *Casti Connubii* (On Christian Marriage). Pius XI wrote:

Since, therefore, the conjugal act is destined primarily by nature for the begetting of children, those who in exercising it deliberately frustrate its natural power and purpose sin against nature and commit a deed which is shameful and intrinsically vicious.

... any use whatsoever of matrimony exercised in such a way that the act is deliberately frustrated in its natural power to generate life is an offence against the law of God and of nature, and those who indulge in such are branded with the guilt of a grave sin.¹⁸

The Pope's sentiments were echoed by Bishop Michael Browne of Galway who had strong words for those who advocated birth control. In 1938, writing in the *Catholic Truth Quarterly*, Bishop Browne wrote that people who promote birth control 'regard motherhood exactly as a prostitute does, something to be avoided at all costs'.¹⁹ The State imposed Church condemnation of family planning with the 1935 Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, Section 17, which prohibited the sale, advertising or importation of contraceptives. In addition, under the Censorship of Publications Act, 1929, the publication, distribution and selling of literature advocating birth control was prohibited.

The co-operation between Church and State after the establishment of an Independent Ireland reflected in certain articles of the 1937 Constitution, are dramatised in *Pray for the Wanderer*. Matt Costello's thoughts on what he calls 'Dev's tricky constitution' are as follows:

And now the proffered Constitution of the Irish Free State was before the world. Founded, intelligibly enough and even as this house was, upon the family as social unit ... but offering in its text curious anomalies and subtleties, alarming signposts. (*PW* 30)

18 Quoted by Fremantle, p. 239.

19 Browne, cited in Peter Martin, *Censorship in the Two Irelands 1922–1939* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 297. See also the *Catholic Truth Quarterly*, 1:5 (July–September 1938), p. 6.

The 'house' referred to is Weir House and its inhabitants, and its inclusion above, as a microcosm of the state, suggests its representation of the aspiration of social and cultural unity of 1930s Ireland. In addition, the question is raised later in the text, as Matt ponders: 'The harmony within this house, for instance – is that representative and does it promise anything?' (*PW* 184). In addition, Matt is appalled at how the new Constitution strengthens the dictatorial powers of the Irish Catholic Church. Una's cousin, Tom Mahoney, agrees, telling Matt: 'Religiosity is becoming a job in this country ... A threat and a menace. A power in the land' (*PW* 47).

In *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, Adele Dalsimer expressed the view that O'Brien approved of Una Costello and through her, espoused the traditional, domestic role of women.²⁰ In a similar vein, Joan Ryan writes that Una 'can be considered as the stereotype (sic) wife and mother who runs the home with infinite patience, efficiency and love, living through others with no obvious impulses of her own.'²¹ She too maintains that O'Brien approved of Una, and of the traditional, domestic role of women. These observations raise questions about the purpose of Una in the novel. Can she be read as the 'ideal' woman, living in the model family, and in that way, as a vehicle for the approval of the Irish moral and cultural ethos? Are there, in fact, 'alarming signposts' (*PW* 30) to be found within this idyllic family? The fact that every other family portrayed in O'Brien's work is dysfunctional to some degree should raise suspicion about the depiction of such apparent perfection. My reading argues that Una is not so sympathetically drawn, and that she is deliberately modeled on the 'ideal' woman rendered in the 1937 Constitution in order to explore the implications of ideological parameters on women's role in the family and in Irish society. In order to address these questions, I will now look a little more closely at the depiction of Una Costello.

20 Adele M. Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), p. 47.

21 Joan Ryan, 'Women in the Novels of Kate O'Brien: The Mellick Novels', in Heinz Kosok (ed.), *Studies in Anglo-Irish Literature* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1982), pp. 322–332, p. 323.

In the text, there are few references to Una's corporeal person, but those there are provide interesting possibilities for reading her against the grain of Dalsimer's and Ryan's interpretations. Rather than relying on conventional terms of the physical beauty of a woman in the description of Una, O'Brien more powerfully compares her to a rose. This is a romance convention used by the silver poets of the sixteenth century. Matt recalls his first impressions of Una, as 'A wild and blowy rose' (*PW* 7). At dinner, on the first evening of his visit, Una is again under his scrutiny: 'Matt pondered her innocent unfoldedness of nature, the ease with which her untracked and native seduction spread its perfume. She was fading, but would live and die most recognizably a rose' (*PW* 11). Matt later tells Una that she has a 'lovely open rose of a face' (*PW* 140). *The Oxford Paperback Dictionary* defines the rose as an 'ornamental, usually fragrant flower', while the expression 'rose-tinted' evokes someone with an unrealistically cheerful worldview. The image of the rose, therefore, invites the reader to interpret Una symbolically. In addition, Matt's use of the description 'native seduction' in relation to Una suggests the use of the motif in eighteenth-century *Aisling* poetry. It was the poet Liam Dall Ó hÍfearnáin who initiated the tradition of Caitlín Ní Uallacháin as symbol of Ireland, who by embodying feminine beauty, personifies the nation of Ireland. In the *Aisling* genre, the poet, while wandering in stunning surroundings, meets a beautiful woman who reveals herself to be Ireland. She gives the poet the message that the rightful king will be installed and that all will be well. Poets such as Eoghan Rua Ó Súillabháin and Aodhagán Ó Rathaille promulgated this symbolism, and it continued to be made popular by poets such as James C. Mangan (*Kathleen Ny Houlahan*) in the nineteenth century, and W.B. Yeats (*Red Hanrahan's Song about Ireland*) in the twentieth century. In this context, the use of the rose motif in relation to Una suggests that, in the text, as well as a symbol for the 'ideal' woman of the Constitution, Una can also be read as a symbol for Ireland itself. And as Gerardine Meaney points out: 'Women have been denied a role in the life and history of nations and been

reduced to symbols of the nation.²² As symbols, women have ideological rather than actual power, an ambivalence that is reflected throughout O'Brien's texts. Moreover, concentration on the role of mother alone for women, as the interchangeable use of the words 'woman' and 'mother' in the Constitution suggests, implicitly withdraws status from women who do not undertake this role.

Una Costello's class is an important element of her portrayal, as the text proposes the rarity of families who have the means to live as Una and her family do, thereby indicating the empirical unreality of sustaining the model family illustrated in the Constitution, in the economic context of the 1930s. Una, Matt notices, quite simply 'lived for others' (*PW* 60). This reflects the selflessness of the 'ideal' woman of the Constitution, but the text indicates that Una can do this because others work for her. Una is not forced by economic necessity to work outside the home. As a middle class woman, she has the option of being able to hand over care of her children to her maid, Bridie, whenever she chooses (*PW* 65; *PW* 183). The text, therefore, situates Una as privileged and she is allowed to enjoy her many children and their company without the attendant labour. She has the time and the resources to 'live for others' and can, therefore, do so without denying her own needs. Women not of Una's class would have worked ceaselessly in the home, caring for small children without the luxury of paid help. Indeed, many worked outside the home, despite the aspiration expressed in the Constitution to keep them there. The predominant question put forward by O'Brien here is the prevalence of the model woman as posited in the Constitution, given that the census figures of 1936 show that over 54 per cent of the female working population were engaged in agriculture or domestic service.²³

Una's happiness is also emphasised in the text, as Matt observes that she 'loved her husband and, deriving from him, her children, with an unheed-

ing, unaware strength of generosity such as Matt had never before observed in an adult. He had never before met in normal worldly life someone who quite precisely lived for others' (*PW* 60). The words 'never before' are used twice here to emphasise Una's uniqueness, thereby questioning the validity of the idea that all mothers are completely fulfilled by Una's mode of living, as well as the notion that all Irish mothers have the economic means to do so. Una's uniqueness is explored further in the text in a scene where Una tells Matt that she has a happy life and 'cannot see why millions of others' (*PW* 134), as she puts it, cannot have the same. O'Brien frames the discussion that ensues as a way of highlighting that the 'ideal' woman of the Constitution can only exist within a very particular class and circumstance. Matt lists the reasons why everyone cannot be as contented as Una:

Millions of others are slaving, Una, or workless, or homeless, or fighting in some brutal army for brutal ideologies they don't even begin to understand, or wasting in prisons because they resisted such ideologies, or hacking coal out of death-trap mines, or working overtime on incendiary bombs, or ranting away in manic-depressive wards because they should never have been born ... (*PW* 134)

To this, Una simply replies: 'But these things needn't be. No decent person wishes it to be so' (*PW* 134). Una's naivety and innocence with regard to the lives of others is emphasised here. In addition, her lack of awareness can be read as a criticism of Irish cultural insularity, as well as suggesting that the preservation of ideologies can mask cruelty in their apparent naivety. Una believes that 'life is worth living on most terms' (*PW* 139). To this, Matt replies: 'Oh Una, I wonder! That's a conviction of the sheltered, and you've always been sheltered' (*PW* 139). Matt's view reflects Terence Brown's assessment of Irish culture during this period when he posits the view that '[d]espite some signs of change, there was a conservative continuum with pre-revolutionary Ireland and minorities and critics in the new order had little chance to make their will felt'.²⁴ The text, therefore, demonstrates the

22 Gerardine Meaney, *Sex and Nation: Women in Irish Culture and Politics* (Dublin: Attic Press, LIP Pamphlet, 1991), p. 22.

23 See Caitriona Clear, *Women of the House: Women's Household Work in Ireland 1922-1961* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2000), Table 1.1, p. 14.

24 Terence Brown, *Ireland: A Social and Cultural History 1922-1985* (London: Fontana [1981], 1985), p. 10.

blinkered world view of the protected bourgeois woman, who cannot see beyond the horizon of her own life.

Dalsimer and Ryan's views of O'Brien's approval of Una are further undermined in an exchange at a family picnic, between Una's cousin, Tom Mahoney and Matt. Tom says:

'My cousin, Una – well, she's very nearly my favourite study.'

'Why?'

'Happiness, Matt. Happiness, you novelist, you! Happiness as innocent as our picnic. Have you ever seen it before, Matt? Will you ever see it again?' (*PW* 34)

The rarity of happiness such as Una's is stressed by the repetition of 'ever seen' and 'ever see'. Matt, later musing on Una, agrees: 'Yes, Tom was right. Here was something not to be seen again, and worth a man's observation' (*PW* 62). Una's 'innocent' happiness suggests that she is childlike and unrealistic as an example of an adult woman. This trope is repeated again in the text when her cousin, Tom, calls Weir House 'an idyllic kindergarten' (*PW* 79). In this novel, therefore, Una is explored in symbolic terms that examine her as representative of the model Irish Catholic Woman, in the model family, and in a particular cultural ethos. O'Brien recognised that women such as Una, happy to live for others and fulfilled by motherhood, existed, as in a discussion in the text between Matt and Father Malachi, who is championing the establishment of families, Matt responds: 'But I allow that, for those who feel it' (*PW* 119). O'Brien, at the same time, by drawing attention to Una's minority economic status and her unrealistic worldview, allowed a space for those who do not 'feel it'.

The political critique brought to bear on the representation of Una Costello as mother/mother Ireland is also particularly explored in *The Last of Summer* with the writing of State boundaries and policies on women's bodies and psyches as representation of Ireland's neutrality policy during World War Two, embodied in the matriarch of the family, Hannah Kernahan. The commentator on the European position in the novel, set in the few weeks preceding the outbreak of war, is Hannah's visiting French niece, Angèle Maury, who subsequently falls in love with her cousin, Tom. As Hannah's favourite son, Tom is the means for the deployment of her

sense of power, an abusive relationship about which Reynolds wrote: 'This study of frustration finding compensation in power is new to Kate O'Brien's work.'²⁵ Retaining her son's love is vital for Hannah's existence, and as such, Angèle as interloper who threatens the safe insularity of the family, and as a representative of modernising European influences, must be expurgated from the Kernahan family. Thus, Angèle and Tom's relationship is subtly but intentionally destroyed by Hannah, and although she is positioned in the text as an example of the 'ideal' mother of the Constitution by her devoted companion, Dotey, and her 'priest admirers', her public persona is rendered in marked contrast to her behaviour in the private sphere of her home. The son to whom she is unhealthily devoted, Tom, shares the opinions of Dotey and the clergy, but Hannah's second son, Martin, and her daughter, Jo, are compelled to love a mother whose flaws they cannot ignore, and the shadow side to the ideal is revealed through these relationships. In addition, Hannah's dealings with her French niece, whose presence threatens to deflect the attention of her favourite son, symbolises Ireland's cultural and political insularity in the face of a world war, as the oncoming war, Hannah tells her niece, is 'nothing whatever to do with us. [...] Eire is certain to be neutral in this war, you see, Angèle. Absolutely neutral.'²⁶ Thus, the dramatisation of the neutrality policy is depicted in Hannah's deliberate ousting of her niece, Angèle, from her home. In this way, Hannah, as symbol of Ireland, rejects variance. The mother-son relationship is the dominant relationship in *The Last of Summer*, and a dramatisation of the psychic excesses of the unfulfilled mother, as Hannah deliberately and systematically destroys the relationship between her son and his fiancé, to retain her position as first in her son's affections. Hannah is, therefore, as Reynolds noted, a study of 'frustration finding compensation in power.'²⁷ In this way, the image of the selfless woman of the Constitution is evoked

25 Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, p. 80.

26 Kate O'Brien, *The Last of Summer* (London: The Book Club [1943] 1944), p. 193. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *LS* followed by the page number.

27 Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait*, p. 80.

as O'Brien dramatises the negative consequences of a woman who emulates the ideal of focusing her life solely on the home.

Although the concerns of *The Last of Summer* are different from *Pray for the Wanderer*, Hannah Kernahan and Una Costello both function as symbols and as dramatisations of the possible consequences of embodying the particular type of motherhood endorsed in the Irish Constitution. Additionally, Hannah, like Una, is of the middle classes, and the material comfort of the Kernahan family is rendered in the text with descriptions of good food, eaten in a dining room full of 'old-fashioned silver and china' (*LS* 46). Moreover, Hannah has a companion, Dotey, a penniless, unmarried relative, and therefore, not paid for her services. Dotey, however, is grateful for the security her position with Hannah brings and is, consequently, 'the one permanent nourisher of the now widely flourishing belief that Mrs Kernahan was a wonder, a sainted widow and a martyr mother' (*LS* 113). Dotey expresses her admiration for Hannah in pious terms, which elicit the wording in the Constitution, and situates Hannah's class distinction in terms of her public persona:

And now look at her – the best of Catholic mothers, unselfish and devoted, a most charitable and perfect lady, a widow who had suffered many's the dark trial all through her married life, and had had to keep her beautiful home together and bring up her children single-handed – an example to us all. (*LS* 113)

As 'the best of Catholic mothers,' Hannah reflects the selfless model woman of the Constitution, while the word 'Catholic' evokes the similar model woman described in Papal Encyclicals, an image buttressed by the presence in the text of Hannah's 'priest-admirers' (*LS* 113). The current 'priest-admirer,' Father Gregory, is effusive in his praise of her and tells her son, Tom, that Hannah is 'A walking saint, Tom' (*LS* 58). These glowing reports by Father Gregory and Dotey affirm Hannah's convincing performance as paragon of the family and the community. However, Hannah Kernahan's public presentation of herself, as 'the best of Catholic mothers' (*LS* 113), masks the mother who is prepared to go to any lengths to keep her favourite child's love focused solely on herself.

The discrepancy between Hannah's presentation of herself and her private thoughts is betrayed mostly by her tone of voice, which is observed throughout the text by Angèle, and narratorial dislike of Hannah is indicated by the framework of verbal irony in which her characterisation is framed. Furthermore, Hannah's antipathy towards Angèle is revealed in the text through Angèle's eyes, as she begins to read Hannah's body signals in contrast to the words she speaks. Walshe writes: 'Hannah Kernahan is Kate O'Brien's most intriguing characterisation in this novel, a woman of great charm and beauty, perceptive and civilised, yet dishonest and cruel.'²⁸ For instance, in reply to Angèle's explanation of her reason for visiting the Kernahan family, her cousin, Martin, expresses the hope that Angèle will stay with them for a time. Hannah's response to Martin's wish conveys her dislike of Angèle's unexpected visit, albeit in a veiled manner: "She's not very likely to give herself time to, Martin dear," said Mrs Kernahan. "You see, she belongs to the world – not to our old backwater." (*LS* 19). The use of 'backwater' is significant here, as it suggests a stretch of stagnant water, as well as a place unaffected by progress or new ideas.

Hannah's remark makes it clear to Angèle that she is unwelcome, different, foreign and worldly, as she draws attention to the distinction between Ireland and the world outside Ireland. Thus, Hannah does not define herself in the text as being part of 'the world'. Here then, the symbolic aspect of Hannah's characterisation is indicated, as the intense relationship between her and her eldest son is paralleled by her focus on her immediate surroundings. As she is disinterested in anything that does not concern Tom, similarly, 'the world' and its concerns, in this case, the issue of Irish neutrality in the face of a world war is of little interest. The contrast between Hannah's remark, which is conveyed in a 'soft' tone of voice, is registered by Angèle, who is 'unnerved by so many currents of mood' (*LS* 19). As a result, Angèle asks herself a question that foreshadows the hostile manner to which her aunt later subjects her, as she wonders: 'Was this Aunt Hannah cruel?' (*LS* 19) With this question, the suggestion is raised that Hannah's

28 Eibhear Walshe, *Kate O'Brien: A Writing Life* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), p. 94.

soft-spoken, gentle exterior masks a strong character, single-minded and ruthless in the maintenance of her comfortable position at Waterpark House, and in the retention of the affections of her eldest son.

While Una Costello is portrayed as 'innocent' and 'sheltered', Hannah is more complex. In the absence of her husband, Hannah is dependent on her son to preserve the family model, and her sense of worth, which in her terms means the preservation of her son's full attention as a spousal-type companion and as a business partner. The transference of Tom's devotion to another would, therefore, result in a loss of status for Hannah that she is not prepared to accept. Although there is much more that can be said about the oedipal nature of the mother-son relationship in this novel, Hannah, for the purposes of this chapter, is rendered here as problematic by O'Brien, in terms of the ideal of the selfless Catholic mother.

The varied representations of mothers throughout O'Brien's texts counteract the stereotyping of women who are mothers, despite the expression of some bias in this regard, as by raising questions about motherhood providing total fulfilment, O'Brien is suggesting the redress of society rather than an outright condemnation of the failure of mothers. By focusing on the individual experience, O'Brien's novels 'quietly protest against the fates of middle-class Irish women who are sheltered, stifled, and forced into prescribed roles as wives, mothers, or spinsters'.²⁹ These prescribed roles are set within the family unit, and O'Brien's texts also suggest ambivalence in this regard, as on the one hand, O'Brien's representation of individual female experience, while placing much emphasis on the security of being in a family, at the same time renders the family unit a stultifying place for many of her female characters. It can be argued that this is a damning indictment against Article 41.1.1 of the Constitution where 'the State recognises the Family as the natural primary and fundamental unit group of Society'.

In addition, analyses of female characters throughout O'Brien's fiction suggest a calling for a reassessment of the veracity of the woman and the family unit of the Irish Constitution as typical models in Irish society. As Margaret MacCurtain argues:

29 Dalsimer, *Kate O'Brien: A Critical Study*, p. xv.

It is rare for historical research to accomplish the task of getting a society to contemplate its own identity without the help of literature ... The clues to the position of women in Irish history are invariably present in the literature of a particular phase of Irish history.³⁰

In this context, O'Brien's texts are a valuable resource for 'clues to the position of women in Irish history', especially in the context of the model woman, as outlined in the Irish Constitution, and as underwritten by representations of Catholic women in Papal Encyclicals. The sustained political critique of the mother, with O'Brien's ironic portrayal of Una Costello and the rendering of the duplicitous Hannah Kernahan, attests to the need for a reassessment of the Catholic woman in her fiction as she conducts a sustained critique throughout her work of the influence of the Catholic Church and State on the lives of Irish women. While the aesthetic merits of *Pray for the Wanderer* can be debated, its relevance can be justified in providing a prism for a politicised reading of O'Brien's representations of women, as well as of Catholicism, in her other novels. To conclude, not only did Kate O'Brien question ideological perspectives that presume middle-class women's homogenised acceptance of their prescribed roles, she also pointed to the need for a place for the expression of female experiences in literary studies.

30 Margaret MacCurtain, 'The Historical Image', in Margaret MacCurtain, *Ariadne's Thread: Writing Women into Irish History* (Galway: Arlen House, 2008), pp. 115–138, p. 117.

A Catholic Agnostic – Kate O’Brien

In the words of Lorna Reynolds, who knew Kate O’Brien well, O’Brien was ‘a Catholic agnostic.’¹ Like some of her own characters, she was a ‘hereditary Catholic’ and a ‘Catholic pagan.’² It would be inaccurate to present O’Brien as a Catholic writer in the ordinary sense, as Joseph Mahon does in his very problematic analysis of the work of Simone de Beauvoir, where O’Brien is mentioned.³ It is possible to do a personal, *biased* reading of religious elements in a way that expands the existing approaches to O’Brien’s writing more than it diminishes them. In the last few years, Kate O’Brien has been promoted into the Irish literary canon, not because of the merits of her writing and her thinking, but because of her Catholic background.⁴ We desperately needed a token woman writer, and she was favoured for that reason. Desmond Hogan, writing in 1986, insisted that some women must be placed beside the Catholic Joyce, and suggested Mary Lavin, Kate

- 1 Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O’Brien – A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross, Bucks.: Colin Smythe, 1987), p. 118. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *K*, followed by the page number.
- 2 Kate O’Brien, *As Music and Splendour* (Penguin: Dublin, 2005), pp. 342 and 317 respectively. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *MS*, followed by the page number.
- 3 Joseph Mahon, *Simone de Beauvoir and Her Catholicism* (Dublin: Arlen House, 2002).
- 4 See Eavan Boland, ‘The Legacy of Kate O’Brien’, in *With Warmest Love – Lectures for Kate O’Brien 1984–93*, edited by John Logan (Limerick: Mellick Press, 1994; pp. 1–14), p. 7; Colm Tóibín, ‘Introduction’ to *The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction*, edited by Colm Tóibín (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999; pp. ix–xxxiv), p. xxv; Adele Dalsimer, *Kate O’Brien: A Critical Study* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1990), p. xi.

O'Brien, and Edna O'Brien.⁵ Kate O'Brien is often referred to as a Catholic writer, but it seems to me that one could as easily say that she was an anti-Catholic writer. What I want to suggest here, however, is that her work can be described as Catholic agnostic, and I want to show how such a position may be articulated in her books.

O'Brien seems overtly interested in Catholic education. This is particularly relevant after the publication, in 2009, of the Ryan Report into institutional abuse in training centres run by Catholic religious orders on behalf of the Irish State. Groups of survivors from these institutions are referring to their collective experience as 'The Irish Holocaust'. It is a pressing concern, because currently in Ireland 92 per cent of primary schools are still in the nominal control of the Catholic Church. From our perspective, Kate O'Brien's re-thinking of Catholicism, her insistence on some of the positive aspects of it, her determination to resignify some of its elements to make them useful, may seem far too generous. However, every crisis is an opportunity – an opportunity for reflection. O'Brien engaged directly and indirectly with the fateful alliance of Church and State in the early years of the Irish Republic. The book which presents her most sustained analysis of the salvageable aspects of Christianity is *The Land of Spices*. Published in 1942 (and banned by the Irish Censorship Board), the book offers a portrait of an all-female religious community, set in an Irish convent run by a French order of nuns, the Company of the Holy Family. This order appears in two other novels by O'Brien, and as far as I know it is fictitious.⁶

5 Desmond Hogan, 'Introduction' to Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* (London: Virago 1986; pp. ix–xix), p. ix.

6 As Reynolds has noted, the same Order and convent reappear, run by the same Mother-General, 'Mother Gertrude' in *The Land of Spices* and *The Flower of May*; while in *The Last of Summer*, the Order's school in Mellick is attended by Jo Kernahan, who tries to get to do novitiate in Brussels but is prevented to do so when war breaks out in 1939. Reynolds (*K*), p. 109. A 'Mother Ligouri' also reappears in a number of books – from the real nun in *Presentation Parlour* to one/several fictional ones in *Mary Lavelle*, *The Land of Spices*, and *As Music and Splendour*.

Many scholars have pointed out that this novel includes references to Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist*, but they don't seem to have realised that O'Brien is in fact re-writing that book. Where Joyce had given a portrait of unredeemable Jesuit sadism and brain-washing in an all-male school, O'Brien wanted to show how a religious, specifically Catholic, education, could have an overall positive effect. James Cahalan was the first to point out that Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is 'echoed at several points' by O'Brien in *The Land of Spices*.⁷ I agree with Ann Owens Weekes, who explains that this story 'of a young girl's development and a powerful mother's nurturing mirrors in a parodic female fashion Joyce's *Portrait*', in a 'deliberately revisionist treatment'.⁸ O'Brien goes much further than 'echoing' Joyce. In a scene providing a grand finale to the book, she offers a 're-mix' of his celebrated 'Girl on the Beach' scene, with the young co-protagonist, Anna, realising that her beautiful schoolmate Pilar can become a symbol, a motive in art.⁹ As in *Portrait*, the scene signals an awakening to the aesthetic, here with a specific and deliberate lesbian slant. The fact that O'Brien sought to revise *Portrait of the Artist* does not mean that she was being antagonistic to Joyce; actually he was one of her favourite writers, and the intertextual links are partly a homage to him. The rewrite does not mean either that O'Brien was not critical of the Church and its role in society: in *The Land of Spices*, she takes note of the cruelties and absurdities fostered in religious orders, and she condemns Catholic education as indoctrination, especially as nationalist indoctrination. What Kate O'Brien wanted to do in this novel was to present an autobiographical account of an Irish Catholic upbringing, to be placed side by side with Joyce's autobiographical account; you could argue that she gave us 'A Portrait of the Artist as Young Woman'.

7 James M. Cahalan, *The Irish Novel* (Massachusetts: Twayne, 1988), pp. 208, 217.

8 Ann Owens Weekes, *Irish Women Writers – An Uncharted Tradition* (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 1990), pp. 122, 123.

9 Kate O'Brien, *The Land of Spices* (London: Virago, 2000), pp. 271–2). All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *LS*, followed by the page number.

In the context of Joyce's attacks on the Jesuits, it is interesting that in *The Land of Spices* there are some positive references to the order, although the evaluation of Jesuit merit fluctuates in O'Brien's work.¹⁰ In *The Flower of May*, the only novel by Kate O'Brien which remains out of print, the protagonists, two young women, realise that they have an affinity when they discover that they both love Pascal (once known as the 'scourge' of the Jesuits). O'Brien is not particularly interested in setting up a contrast between the Jesuits and other orders. She is far more ambitious, because she wants to re-draft the role of religious education itself. In *The Land of Spices*, religious education is understood as the promotion of 'modesty and good manners'. 'La pudeur et la politesse', this is the motto of the school attended by the co-protagonist, little Ana Murphy, who is to become an artist.¹¹ Modesty and good manners tend to be standard requirements in ethical behaviour in general, they are not specifically Catholic. Furthermore, it is not a coincidence either that the Reverend Mother in the novel, who is the co-protagonist, has no religious vocation at all. Nor is it a coincidence that this nun, Helen, seems to be an autobiographical portrait. As Clare Boylan observed: 'One of [Kate O'Brien's] acquaintances once said: "What she really wanted most in life was to be a Reverend Mother"'.¹² Presenting

10 In *The Land of Spices*, apart from the nuns, we also find a few Jesuits, who rate quite highly in the novel. O'Brien (*LS*), pp. 26, 177; but see also p. 251. The Jesuits have a surprisingly low profile in O'Brien's Basque novel, *Mary Lavelle*, even though the protagonist's brother Tom is about to join the order, and in spite of the fact that the novel is set in the Basque Country; the Jesuits were founded by the Basque Ignatius of Loyola, and O'Brien seems to have read a famous anti-Jesuit novel by Vicente Blasco Ibañez, *The Intruder*, published in 1904. This novel not only uses the same setting, but also some of the same historical characters that O'Brien uses in *Mary Lavelle*. Vicente Blasco Ibañez, *El Intruso* (Barakaldo: Ediciones de Librería San Antonio, 1999). Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago, 2000). All subsequent references to *Mary Lavelle* will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *ML*, followed by the page number.

11 The first mention of the motto appears on O'Brien (*LS*), p. 57.

12 Clare Boylan, 'Introduction' to O'Brien (*LS*) (vii–xii), p. xii. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *I*, followed by the page number.

politeness and modesty as the goals of a Christian education is a blatant agnostification.

O'Brien is proposing a radical change. Hugh McFadden concedes that *The Land of Spices* is 'a subtly feminist book', while Elisabeth Butler Cullingford describes it as a blatant lesbian feminist activist novel.¹³ I agree with both. Discreetly but firmly, the novel puts forward a radical agenda. It contains, to paraphrase Virginia Woolf, enough powder to blow up Saint Patrick's.¹⁴ Margaret Lawrence had already discussed the intersection of feminism and Catholicism in O'Brien. She did it in a fascinating book of feminist literary criticism, called *We Write as Women* in the English edition,¹⁵ which sadly is now forgotten. First published in 1936, the book only dealt with O'Brien's first two novels, *Without my Cloak* and *The Anteroom*. Lawrence highlights already the profound religiosity in O'Brien's work, claiming that '[t]here has been no writer in our time who has put into writing the sheer romance of religion as she has given it in *The Anteroom*'.¹⁶ Lawrence sees Catholicism as a 'matriarchal' doctrine and practice, and claims of *The Anteroom*, that 'in presenting a story deeply imbued with the passion of Catholicism, Kate O'Brien presented the supreme manifesta-

13 Hugh McFadden (ed.), 'Introduction' and Notes, *Crystal Clear: The Selected Prose of John Jordan*. (Dublin: The Lilliput Press, 2006; 'Introduction', pp. 4–17), p. 406. Elisabeth Butler Cullingford, "'Our Nuns are not a Nation": Politicizing the Convent in Irish Literature and Film', in *Irish Postmodernisms and Popular Culture*, edited by Wanda Balzano et al (London: Palgrave, 2007), pp. 55–73.

14 Referring to her feminist treatise *Three Guineas*, Virginia Woolf wrote in her diary (16 February 1932): 'I have collected enough powder to blow up St Pauls'. Quoted in Michèle Barrett, 'Introduction' to Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own/Three Guineas* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993; pp. ix–liii), p. x.

15 The title of the version published in England, from 1937. The first edition, published in Canada in 1936, was entitled 'The School of Femininity: A book for and about women, as they are interpreted (sic) through feminine writers of yesterday and today'. Margaret Lawrence, *We Write as Women* (London: Michael Joseph, 1937). All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *W*, followed by the page number.

16 Lawrence (*W*), p. 200.

tion of matriarchy.¹⁷ Such an unusual intersection between feminism and theology perhaps exemplifies the interest in re-evaluating politics, found among writers and critics of the 1930s.

In this context, the community portrayed in *The Land of Spices* may be seen as a 'model' for social re-structuring. O'Brien was particularly interested in monastic communitarianism in the Middle Ages. She was not alone in this. There was an interest in medievalism in general among the modernists – and O'Brien was definitely a modernist writer in my view. Irish modernists, from the painter Mainie Jellett to the poet Austin Clarke, were particularly interested in a sort of mythical 'Celtic Christianity' which they associated with a non-materialistic, non-hierarchical, communitarian, and artistically-minded way of life.¹⁸ On one occasion, O'Brien referred to medieval monastic Ireland as 'a kind of utopia'.¹⁹

The very idea of European modernity can be seen to represent a historic break with paganism.²⁰ In the late nineteenth century, the term 'modernist' was used to describe a person who believed that God was not the object of science, because God was beyond reason (as there is no rational proof or basis for his existence). This was referred to as 'the modernist view', and it inspired irate documents from the head of the Catholic church (Pio X's 1898 'PASCENDI' and 'Lamentabili sane'), as well as innumerable essays, manifestos, and debates instigated by supporters.²¹ It is worth stressing the fact that educated people from the early modernist generation, such as Henry James or John Millington Synge, were the first ones to leave the Christian Church en masse, encouraged by Charles Darwin's theory of

17 Lawrence (*W*), p. 201; see also p. 202.

18 On Clarke, see Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland: The Literature of the Modern Nation* (London: Vintage, 1996), p. 464.

19 Kate O'Brien, *My Ireland* (London: Batsford, 1962), p. 25. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *MI*, followed by the page number.

20 See Jurgen Habermas, 'Modernity versus Postmodernity', in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge (Ma): MIT Press), p. 3.

21 See Manuel Vitoria Ortiz, *Vida y Obra del Doctor Areilza* ['Life and Work of Doctor Areilza'] (Bilbao: La Gran Enciclopedia Vasca, 1975), p. 288.

evolution, which was seen to be incompatible with Church teachings. The very vocal atheism of respected figures such as Leslie Stephen in England or Miguel de Unamuno in Spain made an enormous impact on the Western cultural map of the late nineteenth century.

One of the most interesting aspects of modernist literature is its clash with official religion. Agnostic and atheist writers were often militantly hostile in their depiction of believers. However, spirituality played an important role in modernism (for example through an emphasis on revelatory moments or 'epiphanies'), as did a number of religious beliefs and practices at variance with social norms, such as those investigated in WB Yeats' *A Vision*, of 1925.²² A spiritual inflection is also clear in the medievalising impetus of much modernist art. As early as 1917, one of the main theorists of Cubism, Albert Gleizes, was linking Cubism and medieval art.²³ Irish painters Mainie Jellett and Evie Hone went to France to work with Glazies in 1921, and it has been claimed that they helped him develop and fine-tune his cubist theories about 'translation and rotation'.²⁴ Jellett and Hone introduced cubism and abstraction to Ireland and the UK, in exhibitions from the early nineteen twenties. Jellett once said that painting was itself 'akin to the old Celtic tradition, the pre-renaissance tradition of the Christian era of Italy and France and to the eastern tradition of Egypt, India, China and Japan, and opposed to the materialistic tradition of the late Renaissance'.²⁵ In her notes for a lecture in Dublin, she explained:

22 W.B. Yeats, *A Critical Edition of Yeats's A Vision (1925)*, edited by Margaret Mills Harper and Walter Kelly Hood. (London: Macmillan, 1978). A substantially revised edition was published by Yeats in 1962.

23 S.B. Kennedy, *Irish Art & Modernism 1880–1950* (Belfast: The Queen's University of Belfast, 1991), p. 36. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *IA*, followed by the page number.

24 Kennedy (*IA*), pp. 36–37. See also Anne Dangar, quoted in Bruce Arnold, *Mainie Jellett and the Modern Movement in Ireland* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. 104–105. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *MJ*, followed by the page number.

25 Quoted in Kenneth McConkey, *A Free Spirit – Irish Art (1860–1960)* (Woodbridge: Antique Collectors Club, 1990), pp. 200–201.

I will try to point out the similarity of ideals between the art of the modern movement (headquarters Paris) and the ideals inspiring Celtic art, and try and show that if we could only open our eyes to the truth behind Celtic art and the treasure house we have in this country in what it has left us, we might then become conscious of a reality that would give our art a national character.²⁶

Also in literature, the intersection between religion and modernism had specific characteristics in Ireland, where the clash with Christianity was attenuated in some ways and exacerbated in others, because of the religious component of colonisation, the literary revival, and de Valera's State censorship. For example, a modernist manifesto titled 'To All Artists and Writers', published by the Irish Cecil Salkeld and Francis Stuart in 1924, opened thus:

We are Catholics, but of the school of Pope Julius the Second and of the Medician Popes, who ordered Michaelangelo and Raphael to paint upon the walls of the Vatican, and upon the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, the doctrine of the Platonic Academy of Florence, the reconciliation of Galilee and Parnassus. (...) We proclaim that we can forgive the sinner, but abhor the atheist, and that we count among atheists bad writers and bishops of all denominations.²⁷

Most Irish modernists of the period went further back, to the Middle Ages, in another version of the pre-Christian Celticism of the Irish Revival. O'Brien's generation stole the time-machine of the revivalists, and travelled to another point in time, which was also pre-colonial, and was also pre-reformation. De Valeraism, however, determined the relationship between artists, religion and the state, in quite a different way. Lorna Reynolds summarised O'Brien's position:

Apart from the damage to her own reputation which the vagaries of the new Calvinism in Irish society caused, Kate O'Brien did not like the illiberal, self-complacent and Puritanic society that developed in Ireland in the thirties and forties of [the twentieth

26 Quoted by Arnold (*MJ*), p. 181.

27 C. Salkeld and F. Stuart, 'To All Artists and Writers', in David Pierce (ed.), *Irish Writing in the Twentieth Century: A Reader* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2000).

century]. She saw de Valera as a milder, more skilful variant of the dictators that had come to power in so many countries in Europe.²⁸

Celtic medievalism also offered an Irish uniqueness and a specific association with art, as well as a European dimension, since it relied on connections with the world – that is, the Christian world, Europe. Celtic medievalism was associated with manuscript illumination, which could be read as an avant-garde art form, and could be reclaimed as foundational Irish. In addition to all this, much medievalism was often related to monastic communitarianism, which was of particular interest to the many artists committed to leftist politics around the 1930s, including Kate O'Brien.

Cloistered orders don't play a big part in O'Brien's work, however. In the novel *The Last of Summer*, Jo is having some doubts about becoming a nun, after having completed an MA thesis on the topic of 'Humanism and the Benedictine Rule.'²⁹ Perhaps there is something interchangeable about those two, which may just mean that the Benedictine Rule has been superseded. Cloistered nuns are the subject of O'Brien's group biography *Presentation Parlour*.³⁰ It offers the portraits of five of her aunts, who joined the Presentation order in Limerick, yet the book thoroughly de-mystifies a religious calling. Being a nun, as O'Brien said, can be 'an enigmatic business.'³¹ Sometimes, taking up the habit seems a matter of available options, rather than a vocation. In *Presentation Parlour*, she says of her nun aunt 'Mick': '[h]ad she lived in London she would have been a pioneer and militant suffragette, I have no doubt.'³² It is interesting that, in *The Land of Spices*, Miss Robertson, who is actually a suffragette, makes exactly the

28 Reynolds (*K*), pp. 75–76.

29 Kate O'Brien, *The Last of Summer* (London: Virago, 1989), p. 174. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *LoS*, followed by the page number.

30 Kate O'Brien, *Presentation Parlour* (London: House of Stratus, 2001). All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *PP*, followed by the page number.

31 O'Brien (*LS*), p. 230.

32 O'Brien (*PP*), p. 98.

same claim about Reverend Mother.³³ Helen Archer, Reverend Mother, ‘went into religion’, we are told, ‘with a merciless heart.’³⁴ She became a nun partly as an act of revenge on her father, after discovering that he was gay; in a way, after discovering sex for the first time.

In Kate O’Brien, religious life is presented very emphatically as an option for women who will otherwise have no access to education or prospects, or, as Clare Boylan put it, to ‘autonomy and authority.’³⁵ But it is also an option for those uninterested in (or even hostile to) sexuality. In O’Brien’s last novel, *Clare*, an impoverished immigrant in Rome, declares:

I see now some explanation of the tendency of my race – the Irish, I mean – to become nuns and priests (...). Many imaginations are too extended to passion. The Irish imagination is a bit lopsided, maybe. Anyway, it isn’t at all like the Latin – we are alarmed by the power and stretch of feeling (...). We don’t find it amusing to be in love – that’s why we are so awkward. We are not Mediterranean.³⁶

Kate O’Brien wrote a film script for a movie that was never produced, called *Mary Magdalen*.³⁷ In the script, Mary is a young woman, wealthy and well educated. She is also a serial monogamist, she is intelligent, independent, and self-assured. Even though the film is set at the time of Christ, Mary behaves like a modern woman from the 1920s; she is reminiscent of what they used to call a ‘flapper’. This is not the only striking update in the film, which also suggests that Mary Magdalen and Mary of Bethlehem were in fact one. O’Brien is not saying that the Magdalen gave birth to Jesus, but rather that the Marian tradition in Catholicism was inspired by Mary Magdalen, and that some of the Magdalen’s qualities have been attributed or transferred to the Virgin Mary.³⁸ Mary Magdalen was an important

33 O’Brien (*LS*), p. 206.

34 O’Brien (*LS*), p. 160.

35 Boylan (*I*), p. viii.

36 O’Brien (*ML*), pp. 209–210.

37 Kate O’Brien, *Mary Magdalen* (Undated Filmscript, National Library of Ireland, Doc. 19, 703).

38 For other radical Mariologies in literature, see Ruth Vanita, *Sappho and the Virgin Mary: Same-Sex Love and the English Literary Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

figure in the early Christian Church, despite being later sidelined by the hierarchy, and O’Brien’s hypothesis is imaginative, provocative, and plausible. Her interest in reclaiming the Magdalen exemplifies O’Brien’s attitude towards Christianity.

The most important religious figure in Kate O’Brien’s work is, however, the sixteenth-century counter-reformation leader, poet, and mystic Teresa of Avila, reformer of the Carmelite order. O’Brien wrote a biography of this Catholic saint, which managed to sideline Teresa’s importance as a religious figure. And this is also the case when Teresa is invoked in a number of other O’Brien books. In *The Land of Spices*, for example, Helen wishes she had ‘[Teresa’s] guile’, while in *That Lady* the protagonist is interested in Teresa as ‘character in action’, and in *The Flower of May* she is described as ‘troublesome.’³⁹ Eleanor, one of the characters in this last novel, explains that Teresa is the opposite of the ‘vulgar and popular saints.’⁴⁰ What is that supposed to mean? In her political travel book, *Farewell Spain*, O’Brien explains that the idiosyncratic and unpopular Teresa was ‘everything.’⁴¹ ‘Everything’, it seems, except a nun and a mystic.

[S]he was everything – preacher, teacher, lawyer, cashier, politician, poet, tramp and charwoman. She was the best cook in all her twelve convents (...) [S]he was a formidable match for inquisitor or Salamancan doctor. She was a fighter and a schemer, a soldier and a most subtle diplomat. (...) She was a communist (...). She was a feminist.⁴²

This is a good example of O’Brien’s Catholic *agnosticification*.

39 O’Brien (*LS*), p. 102. Kate O’Brien, *That Lady* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 116. Kate O’Brien, *The Flower of May* (London: Heinemann, 1953), p. 39. All subsequent references will be to these editions and will be denoted in brackets by *TL* and *FM* respectively, followed by the page number.

40 O’Brien (*FM*), p. 39.

41 Kate O’Brien, *Farewell Spain* (London: Virago, 1985), p. 109. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *FS*, followed by the page number.

42 O’Brien (*FS*), pp. 109–110.

In *The Flower of May*, the co-protagonist Fanny tells Sister Eucharia that it must be marvellous '[t]o have a vocation – any kind of vocation'. The nun replies: 'Is it? (...) I expect it might be useful, in a way.'⁴³ By contrast to this lack of enthusiasm among religious people, in O'Brien's work most lay people have a spiritual side to them. Henry Archer for example is an expert in English Christian metaphysical poets of the early seventeenth century. His wife, reflecting on his temperament and his occupation, declares at one point: 'religious understanding is really a gift, like a singing voice – and [it] can be wasted.'⁴⁴ I think that Sharon Tighe-Mooney is correct when she says that there is a sense in which Kate O'Brien 'envied those who had faith.'⁴⁵ Consider the following explanation, from a secondary character in O'Brien's first novel, the Jesuit scholastic Martin Devoy:

He had an extraordinary faith in the Catholic Church. No intellectual appeal – and he did not shut his ears to any – could overcome his need for and therefore his belief in the institution that he saw his Church to be. (...) He was in fact enamoured of the Church as a man may be of an incompatible mistress. She could not disillusion him because he carried his own image of her in his heart. He saw her, could only see her, as he wanted her to be, and out of his love was impassioned to defend her questionable history.⁴⁶

O'Brien certainly supplied us with plenty of models to teach us how to live like a nun or a monk, without being one, in the twentieth century. There are countless lay versions of religious people in her work. Austerity is often a marker, as in the characters Clare Halvey, Agatha Conlan, or Henry Archer, for example. Henry says that, in his friends, he likes 'indifference

43 O'Brien (*FM*), p. 261. Canon Whelan in the same novel is equally despondent (see p. 267).

44 O'Brien (*LS*), p. 155.

45 Sharon Tighe-Mooney, 'Sexuality and Religion in Kate O'Brien's Fiction', in *Essays in Irish Literary Criticism: Themes of Gender, Sexuality, and Corporeality*, edited by Deirdre Quinn and Sharon Tighe-Mooney (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), pp. 125–139, p. 131.

46 Kate O'Brien, *Without My Cloak* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 129. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *WC*, followed by the page number.

to non-essentials'.⁴⁷ That is the kind of austerity that O'Brien is interested in. Not penance, nor solidarity with the poor, but a form of transcendence. And O'Brien gives warnings about the 'misuse' of austerity. For example, in *The Last of Summer*, Angèle sees in the very Irish air: 'an arrogance of austerity, contempt for personal feeling, coldness and perhaps fear of idiosyncrasy'.⁴⁸ The austerity of many of O'Brien's characters is also the expression of a general sense of detachment. Perhaps the key word in the work of O'Brien, 'detachment' has many different connotations for her: financial, philosophical, emotional, political, sexual. Detachment is crucial to the temperament of, among many others, Angèle Maury, Agnes Mulqueen, or Helen Archer. At one point, for example, Helen, who is a Belgian nun living in Limerick, is reflecting on Irish nationalism, and decides that she 'would as little forego [detachment] in her thought as undertake living without sleep'.⁴⁹

If detachment can be read as a-nationalism, it can also translate as celibacy. We see this most clearly in Don Pablo in *Mary Lavelle*, or aunt Eleanor in *The Flower of May*. Sometimes, this detached self-sufficiency is expressed physically in an in-apprehensibility, a transcending of the body, again. For example, the suffragette Miss Robertson is not only 'a bit saintly looking',⁵⁰ but also thin, like the 'starved and dreamy' Agatha Conlan,⁵¹ or Agatha's double, Nieves Areavaga, who is a 'thin' and 'shameless dreamer'.⁵² Fanny Morrow is often 'hardly visible' to onlookers.⁵³ Anna Hennessy is thought of as 'a lovely ghost',⁵⁴ and so on. Some of these characters have considered, or indeed have attempted, the religious life. For example, Christina in *Without My Cloak*, Ana in *That Lady*, Eleanor in *The Flower*

47 O'Brien (*LS*), pp. 150, 151.

48 She adds: 'in this most voluptuously beautiful and unusual land'. O'Brien (*LoS*), p. 5.

49 O'Brien (*LS*), p. 75.

50 O'Brien (*LS*), p. 206.

51 O'Brien (*ML*), p. 200.

52 O'Brien (*ML*), p. 16; see p. 17.

53 O'Brien (*FM*), p. 5.

54 O'Brien (*WC*), p. 463.

of *May*, no less than three characters in *As Music and Splendour*, Clare, Duarte, and Paddy, and another three in *Mary Lavelle*, aunt Cissy, Agatha, and Milagros.⁵⁵ There are two ‘failed nuns’ in *Mary Lavelle*, Aunt Cissy, who as a result has a ‘romantic aura,’⁵⁶ and Agatha, who has considered joining the Carmelite convent in Bilbo (or Bilbao, ‘Altorno’ in the novel), but has come to realise that she is ‘not saintly, just religious.’⁵⁷ In the same novel, the teenager Milagros Areavaga is considering becoming a nun,⁵⁸ although she is undecided between this and becoming ‘one of Spain’s great men.’⁵⁹ In O’Brien, then, religious life can be a career, and it can even be a ‘lifestyle’ choice, independent from faith and religion.

In O’Brien, religious life can also be an option for those who seek vulnerable people that they can abuse. This is the case with Don Jorge, in *Mary Lavelle*, who is a priest and a child molester. It is remarkable that O’Brien talks explicitly about the sexual abuse of children in a number of occasions in her work.⁶⁰ Don Jorge, who is a super-villain, is far more self-assured and clever than our meek heroine, the timid and doubt-ridden governess Mary Lavelle. When he is exposed, he does not defend himself, but instead questions Mary’s moral authority to condemn him. Mary, who is in love with a married man, considers Don Jorge’s argument and is troubled by its logic. O’Brien likes to disturb preconceptions, it is part of her ethical project. Some of her conservative priests, bishops, and cardinals, are intelligent and articulate.⁶¹ In turn, her pagans tend to be deferent towards

55 It is interesting that Christina wanted to be a lay-nun but her aunt gets sick and she must care for her instead (see O’Brien (*WC*), p. 294); a similar decision is taken by aunt Eleanor in *The Flower of May*.

56 Cissy’s past grants her ‘a romantic, “apart” aura in Mellick’ O’Brien (*ML*), p. 23.

57 O’Brien (*ML*), p. 207.

58 See O’Brien (*ML*), p. 16.

59 O’Brien (*ML*), p. 64.

60 For example, in *The Land of Spices*, in *The Last of Summer*, and in her short story ‘Manna’. Kate O’Brien, ‘Manna’ (Unpublished short story, 1962, ‘Kate O’Brien Papers’, University of Limerick, Doc. 145).

61 Even though both Father Conroy and the Bishop get a slap in the wrist in *The Land of Spices*, they are at least intelligent and well-meaning (always appreciated in O’Brien’s work). In *That Lady*, the cardinal is one of the few characters in the novel to realise

Christianity, just as she was. I agree with Adele Dalsimer that O’Brien treats Irish Catholicism ‘with the utmost credibility and respect.’⁶²

In every one of her novels, protagonists are tormented by the moral code of Catholicism, yet they also explicitly state the usefulness of that moral code because of its very precision. In *As Music and Splendour*, for example, we are told that ‘like every well-taught Irish child, [Rose] knew her catechism; so she knew where she stood, she knew that she alone was responsible for her sins.’⁶³ Mary Lavelle and her friends are, as Emma Donoghue has pointed out, ‘early à la carte Catholic[s].’⁶⁴ They stay within the church, but will not allow its moral code to cancel their experiments. In the same way, Clare Halvey and her friends decide to ‘[s]ing away – and take the consequences.’⁶⁵ This is in O’Brien’s last novel, where *sinning* is coded as *singing*. So, when these characters decide to ‘sing away’, what we should be hearing is, that they will *sin* away regardless. However, they will also *sin away*. Away from Ireland, that is. Mary in the Basque Country, and Clare in Italy.

In 1937, O’Brien published *Farewell Spain* to raise awareness of the threat to democracy in Europe after the military rising in Spain. It is in this book that we find O’Brien’s most explicit support for any political ideology. It happens to be also one of the most surprising examples of her use of Christianity as a kind of shorthand; in this case, for a politics, or rather an activism, of everyday life. Before the fascist uprising, Spain was swept along by a revolutionary movement, made up of a number of people on the left, including communists, anarchists, Marxists. On one occasion, travelling

that the protagonist, imprisoned because of her refusal to surrender to the whims of the king, is ‘fighting quite simply for [her own] idea of human conduct’. O’Brien (*TL*), p. 323.

62 Dalsimer (*K*), p. 25.

63 O’Brien (*MS*), p. 317.

64 Emma Donoghue, “‘Out of Order’: Kate O’Brien’s Lesbian Fictions”, in *Ordinary People Dancing – Essays on Kate O’Brien*, edited by Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), pp. 36–59, p. 47. Donoghue uses the expression to refer specifically to Agatha Conlan.

65 O’Brien (*MS*), p. 263. Some characters from *Mary Lavelle* are redrafted into O’Brien’s last novel.

in Spain, O'Brien hears a non-Spanish person telling foreign visitors that the police force is the only thing separating Spain from absolute anarchy. Even today, the word anarchy is often used, inaccurately, as a synonym of chaos; in the context of political theory it simply means a horizontal (non-hierarchical, non-centralised) rather than vertical form of organisation. When O'Brien hears a man referring to post-revolutionary chaos and lawlessness as 'absolute anarchy', she replies: "[A]bsolute anarchy" – oh, my friend (...), don't you know that that impossible condition of life would be Heaven – Heaven on earth?⁶⁶ Most anarchists would see religion as something incompatible with their ideas.⁶⁷ Strikingly, however, O'Brien claims that there is a fundamental similarity between anarchism and Christianity. '[O]ne may believe in anarchy, as in Catholicism, because it is impossible', she declares,⁶⁸ and explains:

As a man may be a fool in Christ, he may be a fool in his brother, and if mad for the love of God, so also mad for the love of man. Credo quia absurdum is a tautological axiom. You do not believe in Fascism. You see it and it is difficult to be as mystical about it as the old gentleman was, who, looking at a giraffe, protested his disbelief in it. You can like Fascism if that is the kind of thing you like. But you needn't exert yourself to believe in it. Nor, for the same reason, need you believe in Communism. But, as [the anarchist] Don Angél (sic) said [to me], no one has seen the Kingdom of God. No human agency has demonstrated it. Therefore it may be believed in.⁶⁹

This is, again, as we have come to expect from O'Brien, an original and exciting analogy. Being an anarchist is a way of being. Being a Christian is a way of being.

By and large, socialism has been associated with anti-clericalism. The nineteenth century, however, saw the emergence of a brand of anarchism

66 O'Brien (*FS*), p. 33.

67 Elsewhere in the book, O'Brien discusses the 'saintly' anarchist lighthouse-keeper Don Angel who considers religion to be obsolete. She disagrees. O'Brien (*FS*), p. 63.

68 Political idealism is important in the travelogue's companion book, *Mary Lavelle*, where Luisa's conservative politics differ from those of her communist husband Juanito. Despite her loyalty, she is contemptuous of his theories, but tolerates them 'because she knew them to be impossible of realisation'. O'Brien (*ML*), p. 165.

69 Emphasis in original. O'Brien (*FS*), p. 35.

known as 'Christian anarchism', developed, among others, by the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. One of the characters in *Mary Lavelle*, Juan, is a Catholic communist; his father, Pablo, is a Christian anarchist, whose 'difficult creed' is described at length in the novel: 'He was a loather of institutions, but he believed in the human spirit; he regarded the existent Catholic Church with profound suspicion, but he accorded to its ideals [,] and to much of its tradition and unwithholdable inbred devotion.'⁷⁰ The word 'inbred', in this context, is something of a pin in a cushion. One is reminded of O'Brien's description of some of her characters as 'hereditary Catholic[s]', which has the unmistakable ring of a genetically transmitted disease.⁷¹ Perhaps that is what's behind the agnostic O'Brien's claim, in *Farewell Spain*, that: 'I [am] a Catholic in all my blood.'⁷² In Kate O'Brien, whether you are infected, a carrier, at risk, in remission, or in recovery, faith is a problem. In *Mary Lavelle*, for example, the communist Juan is 'unable to *escape* his personal faith in the Catholic Church', and this is a 'problem to be worked out, as his father [Pablo] had'.⁷³

With such a variety of de-Catholicisations, in a context of general agnostification, you may be wondering if there are any actual declared non-believers in O'Brien's work. They are rare, but we have some. Incidentally, they all live abroad. Lorna Reynolds made the point that O'Brien would have described loss of faith in Ireland, but she could not, because she knew that such a novel would be instantly banned⁷⁴ (so these characters also 'sin away'). We have Matt Costello in *Pray for the Wanderer*, the atheist who is often read as a self-portrait of the author.⁷⁵ There is Thomas Evans in *As Music and Splendour*, 'an atheist flung out from Baptist chapels'.⁷⁶ And there is Fanny Murrow in *The Flower of May*, who is agnostic – or, as she describes

70 O'Brien (*ML*), p. 61.

71 See O'Brien (*MS*), p. 342, and Kate O'Brien, *The Ante-Room* (London: Virago, 2006), p. 67.

72 O'Brien (*FS*), p. 95.

73 Emphasis added. O'Brien (*ML*), p. 63.

74 Reynolds (*K*), p. 118.

75 See Reynolds (*K*), p. 37.

76 O'Brien (*MS*), p. 206; see also p. 107.

herself, 'indecisive'.⁷⁷ Clare, in *As Music and Splendour*, claims that 'I'm not a fervent believer, I never was, even as a small child. But Confession and all the rest – it's a discipline. I suppose that I have in spite of myself what Grandmother calls "The Faith". If I have, I'm glad'.⁷⁸ All of these characters are lapsed Catholics. They have a very strong sense of ethics, so similar to Catholic morality that it can be read perhaps as a relic of their days in the church. But there is a difference in O'Brien: to her, ethics are always an individual matter, which gives her work not only a left-libertarian emphasis, but perhaps also a Protestant one. In fact, in her fiction, individual rules of conduct always start with the scrupulous respect towards other individuals and their private judgement. A key scene in O'Brien's last novel is the moment when the lesbian and agnostic Clare Halvey is lying in bed, and her double Thomas, a homophobe and an atheist – a character who represents another side of herself – approaches her bed and asks:

'Have you any chance of absolution?'

'None at all.'

He stood up, and pushed her gently back onto her pillow, and then he bent down and kissed her.

'Ego te absolvo' he said, and smiled and went.⁷⁹

To Kate O'Brien, Catholic-agnostic, Catholicism was very often toxic; but also, and always, recyclable.

77 O'Brien (*FM*), p. 261.

78 O'Brien (*MS*), p. 142.

79 O'Brien (*MS*), p. 156.

JAMES SILAS ROGERS

Edwin O'Connor's Language of Grace

In recent years, the Irish-American novelist Edwin O'Connor (1918–1968) – often dismissed as little more than a local colourist of the Boston Irish, and still best remembered for the quirk of having coined the phrase 'last hurrah' – has enjoyed at least a modest rediscovery.¹ In 2003, the Catholic University of America Press released Charles Duffy's exemplary critical biography of O'Connor, *A Family of His Own*.² In 2006 the distinguished critic and essayist Ralph McInerny included O'Connor in his essay collection *Some Catholic Writers*, which followed on the 2005 Loyola Press reissue, in its Christian Classic series, of what is easily O'Connor's best book, *The Edge of Sadness* (1961); the reprint is glowingly introduced by the contemporary Catholic novelist Ron Hansen.³

O'Connor was blessed with both a talent for mockery and a flawless ear for bombastic language. These authorial gifts secured his popularity, but also obscured his more serious intents; like many another Irish writer, he seems consigned to a sort of presumed jocularity, rendering invisible his deeper purposes, and – in the case of *The Edge of Sadness* – his theological concerns. O'Connor publicly asserted that there was no such thing as a Catholic novel, insisting that 'There are Catholics who write novels – that is all'.⁴

1 An earlier version of this essay appeared as 'The Edge of Sadness: Grace, Duality, and Words of Blessing' in *U.S. Catholic Historian*, 23:3 (2005), pp. 57–70.

2 Charles Duffy, *A Family of His Own: A Life of Edwin O'Connor* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2003).

3 Ralph McInerny, *Some Catholic Writers* (Notre Dame: St Augustine's Press, 2006); Edwin O'Connor, *The Edge of Sadness* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2005).

4 Duffy, *A Family of His Own*, p. 248.

But in theme and content, *The Edge of Sadness* belies that claim – even before the novel begins, in fact, by its dedication to Frank O'Malley (1909–1974). O'Malley was the most influential teacher of the humanities in American Catholic higher education during the twentieth century. His instruction of the future novelist at Notre Dame in the 1930s introduced O'Connor to the giants of modern Catholic literature, including Waugh, Greene, and Mauriac. O'Connor absorbed the literature of Christian Humanism from this legendary professor, who taught the Catholic novel as one that stressed the divided nature of the human person – fallen yet redeemed, natural yet transcendent, living in a world that is not home. O'Malley sought to articulate a distinctly Catholic, as opposed to a merely parochial, approach to literature.⁵

The Edge of Sadness is arguably the 'most Irish' of O'Connor's five novels, and undoubtedly his most Catholic work of fiction – and not solely because its narrator, Fr Hugh Kennedy, is a priest. There is an interiority in the narrative voice that links the telling of the story to an examination of conscience. At a certain level the novel – like Bernanos's *Diary of a County Priest* – can be read as a meditation on daily 'ennui', in which sins are by no means scarlet. Ron Hansen notes that the novel evokes 'the age-old maladies of selfishness, lethargy, and bleakness of soul'.⁶

Over the course of a ruminative, digression-filled narrative, O'Connor refracts his religious concerns through a distinctly Irish preoccupation with language. In O'Connor's hands, speech, and the changing nature of talk in succeeding generations of Irish Americans, becomes a sort of cultural barometer that describes an ethnic community in transition. As

5 On O'Malley, see: Arnold Sparr, *Frank O'Malley: Thinker, Critic, Revivalist* (Notre Dame: Charles and Margaret Hall Cushwa Center for the Study of American Catholicism, Working Papers Series, 14: 2 (1983); John W. Meaney, *O'Malley of Notre Dame* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991). After establishing himself as a writer, O'Connor returned to Notre Dame many times to lecture in O'Malley's classes. In the novel that is the subject of this article, O'Connor also included an alcoholic priest character who is unmistakably modeled on his former teacher. See Duffy, pp. 256–58.

6 Ron Hansen, 'Introduction', *The Edge of Sadness* (2005), p. xii.

Charles Fanning points out, a distinctly Irish preoccupation with speech and with storytelling, in which 'talk itself is of paramount concern', is one of the book's central themes.⁷ The concern with speech, both public and private, similarly inflects the novel's religious dimension.

Catholicism, and the Irish-American subculture it shaped, is a conspicuous motif in *The Edge of Sadness*. Three important characters are diocesan priests: the narrator, Father Hugh Kennedy,⁸ his curate, Father Stanley Danowski, and his closest friend, Father John Carmody. The novel accurately portrays the external pieties of late-1950s American Catholicism; at the end of the book, when Kennedy rededicates himself to his vocation, *The Edge of Sadness* can also be said to depict the inner experiences of grace and redemption – though again, as a discreet sort of grace, rather than a thunderclap. The novel's near-sociological examination of Irish America relies on its evocation of Irish speech, as *Time* magazine noted when it commended O'Connor for capturing 'the tangy, smoky drift of Irish talk'.⁹ But *The Edge of Sadness* undertakes a solemn reckoning with language. O'Connor's religious sensibilities understood language – in its multiple, diverging, and occasionally contradictory modes – as a mirror

7 Charles Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America: 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 2000), p. 319.

8 Anyone alert to Irish-American history will suspect that there is more than coincidence at work in the selection of the main character's name, given that the book appeared in the opening year of JFK's presidency – a period in which American Irish Catholics occupied the positions of President, Attorney General, Postmaster General, Speaker of the House, and President of the United States Senate. There is no doubt that America's Irish Catholics enjoyed a cachet in those years unseen at any other period. However, the Duffy biography makes no claim that the novelist was capitalising on the currency of the US President's name, and indeed goes to considerable lengths to show that O'Connor's next novel, *All in the Family* (1966), about a prominent New England political family named Kinsella, was not a roman à clef on the Kennedys. On the Irish dimensions of the Kennedy years, see William V. Shannon, *The American Irish: A Political and Social History* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), pp. 392–431.

9 'Something About the Irish', review of *The Edge of Sadness*, *Time*, 9 June 1961, p. 90.

for the divided nature of the human person. Something close to what the Jungian theorist James Hillman terms ‘the angel aspect of the word’, a sense that ‘Words, like angels ... have their own guarding, blaspheming, creating, and annihilating effects’,¹⁰ can be found in O’Connor’s most nuanced and successful novel.

Many commentators have observed that O’Connor’s books all tell a story of sudden collapse. For example, in *The Last Hurrah* (1956), the collapse is that of a political machine, and the slight novel *I Was Dancing* (1964) relates how a delinquent parent’s naive hope to rejoin his abandoned family is dashed. In *The Edge of Sadness*, what collapses is the spiritual inertia of the narrator. The sudden redemption that closes the book is intimately connected with O’Connor’s attitudes towards language – for it comes about through the rarest of commodities in Irish life, plain speech.

Set in an unnamed Eastern city, *The Edge of Sadness* describes a liminal ethnic milieu, a moment between generations. The Irish Americans who fill the book have vivid memories, through their parents and grandparents, of an earlier cohesive community. As they look at the well-educated and upwardly mobile Irish Americans of the next generation, they take pride in saying, as one does, that they are ‘a long, long way from the immigrants’,¹¹ even while they recognise that the old way of life is being refined out of existence.

As an early attempt to portray a Catholic cleric as a human, flawed, multidimensional individual, *The Edge of Sadness* is comparable to – though less jaded, and not quite so masterfully drawn – the priest stories of J.F. Powers with which it is roughly contemporary. Fr Hugh Kennedy has been exiled to a shabby inner-city parish after alcoholism causes him to lose a comfortable pastorate in a familiar Irish neighbourhood. Additionally, although it lacks the life-and-death urgency of Graham Greene’s *The Power and the Glory* that appeared two decades earlier, there can be little doubt

10 James Hillman, ‘The Poetic Basis of Mind’, in *A Blue Fire*, edited by Thomas Moore (New York: Harper & Row, 1989), pp. 28–29.

11 Edwin O’Connor, *The Edge of Sadness* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1961), p. 265; all subsequent quotations will be to this edition and will be denoted in brackets by *EOS*, followed by the page number.

that O’Connor would have had the example of the ‘whisky priest’ in mind as he created the character of an alcoholic cleric. O’Connor’s novel draws our attention to the ‘in between’ status of a priest trying to function in the self-enclosed world of pre-Vatican II American Catholicism. The triumphalism of the Irish-American Catholicism in which he was raised is at best irrelevant to the social and spiritual needs of the ‘new immigrant’ parishioners he is now assigned to serve. At fifty-five, Kennedy is just old enough to realise that his age cohort is located between generations, though unmistakably moving towards ‘the once distant world of the old’ (*EOS* 46). Some of his boyhood friends are grandparents, and he shares the rectory with a newly ordained curate, Fr Danowski, who had not yet been born when Kennedy was inaugurated. But middle age is by no means the most significant expression of his ‘middleness’; the fact of his ordination likewise underscores the dual nature of his world, and worldview. As J.F. Powers himself said of priests: ‘They are officially committed to both worlds in the way most people are not.’¹²

On a daily basis, Kennedy negotiates with a dividedness, in both his circumstances and in his spirit, that makes visible the novel’s philosophical underpinnings. The Catholic literary and philosophical training of the author is best articulated when, in a reflection on the ‘shattering duality’ of human nature, Kennedy ruminates: ‘I mean the fundamental schism that Newman referred to when he spoke of man being forever involved in the consequences of some “terrible, aboriginal calamity”; every day and in every man there is this warfare of the parts’ (*EOS* 253). In *The Edge of Sadness*, O’Connor melded his concern with Newman’s ‘warfare of the parts’ with a subtle critique of a less philosophical, more boisterous Irish tradition of linguistic vibrancy and exuberance.

Language also constitutes a major theme in O’Connor’s better-known *The Last Hurrah*, which tells of political boss Frank Skeffington. The earlier book explores the civic and performative aspects of language and rarely ventures into the realm of the personal or the domestic. Little of the dialogue in *The Last Hurrah* occurs within the four walls of a home, and when it

12 Quoted in John Hagopian, *J.F. Powers* (New Haven: Twayne, 1968), p. 67.

does, it is often awkward and unsatisfying, as in the old politician's stunted conversations with his playboy son. By contrast, in *The Edge of Sadness* the most meaningful conversations occur in such intimate, private settings as a priest's rectory, around a dinner table, on deathbeds, or between friends driving or taking a walk together.

In *The Last Hurrah*, the elevated blarney and speechifying that O'Connor put in the mouths of political boss Frank Skeffington and his cronies is so beguiling that readers forgive the venality and corruption of the speakers. Yet, even though *The Last Hurrah* revels in oratory and linguistic fireworks, it also hints at O'Connor's recognition of the sterility of public speech – that is, of eloquence not complemented by an inner life. The earlier book, for instance, depends on the plot device of Skeffington, the old politician, wanting to leave a personal legacy to his family by inviting his nephew Adam along for a front-row seat on the campaign. And as *The Last Hurrah* plays out after the landslide defeat of Skeffington, the otherwise obnoxious character of Jack Mangan offers this pensive reflection on public life:

'... when you come right down to it, out of all that crowd that were with him night and day, who did he have that he could talk to? I mean *really* talk to?' He looked at Adam and shrugged. 'Not many, I'll bet. And probably not even one. Kind of a lonely business, wouldn't you say?'¹³

O'Connor's popular reputation stemmed largely from his position as an affectionate chronicler of Irish talk, and his impressive capacity for recording its quirks and cadences. The celebrated Irish linguistic virtuosity – often bound up with mendacity and double-speak – became, if anything, a more important badge of 'tribal' identity among the exiled Irish of the diaspora. Memoirs of O'Connor recall that the author was overwhelmed with readers who professed to see their Uncle Pats and Aunt Bridgets in his work; their enthusiasm surprised the author, who had expected to find himself

13 Edwin O'Connor, *The Last Hurrah* (Boston: Atlantic Little, 1956), p. 376.

denounced by stick-in-the-mud Irish-Americans who felt mocked.¹⁴ Once again, the Irish and Irish-American experience of language seems to have a heightened attentiveness to the polarities of talk; the same speech can be understood as derision or as affection, and possibly at the same time. O'Connor's ambivalent relationship to words, and, as Hillmann puts it, their potential to create and annihilate, is one of his most Irish characteristics. Similarly, an attentiveness to duality lies at the heart of the author's religious sensibilities.

Publicly, at least, the narrator of *The Edge of Sadness* is a man of few words. Inertia has overtaken Kennedy at Old St Paul's, and he candidly admits that he has become 'a modified and a muffled man' (*EOS* 165). He knows almost nothing of his parishioners, lets his well-meaning but fatuous Polish-American curate run the parish, and seems never to touch the lives of the faithful assigned to his pastoral care. He recognises that his subdued pastorship is a far cry from the forceful priests he knew as a boy. At one point, the narrator reflects on the stem-winder sermons of his boyhood pastor, Monsignor Degan, who routinely preached for 'thirty violent, storm-tossed minutes ... for the Monsignor rarely whispered when a shout would do' (*EOS* 15–16). Kennedy's preaching, in contrast, is terse, and, by his own admission, unexciting; looking out on his ethnically diverse parish as he gives his homily, Kennedy sees 'Not interest or attention or boredom or discontent – just polite, neutral nothing' (*EOS* 17). The only parishioner who seems to pay attention is a Chinese man, Mr Yee, who listens raptly to Kennedy's sermons. Unfortunately Kennedy later finds that 'Mr Yee understands no English. Not a single blessed word ...' (*EOS* 18).

Kennedy consoles himself that the mutual incomprehension of an English-speaking priest and a Chinese-speaking parishioner fade into irrelevance before the sacred mysteries of the Mass (conveyed at this time in

14 For accounts of O'Connor's relations with the Irish-American community, see Duffy; John V. Kelleher, 'Edwin O'Connor and the Irish-American Process', *Atlantic*, 222 (1968), pp. 48–52; Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., 'Introduction' in *The Best and Last of Edwin O'Connor* (Boston: Atlantic – Little, Brown, 1970); and Edmund Wilson, 'The Great Baldini: A Memoir and a Collaboration by Edmund Wilson and Edwin O'Connor', *Atlantic*, 224 (1969), pp. 64–75.

the revered language of the Western Church tradition, Latin): 'And yet the saving thing is that it all couldn't matter less,' he reflects. 'The sermons, I mean ... what really counts – what *only* counts – is the Mass itself ...' (EOS 18). This particular Catholic Mass poses a complicated linguistic environment in which language functions in both its most frustrated and its most exalted aspects.

Kennedy's uneventful life changes when he is drawn back into the lives of his closest boyhood friends, the Carmody family, by an unexpected invitation from old Charlie Carmody, their penny-pinching father, to his birthday party. Old Charlie shares his birthday with the Feast of St Paul, and Kennedy muses: 'Charlie Carmody and the Apostle of Charity: it was a strange coupling' (EOS 15). His ironic comment also suggests the book's preoccupation with the double nature of man. One of the Carmody children, John, is Kennedy's exact contemporary and also a priest – the pastor, in fact, of their old neighbourhood church. As his story continues, Kennedy spends an increasing time with the Carmody family and with the now-elderly Irish men and women with whom he grew up.

The extended scene at Charlie's birthday party is the most accomplished rendering of Irish-American speech that O'Connor ever wrote. In contrast to the exhibitionist and argumentative discourse of *The Last Hurrah*, the language of *The Edge of Sadness* is ruminative, self-questioning, and avowedly sceptical about the public aspects of speech; the *New Yorker's* review was wrong when it jibed that in *The Edge of Sadness* 'There are no conversations, only speeches, and no speech is less than a paragraph long'.¹⁵ The Irish Americans in this book clearly delight in well-turned phrases and they may run on – but the only speechifying in *The Edge of Sadness* is the birthday-table address delivered by the self-congratulatory honoree himself. Moreover, this moment of oratory is undercut by the tiredness of the family who have heard it all before, the none-too-concealed cynicism of the priest son, and the family's unstated but pervasive sense that the speech and party are but one more elaborate, highly encoded game

orchestrated by the manipulative old man. The family's weary reaction to Old Charlie's speech reminds us that public eloquence alone offers no emotional sustenance.

Another note is sounded in *The Edge of Sadness* that indicates it is not merely an affectionate chronicle of Irish America before full assimilation. Usually through John Carmody, the novel presents scalding attacks on Irish Catholic complacency. John savagely describes Hugh's multicultural parish at Old St Paul's:

That's not a real parish at all, is it? We all know what a real parish is. A real parish is an old time parish. One with a fine, big, old-fashioned, well-kept church with – and here's the important thing – lots of Irish to put inside it! People like ourselves, Hugh. (EOS 418)

This, too, is one of the dualities with which Kennedy wrestles, the opposing pulls of engagement and withdrawal. *The Edge of Sadness* ends on a note of redemption, however, with Kennedy choosing to commit himself to his pastorate at Old St Paul's. He turns down an opportunity to retreat into the familiar parochial world of his background, and reflects: 'The new was something of another kind, something I had never known before. And at this moment, here in the rectory hallway, I stood aching with excitement ...' (EOS 458). While O'Connor's novel differs greatly from *The Power and the Glory*, it is not a stretch to compare Kennedy's decision to that of the 'whisky priest'; in both cases, the moment of redemption comes when the character chooses to embrace the very thing he has been striving hardest to avoid.

The reading public's previous encounter with the mock-eloquence of *The Last Hurrah*, in which colourfulness more than atones for corruption, led most readers to expect (and therefore find) sentiment, blarney, and performance in *The Edge of Sadness*. Like much Irish creativity, comic, frivolous, and picturesque elements – the overblown dialogue and the concomitant exaltation of personality and anecdote on which O'Connor built his reputation – make it easy for a casual reader to consign the novel to a ghetto

15 John Kenneth Galbraith, review of *The Edge of Sadness*, in *The New Yorker*, 24 June 1961, p. 94.

of quaintness.¹⁶ These elements can overwhelm the book's deeper and, at times, much darker concerns, much as the fratricide and rural desperation of Synge's *Playboy* are less attractive than the attending linguistic extravagance. *The Edge of Sadness* may relish quirky and performative speech, but the novel also simultaneously comments on the superficiality and spiritual danger of such language.

One indication that O'Connor sought to deal with serious considerations in this novel is the fact it repeatedly visits the most solemn of scenes, the deathbed. In his comprehensive study of Irish-American fiction, Charles Fanning finds that deathbed scenes were a standard component of early Irish-American literature, and have continued to be adapted and revised by twentieth-century authors.¹⁷ *The Edge of Sadness* presents no fewer than four such scenes, and they move towards progressively greater moral awareness on the parts of both Kennedy and of the dying person. In addition, in the first of these scenes the narrator gives a lengthy (and not completely plausible) account of the antic behaviour of the dying – among them a woman who insisted on telling how she once met Al Smith, and a man who recounts a Laurel and Hardy story before expiring. In noting these incongruous deathbed recollections of the poor and the insignificant, Kennedy repeats, almost precisely, Jack Mangan's comment at the death of Skeffington. The dying have:

16 For a discussion of this phenomenon, which includes O'Connor's *Last Hurrah*, see James Silas Rogers, 'Invisible Irishness: Leprechauns and Postwar American Satire', in *After the Flood: Irish America, 1945–1960* (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2008), pp. 146–59.

17 Fanning, *The Irish Voice in America*, p. 322. Any list of the twentieth century's most notable Irish-American novels would, in addition to *The Edge of Sadness*, also include James T. Farrell's *Studs Lonigan* (1935), Elizabeth Cullinan's *House of Gold* (1970) and O'Connor's *The Last Hurrah* (1956). It is surely notable that each contains a crucial deathbed scene. The convention persists; Alice McDermott's *Charming Billy* (1998), which will undoubtedly join such a 'canonical' list, departs only slightly by taking place entirely on the day of a funeral.

drifted into a place like this, after having lived God knows where and how, [and] have been locked up so tight within themselves and their unhappy lives for so long that for years they haven't talked – I mean, *really* talked – to another soul. (EOS 109)

In Kennedy's reflections, human nature allows no place for an acceptance of death; the only strategies he has encountered for dealing with mortality have been denial and digression.

And digression, for O'Connor's Irish, is a way of life; and for his Irish, digression is enshrined in language, in meandering, story-rich, but ultimately pointless talk as an end in itself. The narrator's re-entry into the Irish world of his youth is, at bottom, a re-entry into the world of such talk. When Kennedy and John Carmody return from Charlie's birthday celebration there is an exchange that tells much about the language's capacity to both smother and to exhilarate. John says in despondency,

'It's the talk that does it, of course.'

I [Fr Kennedy] said 'That does what?'

'Tires you ... And not just my father's. Everybody's. Around that table, I mean. They all have that special, dreadful kind of talk that doesn't exist anywhere but here. It's not conversation. It's not anything. Just a suffocating cloud of words that keeps on growing and growing and coming and coming. Like a fog.' He looked at me and said, 'It didn't bother you did it?'

'No. Of course I hadn't heard much of it for a long time ... I thought it was all rather wonderful'. (EOS 95–96)

After returning from the party, alone in the rectory after his first day out in years, Kennedy is called to the deathbed of a Mrs Sanchez. There is no need for last rites. Mrs Sanchez is an epileptic who has had a seizure. Kennedy urges her to make a confession, but when he hears it he finds that the old woman 'was conscious of almost no sins at all, and that these few were venial' (EOS 113). The unsatisfactory pastoral moment is further complicated by Kennedy's poor Spanish, and implicitly, by his remoteness. The family tries to offer hospitality, but he insists on going. Leaving this unsatisfactory encounter, Kennedy muses:

At such times I feel that my parishioners and myself are separated by a gap miles wide and unmeasurably deep, and yet I also feel, curiously enough, that so simple a thing as just one word, if it were the right word, could throw a bridge across the gap. But now, as always, the right word did not occur ... (EOS 115)

Language is not the only barrier between Kennedy and the Sanchezes. The deeper problem is that Kennedy, the child of digressive Irish Catholics, has grown up in a culture in which words are used to divert and to perform. Irish speech is almost never used to express caring and openness. It is marvelously sociable and entertaining, but it is not the speech of intimacy – a deficiency that anthropologist Nancy Scheper-Hughes in the controversial study *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics* (1979), suggests is at least in part responsible for the high rates of mental illness in Ireland.¹⁸ Kennedy cannot summon, and may not know, the words to address the pastoral needs of his parishioners.

The next deathbed encounter is told in recollection. After returning from Mrs Sanchez's apartment, the narrator embarks on a lengthy autobiographical account of how he came to his present state. The cause-and-effect story of Fr Kennedy's descent into alcoholism following his father's death may strike a contemporary reader as facile; the important point to note is that his 'drinking to escape' continues, rather than starts, a pattern of avoiding painful reality. Neither the doctor nor the family tells the father that he has an incurable cancer. When Kennedy asks if there will be pain, the doctor answers that it's best not to speculate. The death of the narrator's father is surrounded with evasion and dissembling. A protracted Irish game of hide-and-seek with the truth commences, in which the grim diagnosis is explained in terms of 'a temporary stomach upset' (EOS 123). The dying father notes the sudden increase of attention from his son, but both are careful not to make too much of it. His son dissembles to the end:

Whenever the doctor or I tried to support him with the usual bedside reassurances, he smiled, agreed, and very soon changed the subject. And one afternoon as he was lying there, awake but with his eyes closed, and I was talking to him in a way that

18 Nancy Scheper-Hughes, *Saints, Scholars, and Schizophrenics: Mental Illness in Rural Ireland* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), p. 82.

was intended to be encouraging, his eyes opened, and he gave me a slow and weary wink.

'You wouldn't kid an old man, would you, Hughie?' he said. It was the saddest question I had ever heard. (EOS 125)

The father is soon hospitalised, where he dies 'witless and in pain' (EOS 128). Kennedy's last view of him is of 'a total stranger ... talking on and on in an endless parade of urgent crazy words' (EOS 128). Here, O'Connor's description of the deathbed recalls John Carmody's description of Irish talk: 'a suffocating cloud of words that keeps on growing and growing and coming and coming' (EOS 96).

Kennedy narrates a lengthy account of alcoholism and recovery that is, again, somewhat facile, as the persons whom Kennedy's drinking has hurt are left out the story; it is a recovery that seemingly occurs only between Kennedy and God. Kennedy does, however, praise those who spoke forthrightly during this time, especially the decisiveness of the bishop who removes him from his parish, telling him of his loss 'in so many words' (EOS 143), as well as praising the bluntness of his counsellors (though their bluntness is tempered with delicacy, as this was still an age when shame attached to alcoholism). Kennedy's recovery from his disease foreshadows the deeper recovery he makes at the end of the book. In a book that is in part 'about' digressive talk as a way of life, it is surely noteworthy that his recovery, or recoveries, occur specifically as a result of confrontation and direct speech.

As his story progresses, Kennedy turns his attention to his deepening relationship with the various members of the Carmody family. Occasional reminders of his nonfeasance as a pastor (such as an incident when he fails to recognise an Italian-American parishioner) underscore his sense of disconnectedness in his pastorate. But a mystery question nags at Kennedy and at the Carmody children: Why does the old man cultivate the middle-aged priest's friendship? What *is* Charlie up to? No clue is forthcoming until Christmas night, when Charlie collapses with a heart attack and the family and friends first introduced at the birthday party reassemble for what they assume to be a death watch. An unfamiliar Franciscan has been called to give the last rites; after which the first and the only person

the old miser wishes to see is Fr Kennedy. An extended scene follows, in which Kennedy hears a very different sort of confession than, presumably, the anointing priest has heard.

Charlie, it seems, has an earnest trust in the last sacraments and has taken all the necessary steps to die in the state of grace; but he is deeply unhappy, for, as he discloses to Kennedy: 'How can a man die happy if he knows that when he goes he won't be missed by a single livin' soul? Not one!' (EOS 352). Charlie's wish, and the key to the mystery of his motives, is the wish of a child: in all the world, the only person he thinks might possibly have liked him, the only person whom he believes could conceivably miss him when he is gone, is Kennedy's late father. This proves an impossible hope, as the priest's father held Charlie in deep contempt, summed up in the memorable phrase that he was 'As fine a man as ever robbed the helpless' (EOS 127). But decency and gratitude prevent Kennedy from dashing this preposterous wish. He says: 'I was a priest, after all: I couldn't let this old man die in despair' (EOS 353). He weaves a series of fabrications that will allow old Charlie to die thinking that he had at least one friend. Kennedy says of his lying: 'I said the only thing it was possible to say and still remain a human being' (EOS 369).

Kennedy's 'human' response, though, is not a morally straightforward choice. The novel's denouement makes clear that his fully understandable decision to prevaricate to a dying friend is not necessarily the most pastoral act. Here, too, there is a 'warfare of the parts'. Kennedy admits to himself that 'a man who is dying and who is listening to what may be the last words that will ever be spoken to him is entitled to hear, not just a few more of the old duplicities, but now, of all times, the *truth*; you feel that this should be his right, simply for having been a man' (EOS 370). And yet, in the same breath Kennedy tells himself that 'the uncushioned truth at such a moment would be a cruel and perhaps unbearable burden – because it came too late to help. There are those times when simple compassion demands evasion ...' (EOS 371). Yet the deepest moments of grace in *The Edge of Sadness* – Kennedy's recovery from alcoholism, and his redemption at the novel's close – come about from confrontation, not evasion.

However humane Kennedy's choice may appear, it is important to remember that it *was* a choice. O'Connor creates the scene in such a way

that it seems the inevitable choice, yet he subsequently subverts the moral wisdom of having fed the old man 'white lies'. Charlie survives, returns to his mean-spirited ways, and as his son John will later report, continues his lifelong practice of making it 'hell on earth to live with him' (EOS 404). In the moral theology of Thomas Aquinas, Kennedy has committed the minor sin of telling what Aquinas calls an 'officious' lie, one told for the supposed good of another¹⁹; the lie is made more complicated and serious in this instance because it does not take justice into account. A contrasting view is found in Kant's prescription for pastoral care of the dying:

The purpose of those who at the end of life have a clergyman summoned is usually that they want him as a *comforter* – not for the *physical* suffering brought on by the last illness or even for the fear which naturally precedes death ... but for their *moral* anguish, the reproaches of conscience. At such a time, however, conscience should be *stirred up* and *sharpened*, in order that the dying man may not neglect to do what good he still may, or (through reparation) to wipe out, so far as he can, the remaining consequences of his evil actions.²⁰

A version of Kant's stern counsel was implied in the dying words of Kennedy's own father, 'You wouldn't kid an old man, would you?' At his father's bedside, and again at Old Charlie's, Kennedy's answer seems to be, 'Sure I would'. Having gotten the comfort he wanted from Fr Kennedy, old Charlie is beyond any hope of having his conscience 'stirred'. The miser has no further use for the priest. They will only meet again by accident.

In the final deathbed scene in *The Edge of Sadness*, Kennedy visits John Carmody in his rectory. John, impatient at the best of times, is inordinately brusque in this encounter. For the first time in his life, John speaks freely

19 St Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Second Part of the Second Part, Question 110, 'Of the vices opposed to truth, and first of lying'. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947). The internal chronology of *The Edge of Sadness* suggests that the fictional Fr Kennedy's seminary education would have taken place during the mid-1920s, an era when Thomism almost exclusively informed America's seminary classrooms.

20 Immanuel Kant, 'Religion Within the Limits of Reason Alone', quoted in James M. Gustafson, *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective, II: Ethics and Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), pp. 117–118.

to Hugh about the nightmares of growing up in the Carmody family, and of the psychic maiming inflicted on all of them by his father who, a few blocks away, is getting stronger every day. John admits gloomily that he has become emotionally incapable of living among people as a priest is called to do; that, in fact, he feels revulsion when he looks at his parishioners. He feels himself to be ‘a misanthrope’ (EOS 412). Several times during his painful account John needs to excuse himself. He is internally hemorrhaging – symbolic, of course, of his spiritual hemorrhage. This, too, is a deathbed conversation. Kennedy realises that John ‘actually did what many are alleged to do: I think he often took a hard, objective look at himself, and then decided he was not pleased with what he saw’ (EOS 408).

Having been forthright about his own shortcomings, John abruptly challenges Kennedy’s inertia:

It’s a haven. That’s what St Paul’s is for you. Not a parish but a haven. A nice quiet recovery room ... Sitting up in a bedroom and reading Newman and being grateful to God that You Have Come Through is all very well but what’s it got to do with running a parish? (EOS 417–418)

John skewers Kennedy for his yearning to be back among the familiar Irish parishioners of his youth:

and meanwhile neglecting his present parishioners, not even knowing who they are and not wanting to know ... We were talking a minute ago about the differences between us, Hugh, but I’ll tell you what the real difference is. It’s that I may have turned my back on my parish but you’ve never even turned your face on yours ... you don’t do your job either. Only you don’t do yours in a slightly different way. That’s all. (EOS 419–420)

In the end, John’s rant dissolves in regret and mutual embarrassment, but his comments have hit their mark. The two part as friends, John leaving to say Benediction, a religious practice whose name comes from *bene dictus*, or good speech, and Kennedy to his own parish, where in a mixture of both stunned shock and sudden awareness, he realises that ‘John had been mortifyingly right’ (EOS 426). Just as Kennedy dozes off to sleep, the phone rings and he learns that his friend has been found dead in his rectory. His

death has come in the first hours of New Year’s Day, a day for wiping the slate clean and starting over.

Precisely such a rejuvenation comes about as a consequence of John’s candid attack on Hugh. But, although this irruption of grace may be said to change Kennedy’s heart abruptly, the manner in which that change of heart is displayed is a matter of embracing the quotidian – a sense of dedication to the ‘little ways’ of service that evokes the spirituality of St Therese of Lisieux. In the remaining pages of *The Edge of Sadness*, Kennedy becomes, at last, a real pastor, becoming involved in the lives of his parishioners as their priest. He turns down the Bishop’s offer to take up John Carmody’s pastorate in the Irish parish of his youth. Kennedy plans instead to continue:

as a priest in Old St Paul’s, working day by day in this parish I had really been shamed into choosing by the scornful words of a dying friend, [where] I might, through the parish and its people, find my way not again to the simple engagement of the heart and its affections but to the Richness, the Mercy, the immeasurable Love of God ... (EOS 458)

At the close of *The Edge of Sadness*, a seemingly minor detail in the opening paragraph takes on a new resonance. The novel opens with Kennedy musing on how, even as a young seminarian, it was hard for him to wake up. This trait lies at the heart of Kennedy’s story; it has, in fact, taken him thirty-five years as a priest to wake up. Notably, his long-postponed awakening occurs in Old St Paul’s, a parish that bears the name of the saint who underwent the most celebrated conversion in the history of Christianity, that of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus, which eventually led to his canonisation as St Paul.

Before the novel closes there is one last encounter between the narrator and Charlie Carmody, who was unable to attend his son’s funeral and has avoided Kennedy – no doubt flummoxed because he has, as Kennedy says, ‘talked for once in his life without pretense’ (EOS 447). They meet by chance on the street outside a run-down tenement owned by Charlie, where Kennedy has been on a sick call. The old man swings into his usual hyperbolic speech, and then, as he is about to leave, feigns to have forgotten all about their ‘deathbed’ conversation:

'I don't remember none of it,' he said. 'Ain't that funny, Father? A man with a mem'ry like mine? Although it's prob'ly just as well; they tell me I made no sense at all. I said to the doctors only a week ago, I said, 'Well, doctors, I suppose I must have said some queer crazy stuff whilst I was sick in bed, back there?' 'You did, Mr Carmody,' they said to me. 'You did. But we paid it no mind. We pay no mind to what any man says when he's out of his head.' And I said to them, 'Are you tellin' me, doctors, that I was so sick I was drove loony? And nothin' I said was true?'

... They said, 'No, Mr Carmody, nothin' at all. Not so much as a word!' (*EOS* 450–451)

As Kennedy watches Old Charlie driving away, the car halts and Charlie pokes his head out the window: 'Not so much as a word!' he bawled. '*Not a single blessed word!*' (*EOS* 451; italics in original).

This encounter makes it clear that Kennedy failed Charlie. His supposedly innocent lies, well-intentioned as they may have been, have allowed the old man to remain not only unrepentant, but self-satisfied. As a Catholic priest, Kennedy could quite rightly claim that his comforting words paled into insignificance when compared to the sanctifying grace conferred by the last rites; but he could not claim that his words to the dying man conveyed anything more than comfort. Old Charlie's last statement in the novel – 'Not a single blessed word!' – is an unwittingly accurate characterisation of their previous encounter. It is also the precise phrase Kennedy used in reference to Mr Yee, the Chinese man who could comprehend nothing of his sermons.

Few Catholics of O'Connor's era, including the novelist, would have thought that failure to comprehend mere words would render Charlie, or Mr Yee, unreachable by the sacraments. As the eminent historian Emmet Larkin has shown, Catholics of post-Famine Ireland embraced a spirituality wherein the sacraments were considered virtually the exclusive channel of grace. The author, and the Irish-Americans about whom he wrote, were the fairly recent (fewer than 100 years) heirs of such a mechanistic theology.²¹ The understanding of grace that informs *The Edge of Sadness* departs

from this sterile and hierarchical approach to the sacred. It suggests a less quantifiable, more expansive, and in some ways more mysterious spiritual experience, in which flawed and failed humans can nonetheless point others to redemption – in which an ultimately supernatural healing can flow from the personal presence and the candor of committed friends.

The Edge of Sadness is a novel about blessed words, as well as a novel about words that fail to bless. The 'urgent crazy words' that attend his father's death; the 'suffocating cloud of words' that torment his oldest friend; the intuition that 'just one word, if it were the right word' could bridge the gap between the priest and his unfamiliar parishioners; 'the scornful words of a dying friend' that lead its priest-hero to discover, however belatedly, his true calling to the priesthood; in all these instances, concerns with the uses and misuses of language inform Edwin O'Connor's novel.

21 Emmet Larkin, 'The Devotional Revolution in Ireland, 1850–1975,' *American Historical Review*, 77: 3 (1972), pp. 644–645; reprinted in Emmet Larkin, *The Historical Dimensions of Irish Catholicism* (New York: Arno Press, 1976).

EAMON MAHER

Issues of Faith in Selected Fiction by Brian Moore (1921–1999)

Born in Belfast in 1921, Brian Moore spent the vast majority of his adult life in Canada and the USA. In a career that spanned more than four decades, he published twenty novels and won numerous literary accolades (*The Doctor's Wife* and *The Colour of Blood* were both nominated for the Booker Prize in the 1970s and 1980s respectively), in addition to having a number of his novels (most notably *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne*, *The Luck of Ginger Coffey*, *Catholics* and *Black Robe*) made into films. He is generally accepted as having been a talented storyteller, as well as someone with a keen understanding of the female psyche. When you are described, as Moore was, by no less a literary giant than Graham Greene, as 'my favourite living novelist', there is a natural tendency for the reading public to take you seriously. There is also a temptation to assume Catholicism plays a significant role in your work, given Greene's own fascination with this topic.

Sometimes, because of the accessibility of his novels, Moore's skill as a wordsmith is underestimated. The connection with Graham Greene is interesting because of the propensity of both writers to tease out the issue of faith or unfaith in their protagonists, to seize on the moment when cracks begin to appear in their belief system. In an interview with Joe O'Connor in 1995, Moore stated:

Belief is an obsession of mine. I think everybody wants to believe in something – politics, religion, something that makes life worthwhile for them. [...] So faith is my obsession.¹

1 Joe O'Connor, 'An Interview with Brian Moore', in *The Sunday Tribune*, 1 October 1995.

This chapter will explore the 'obsession' with faith as it reveals itself in the early fiction of Brian Moore. Before dealing with the novels, however, it is necessary to provide some biographical details on the author. He was born into a very devout Belfast Catholic family. His father was a doctor and Moore was the nephew of Éoin McNeill, one of the founders of the Gaelic League and the person who signed the countermanding order for the 1916 Rising in Dublin. Not surprisingly therefore, the Moore family was vehemently Catholic and nationalistic in outlook, something that would cause problems for Brian when he was growing up. He discovered at a young age that he lacked 'the religious sense'. This became especially apparent when he went to confession and omitted to tell the priest about his sexual peccadilloes.² Afterwards he felt no guilt and he had no fear of divine retribution. Growing up in the Belfast of the 1930s and 1940s, a city where people took their religious allegiance seriously, such a cavalier attitude was far from normal. Denis Sampson offers the following evaluation:

Moore was born into a state of conquest and colonial settlement in which racial origin and religion had been matters of life and death for centuries; the faiths of the fathers were at once absolutely true and, at every turn, under siege.³

His negative experience in the diocesan school, St Malachy's, where teaching was accompanied by liberal doses of corporal punishment and where there was a heavy emphasis on religious guilt, fuelled his disillusionment with Catholicism. Moore was good at French and English, but he was never in the same academic category as his older brother Seamus, who would follow his father into the medical profession. He disliked the highly charged religious atmosphere in the school, which imbued in him a sense

2 Denis Sampson, *Brian Moore: The Chameleon Novelist* (Dublin: Merino, 1998), p. 28 – cites an interview Moore did with Tom Adair during the 1980s in which he said: 'I started going to Confession as a child and I now date a lot of my troubles to that. I was a child who was incapable of confessing things to a stranger in a box; particularly sexual peccadilloes like masturbation ... So I had trouble with Confession and I started telling lies, and that was a mortal sin, so automatically I thought there was something wrong with me ...'

3 Sampson, *Brian Moore: The Chameleon Novelist*, p. 10.

of isolation and unworthiness, and was happy when he found liberation beyond its walls. Surprisingly, it was the bombing of Belfast during World War II and Moore's involvement in the Air Raids Precautions (ARP) unit that would finally provide a platform where he could assume a heroic role. He pulled bodies from collapsed buildings and responded to the crisis in a manner that surprised everyone, himself most of all perhaps. He recounts these events in the strongly autobiographical *The Emperor of Ice Cream* (1966). The hero, Gavin Bourke, remarks on the transformation of Belfast: 'Tonight, history had conferred the drama of war on this dull, dead town in which he had been born.'⁴ His liberation from a repressive Catholic upbringing is asserted at the end of the novel when he and his fellow ARP volunteer, Freddy Hargreaves, refuse to kneel when the priest recites the 'Our Father' in the hospital mortuary. This is a serious gesture of revolt in the context of the background of these two young men and illustrates a more questioning attitude on the part of Moore's characters towards religion. I will return to this novel later in order to underline the negative impact sectarian Belfast has on Moore's characters, as it did on him when he was growing up.

Moore escaped from Belfast by joining the British Ministry of War Transport in 1942. Many Catholics in Northern Ireland had been pro-Nazi before the Belfast bombs: this attitude changed afterwards. Moore found Ireland's neutrality unacceptable and he was happy to be able to contribute to the war effort in some small way. His work took him to North Africa, Italy, Poland and France and exposed him to experiences that he would file away and use in his future novels. He eventually found a job as a journalist in Canada. His chosen exile opened up new possibilities for him, but his main literary inspiration would remain the Belfast he left in his early twenties. In a passage from the semi-fictional 'The Expatriate Writer', an emigrant replies to a question from a man on the ferry leaving Belfast:

4 Brian Moore, *The Emperor of Ice Cream* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 202. All references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *EI* followed by the page number.

I'm leaving home because I don't want to be a doctor like my father and brothers. Because I want to be a writer. I want to write. [...] Perhaps that's the way a lot of people become writers. They don't like the role they're playing and writing seems a better one.⁵

He seems to be joining the Joycean 'priesthood of art' in the lines above. When asked once when he left the Church, Joyce famously replied: 'That's for the Church to say'. Moore maintained a fascination for the Catholic faith although he ceased the practice of his religion early in life. Commenting on Joyce's statement, Moore observed: 'There's some truth in it because while I left the Church, I've always had a very strong interest in Catholicism. I've felt as a writer that man's search for a faith, whether it is within the Catholic Church or a belief in God or a belief in something other than merely the materialistic world, is a major theme.'⁶ His characters hover between the devout and the spiritually ambivalent, but at some stage they're nearly all forced to come to terms with their mortality and the question of what lies in store for them beyond this life. We will now turn to how Catholicism is portrayed in a few of the early novels.⁷

Moore's first novel, *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (1955), is also his best in my view. Set in Belfast, it describes the difficulties of an alcoholic spinster who has fallen on hard times after her best years were spent nursing an ailing aunt. When the aunt died, there was no provision left for Judith other than a miserable yearly allowance. The days of middle class respectability are long gone, as is revealed in the opening pages of the novel which see the heroine settling into frugal digs. Judith's snobbery and sense of class seem to have survived her social decline:

5 'The Expatriate Writer', in *The Antagonish Review*, 17, Spring 1974, pp. 28–29.

6 Cited in Sampson, *The Chameleon Novelist*, p. 210.

7 *Cold Heaven* (1983), which is set in California, is a fascinating narrative dealing with how a staunch atheist, Marie Davenport, is the privileged witness for an apparition by the Virgin Mary. It raises some very interesting questions in relation to unbelief, but will not feature as part of this article. Likewise, I will only make some passing references to *No Other Life* (1993), set in a former French colonial island in Central America, which treats of the dangerous mingling of religion and politics in the person of a native priest, Jeannot, who rises to the position of President.

The street outside was a university bywater, once a good residential area, which had lately been reduced to the level of taking in paying guests. Miss Hearne stared at the houses opposite and thought of her aunt's day when there were only private families in this street, at least one maid to every house, and dinner was at night, not at noon.⁸

As is her custom (she appears to move digs quite a bit), Judith's unpacking begins with her carefully choosing a prominent position for two items that play a significant, or symbolic, role in her life: a picture of her deceased aunt and an oleograph of the Sacred Heart. Family and religion are what count for the heroine, but with her aunt's disappearance she is left with just religion, which, on its own, will prove inadequate when the pressure of a disappointed love affair throws her into despair. The object of this love is the brother of her new landlady, James Madden, a returned emigrant who worked as a hotel porter in New York. Madden mistakenly believes that Judith is a woman of means and he begins courting her in the hope that she will invest in one of his hair-brained business schemes. She, on the other hand, sees in him her last hope of a loving relationship. Unlike other men, he doesn't flinch when he first looks at her: 'He smiled at her. Friendly, she is. And educated. Those rings and that gold wrist-watch. They're real. A pity she looks like that' (*LP* 39). When the couple goes to Sunday Mass together, their differing reactions to the ceremony are revealing. Whereas Madden is hung-over and feeling a bit worried about the lust inspired in him by the maid in his sister's house the previous night, Judith is thinking about how important religion is:

Religion was there: it was not something you thought about, and if, occasionally, you had a small doubt about in the way church affairs were carried on, or something that seemed wrong or silly, well, that was the devil at work and God's ways were not our ways. You could pray for guidance. (*LP* 67)

8 *The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne* (London: Flamingo, 1994), pp. 7–8. All references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *LP* followed by the page number.

Madden drifts into sleep during Fr Quigley's sermon, in which he denounces his parishioners for abusing alcohol, gambling, attending the cinema – where they see 'a lot of people who're a moral disgrace to the whole world gallivanting half naked in glorious technicolour' (*LP* 72) –, or going to dances, rather than being present at sodality meetings and the Children of Mary devotions. He concludes with a warning that if his parishioners don't have time for God, God will have no time for them. Judith experiences a shiver of exaltation at the powerful performance given by the priest. Later on, she will turn in desperation to Fr Quigley, who, anxious to get away to a golf appointment, will not spare the time for her that he expects everyone else to find for God.

Judith's move from blind faith to serious doubt is sparked by the realisation that Madden has absolutely no intention of marrying her once he discovers that she is as impoverished as he himself is. Bernard Rice, the son of the landlady, mercilessly exposes Judith's superstitious faith: 'Why are you alone tonight, if it isn't for your silly religious scruples? [...] Your God is only a picture on a wall. He doesn't give a damn about you' (*LP* 183). Bernard's harsh words contribute to Judith's growing misgivings. Her uncharacteristic behaviour during one of her Sunday afternoon visits to her friends, the O'Neills, when she exceeds her 'absolute limit' of two sherries and makes some reckless comments, allied to her fruitless visit to the church where she wishes to atone for her drinking, bring to a head what has been a deepening crisis. Alone in the local church, she really begins to question her religious beliefs: 'In the tabernacle there was no God. Only round wagers of unleavened bread. The great ceremonial of the Mass, the singing, the incense, the benediction, what if it was all show, all useless show? What if it meant nothing, nothing?' (*LP* 140–141).⁹ For a woman

9 It is worth comparing this episode with the one that confronts the missionary priest, Paul Michel, when he travels home to be with his dying mother. All her life, this woman's faith had been an inspiration to her son. Now he hears her utter the following words: 'There is no one watching over us. Last week, when I knew I was dying, I saw the truth. Paul, I have prayed all my life. I believed in God, in the Church. I believed I had a soul that was immortal. But I have no soul. When we die, there is nothing' – *No Other Life* (London: Flamingo, 1994), p. 73. Her later comment,

who steadfastly believed that there was a divine presence who listened to all her prayers and loved her in her naked wretchedness, to be plunged suddenly into such a morass of doubt is unsettling in the extreme. Alcohol further fuels her fears and leads ultimately to a nervous breakdown when her final call for help is left unanswered:

What is to become of me, O Lord, in this city, with only drink, hateful drink, that dulls me, lonely drink that leaves me more lonely, more despised? Why this cross? Give me another, great pain, great illness, anything, but let there be someone, someone to share it. Why do you torture me, alone and silent behind your little door. Why? (*LP* 239–240)

No response issues forth from the tabernacle: silence greets her prayer. She collapses on the altar after trying to break into the tabernacle and Fr Quigley, seeing her in a heap, moves quickly to have her committed to a nursing home, which the O'Neills agree to pay for. The novel concludes with Judith attending Mass in the home, but now she has a much more sceptical view of the ceremony. She wonders what the nuns would think if they knew she had struck at the door of the tabernacle: 'In God's house I defied God. And nothing happened. I am here' (*LP* 251). This revelation is something similar to what Moore himself discovered after making a bad Confession. Nobody struck him down: he remained unharmed. However unlikely it may at first appear, there are some similarities between Moore and his protagonist in their experience of religion. The difference is that in Moore's case, faith was questioned much earlier in life and for different

'There is no other life', is reproduced in the title of this novel, which really has more to do with liberation theology than with this woman's religious doubts. When one compares the priest's mother's crisis of faith to that of Judith Hearne, however, there are some revealing parallels, particularly in how abandoned the two women feel in their hour of need. Fr Paul remarks: 'Until now, nothing my mother had ever said or done would have made me suspect that she could harbour doubt. Nor were her dying words the panic of someone facing the mystery of death. She had been as certain in her unbelief as, all her life, she had been certain in belief. In the darkness and silence of that night before her funeral, a sad and terrible question crept into my mind. Why did God fail her in the end?' (*No Other Life*, p. 75). Judith feels similarly cut adrift by God when she turns to Him for help.

reasons. Judith's religion is part of the fabric of her being: it gives her life a meaning that is lacking when faith disappears. Patricia Craig finds that the concentration on faith is a weakness in the novel:

Actually, the crisis of faith is the least satisfactory part of the novel; you feel it is somehow manufactured to add point and drama to the plot, whereas the ordinary miseries of the protagonist, the boarding-house life, the contrast with the domestic warmth of the affluent O'Neills, the men's talk in pubs, the rainy atmosphere of the uninspiring city – all these ring wonderfully true. The real point of the story is the importance (to its heroine) of being genteel, and the moral perplexities attending the loss of gentility.¹⁰

While I agree with Craig about the importance Judith attaches to her social status, I cannot accept the thesis that Moore's portrayal of the crisis of faith in Judith is unsatisfactory. After all, Judith's feeling of self-worth is indelibly linked to her faith. She notes:

The special thing about Sunday Mass was that for once everyone was doing the same thing. Age, income, station in life, it made no difference: you all went to Mass, said the same prayers and listened to the same sermons. Miss Hearne put loneliness aside on a Sunday morning. (*LP* 60)

These are not the views of a woman who is solely concerned with social appearances. Her faith is a means to an end, a way of alleviating loneliness and giving her humdrum existence some meaning. Moore very successfully captures the inner turmoil of his middle-aged heroine as she moves from one rejection to the next. The harshest rejection of all is the one she gets from God. Moore stated his conscious desire to steer clear of re-writing Joyce's *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* in his first novel:

I wanted to write about my own loss of faith, but did not want to risk adverse comparisons with him (Joyce) by describing the loss of faith in a young Irishman. [...] I decided to write not about an intellectual's loss of faith but of the loss of faith in someone devout, the sort of woman my mother would have known, a 'sodality lady'.¹¹

10 Patricia Craig, *Brian Moore: A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2002), p. 124.

11 Quoted by Denis Sampson, *The Chameleon Novelist*, p. 88.

He succeeds admirably in this objective and Judith Hearne's religious dilemmas are keenly felt. Patrick Hicks, like Sampson before him, notes that the religious roles people like Moore's heroine adopt are the result of living in an 'enclosed society that has endured decades of punitive colonial history'. He continues: 'To challenge these roles is to challenge Catholicism and, by extension, what it means to be Irish in Northern Ireland'.¹² This is undoubtedly true and is developed even more pointedly in Moore's second novel, *The Feast of Lupercal* (1958), which delves once more into the effects the religious ghetto that is Belfast can exert on his characters. This time the main focus is on a teacher in Ardath (a thinly disguised representation of St Malachy's), Diarmuid Devine, who, like Judith before him, is confronted with a system that leaves little room for dissenting voices. Whereas Judith is rather constricted by her lack of financial resources and her sex, Devine would appear to have more of a chance of escaping the religious intolerance all around him. But in order to reap the benefits of independent maturity, he would have to pit himself against the institution where he was formed and in which he now works, a task that proves beyond his powers.

Upset when he overhears his colleagues refer to him as an 'old maid', the thirty-seven-year-old bachelor begins to reassess a life that seems bereft of any real excitement. His only obvious attributes are a capacity to anticipate examination questions for his students and his involvement in the local drama group. He decides it is time for him to become more daring, especially when it comes to his relations with the fairer sex. When invited to attend a party to mark the occasion of the engagement of his colleague Tim Heron's daughter, Devine has the unexpected pleasure of making the acquaintance of Heron's niece, Una Clarke. Una turns out to be a Protestant, an exotic breed about whom Devine harbours serious doubts:

12 Patrick Hicks, *Brian Moore and the Meaning of the Past* (Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2007), p. 21.

Protestants were the hostile Establishment, leaders with Scots and English surnames, hard, blunt businessmen who asked you what school you went to and, on hearing your answer, refused the job. [...] To them, Catholics were a hated minority, a minority who threatened their rule.¹³

The weight of sectarianism is palpable in these lines, the distrust, the stereotyping, the segregation. Catholics and Protestants did not mix in the Northern Ireland described here. Moore himself often marvelled at how two communities living side by side could live at such a remove from one another in terms of mutual understanding and social interaction. Diarmuid Devine has definitely a warped view of Protestants and yet he is attracted to Una Clarke, particularly once he discovers that she had to leave Dublin as a result of an affair with a married man. He thinks to himself that he may well have a greater chance of broadening his sexual horizons with a woman like this than with any strait-laced Catholics he might encounter in Belfast. The omens are not good from the outset, however: as a teacher in a Catholic diocesan school, any liaison with a Protestant would be viewed in an unfavourable light. But, blinded by his passion, Devine pursues a relationship with Una, to whom he gives the leading female role in a play he is directing. One thing leads to another until one night, after attending a dance in the city, Una accompanies Devine to his digs. When he is suddenly presented with the opportunity for sex about which he has dreamed for years, Devine is unable to perform. This has a lot to do with the distrust of females which has been instilled in him from a young age:

Women were mockers, character-assassins, every single one of them. Fancy putting yourself in a position where a woman could laugh at you. An intimate moment, a ridiculous posture – a declaration of love for instance. Or, on your wedding night, to hear a girl laugh at you. (*FL* 123)

Una, taking the shock the sight of her naked body has on Devine as a demeaning rejection, falls into a drunken stupor and is caught entering her

13 *The Feast of Lupercal* (London: Granada Publishing, 1983), p. 35. All references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *FL* followed by the page number.

uncle's house the following morning. Furious at what he deems to be an abuse of friendship, Heron then administers a severe caning to Devine in the school yard of Ardath in full view of the priests and teaching staff. When summoned to his office by the President, Devine fully expects to lose his job and is surprised when Dr Keogh accepts his explanation of what happened. What emerges from the whole episode is a rather sordid depiction of the adverse consequences a certain form of religious formation can have on people. Thinking about what has happened to him, Devine notes: 'If I had been a Protestant, this would never have happened. [...] I would have had my fill of girls by now. I would never have had to go to confession' (*FL* 212). Earlier in the novel, Una had remarked to her suitor that Catholics didn't seem 'free' to her: 'They have to believe certain things or suffer the consequences' (*FL* 136). Anxious to assuage her doubts, Devine told her that he was 'pretty free', 'quite a heretic in many ways'. But of course this is only partially true. He is anxious to experiment with sex, to break out of his lonely existence, but finds that his religious convictions have made him into a pathetic, feeble adult who does not know what he wants.

In this, his solitary bed where he had sinned a thousand times in sinful imaginings, repented nightly in mumbled acts of contrition, in this bed this very night, real sin would be consummated. (*FL* 144)

His religious conditioning intervenes at the critical moment and he is unable to go through with what he is conditioned to view as a sinful act. Una is right when she tells him: 'We're completely different types. I want to fight against what life's doing to me, and you're afraid to. Live and let live is your motto' (*FL* 188). What she cannot comprehend is the extent to which Devine is emasculated by his sheltered upbringing. Unlike Moore, he finds it impossible to break free from the strictures that render him impotent in every facet of his life. People take advantage of him when they need to raise funds or want a play to be staged. He cannot bear to offend anyone and so tells them what they want to hear. Una offered a possible escape from the *cul de sac* in which he is trapped but he has too much emotional baggage to take the necessary risks that would entail:

All things to all men, am I? I love you; is that just a joke to you? Oh, it's a joke, I'm sure. Just an ass of a schoolmaster, a Papist too, no good at kissing and loving, just a big joke. No great chartered accountant that runs back to his wife. (*FL* 185)

He tries to hit back at Una's criticism by bringing up her former lover who decided to return to his wife, but he also emphasises his own feelings of sexual inadequacy. Because of his religion, he has not got the type of sexual experience that he believes a Protestant man of his age would have and, as such, thinks he is nothing but a joke. For Devine, Una represents a freedom that is bestowed on her by what he views as her 'pagan Protestantism' (*FL* 35), whereas he is left wallowing in a sea of guilt and unfulfilled longing. Patrick Hicks maintains that 'Dev's tragedy is greater than Judith Hearne's because he could have fled from the traditions of his community and challenged the background which made him so uncomfortable'.¹⁴ I am not so sure, in fact, that he enjoys much more freedom than Judith does. He, no more than she, cannot definitively break from his harsh Catholic upbringing and ends up settling for a mundane, albeit secure, life bereft of excitement. Moore directs much of his criticism at the type of education meted out in Ardath, which is very similar to what he received in St Malachy's:

Man was born sinful, he must avoid the occasions of sin. The men who ran Ardath did not believe in words of honour, they did not consider human intention a match for the devil's lures. (*FL* 79)¹⁵

Diarmuid Devine, as well as teaching in this establishment, is also one of its products and so its influence on his character is all the more oppressive. The heavy emphasis placed on sin, especially sexual sin, leaves people with grave suspicions about their bodies. One wonders how Judith might have reacted had she been in the position to realise her sexual fantasies with Madden? My feeling is that she may well have frozen in the same way as

14 Hicks, *Brian Moore and the Meaning of the Past*, p. 30.

15 In the short story, 'A Vocation', Moore underlined the emphasis on sin prevalent in the heroine's early education: 'There was Sin. It was an awful thing in the sight of God. Lies were sins. Losing your temper was a sin. Calling Mary a Dirty Pig was a sin. It was a sin to tell a lie'. Cited in Sampson, *A Chameleon Novelist*, p. 29.

Devine did. Neither character thinks too much about their religion: nevertheless it has left a kind of imprint on their consciousness that is almost impossible to erase. Jo O'Donoghue observes:

For the two main protagonists, Judith Hearne and Diarmuid Devine, religion is not a choice, not a gift, not in any sense a joy or a blessing. It has been imposed on them, with all its devotions, its limitations, and its prejudices, by their families and their backgrounds. Their belief is not really a belief at all because they only observe their religion by default.¹⁶

This is a fair assessment of the two Belfast novels we have briefly discussed in this chapter. One can detect a certain amount of hostility on the part of Moore towards his own religious formation, a hostility that waned somewhat as the work evolved. An interview with the (then) young Jesuit academic, Michael Paul Gallagher, in 1969, who treated him with respect and appreciation, may have had a positive impact because the priest protagonists in the later novels (especially *Catholics* and *Black Robe*) are far more positive than in the first two. As the work evolves, there is also a tendency by Moore to underline the futility of secular gods like money and sex, to whom his characters turn in an attempt to find a replacement for religious belief – *I am Mary Dunne* (1968), *The Doctor's Wife* (1976) and *The Temptation of Eileen Hughes* (1981) are very revealing in this regard. Although he was not a practicing Catholic from a young age, Moore held on to a fascination with religious belief that would stay with him all his life.

Sometimes he looks to be espousing the Joycean popular religion of art and at other times he appears to be genuinely fascinated with characters who have real faith, something he never achieved in his own life. In his first two novels, we are presented with characters who are forced to live in the dark oppressive atmosphere of Belfast, a city that has for too long been the site of deep sectarian hatred and violence. *The Emperor of Ice-Cream*, Moore's *Bildungsroman*, presents a young man who manages to survive a restrictive religious education and discover an 'alternative' community

16 Jo O'Donoghue, *Brian Moore: A Critical Study* (London: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1991), p. 11.

in Belfast, one that is more liberal and artistic. Gavin Burke is amazed to discover that there are groups of people who live their lives in blissful ignorance of religious interdictions: 'To think that people who wrote poetry, burned joss sticks, and built puppet theatres were living here in Belfast, not a mile away from his own home. They were Protestants, naturally. Why was it that no Catholic could grow up in an interesting atmosphere?' (*EI* 98–99) He contrasts this tolerant, liberal, free way of life with his own dull, repressive existence. He feels that his girlfriend Sally will never allow any real intimacy between them because of her religious scruples. His darker side will not allow him harbour any illusions about his true nature:

Come off it, the Black Angel said. You want her lily-white body, that's what. And if that's what you want, those girls who hang around the Grafton Players' Hall are hotter than Sally will ever be. They're not Catholics, not even Prods, they're probably Communists. Free love and all that. (*EI* 75)

The Emperor of Ice-Cream offers some worthwhile insights with regard to Moore's juxtapositioning of religion and sexual desire. Gavin Burke regrets the loss of comfort felt after attending Confession during the time when he believed in the sacrament: 'The priest said the words of absolution, and you made an act of contrition and came out of the box, washed clean of sin, pure and holy, half hoping you'd be run over by a bus and die in a state of grace and have your soul go straight to heaven.' (*EI* 143) One detects echoes here of similar descriptions encountered in Frank McCourt's *Angela's Ashes*, the same humorous tone, the same recollection by the adult of the lost innocence of youth. While he does achieve a liberation of sorts as a result of his heroics during the bombing of Belfast, Gavin Burke nevertheless is forced to observe towards the end of the novel that something of his religious upbringing will always stay with him: '[...] although he had left God behind in the dusty past of chapel, confessional, and classroom, the catechism rules prevailed. In both worlds, lack of purpose, lack of faith, was the one deadly sin' (*EI* 194).

In an article written for a special edition of the *Irish University Review* devoted to the work of Brian Moore, Terence Brown began by remarking:

Brian Moore has always been a Catholic writer. Happily not in the sense in which, for example, Graham Greene can be said to write Catholic novels, where characters who seem to all intents and purposes much like the rest of us suddenly admit to religious scruples of a mysterious kind ... Rather, in Moore's fiction the Catholic faith is as undeniable as the weather, with its prevailing winds of depressed feeling and moral demand affecting the psychological temperature of almost all his protagonists.¹⁷

This is an excellent summation of the way in which Catholicism continued to inform Moore's world view, even years after he had ceased believing in God. Like John McGahern and so many other Irish writers, Catholicism was the language of Moore's youth and education, the theatre in which the drama of life was enacted. He could not have escaped its influence, even if he had wished to so do. I will conclude with the observation by Patricia Craig in relation to the reaction the Mass that was said for Moore in Belfast might have had on the Belfast writer:

There was no deathbed reversion to the Catholic faith. That particular form of belief, a closed book to Brian even in his church-ridden youth, remained a closed book. However, at the instigation of his relatives, a Requiem Mass was held for him in Belfast, in the very church – St Patrick's in Donegall Street – where his enforced attendance in childhood had caused him so much resentment and boredom. A kind of wheel of infelicity had come full circle. It is likely that those emotions, resentment and boredom, would have overcome Brian Moore once again had he been a speck on the wall at that occasion.¹⁸

17 Terence Brown, 'Show Me a Sign: The Religious Imagination of Brian Moore', in the *Irish University Review*, 18.1 (1988), pp. 37–49, p. 37.

18 Craig, *Brian Moore: A Biography*, p. 264.

PETER GUY

‘Earth’s Crammed with Heaven, and every
Common Bush Afire with God’¹:
Religion in the Fiction of John McGahern

Back home in Connemara, a copy of *Old Moore’s Almanac* was as much a staple of our household as *Ireland’s Own* or *The Connaught Tribune*. It was purchased in January, had a patriotic De Valera-like green cover which hinted at perpetual rainfall, comely maidens, the mail boat to England and *Glenroe* on a Sunday evening. It was a compendium of bad astrology, the dates for the major cattle marts and weather predictions which were uniformly deranged – ‘I have to tell you that the average temperature in January was 6.2 degrees. In July it was 25 degrees. At this rate of increase, by December it will be 58 degrees and human life will be unsustainable.’ I bring this up because *Old Moore’s Almanac* will go some way towards explaining the religious instinct in the fiction of John McGahern.

I do not think anyone actually believed that a tsunami was going to wipe out the Aran Islands and drive the people of Spiddal to take to living in trees – the whole premise is absurd. But sure enough, the Almanac would reappear on the kitchen table year in, year out and for the life of me I could not understand why – supernaturalism departed from the country cottage with the advent of electricity so I could not understand why Old Moore did not go the same way as the Puca, Dagda’s Harp and Oliver J. Flanagan. The truth of the matter is somewhat more complex. Like Old Moore, religion is speculative. We don’t really understand the nuts and

1 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (Chicago: Academy Chicago Printers [Cassandra Editions] 1979), Bk. VII, l. 820–821.

bolts of it, but in a country setting any form of amusement is a distraction from other, usually depressing concerns.

The point I am making is that religion was half creature of expediency and half pantomime. It had its real, vicious side where a little power went to the head of a small number of narrow-minded men who took out their frustrations on the most vulnerable members of their flock – it is only recently that those particular chickens came home to roost and caused major consternation among the faithful. The other side was theatrical. The countryside could be a dull place from harvest until spring and the Church brought a splash of colour into the community. It also served as a medium to bring people together for those mysteries which could not be explained by Old Moore and his ilk – death, birth and the occasional wedding brought about by either desire or compunction. The synapses of love and communality are as much a mystery as hate.

John McGahern (1934–2006) knew both sides of the Church. He was deprived of a living and forced to emigrate when his second novel, *The Dark*, was banned by the Irish Censorship Board. But he also spoke lovingly of the Church, stating, ‘The movement of focus from the home and school to the church brought with it a certain lightness, a lifting of oppression, a going outwards, even a joy ...’² This can be confusing to some outsiders and McGahern did much to add to the ambiguity. It may be truly said that he went out of his way to avoid answering any question with any definiteness and so a more pressing question would be: Was McGahern’s writing driven by a spiritual or a religious impulse? He wrote: ‘The way I view that whole world now is expressed in Freud’s essay *The Future of an Illusion*’ (*LotW* 149). Freud viewed religion as a phenomenon of culture or civilisation, based, like all culture, on what could be construed as the ‘rejection of instincts’ by means of ‘prohibitions.’ The gods, in essence, ‘must exorcize the terrors of nature.’ Such terrors include death, but also

2 John McGahern, *Love of the World: Essays*, edited by Stanley van der Ziel with an Introduction by Declan Kiberd (London: Faber & Faber, 2009), p. 137. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *LotW* followed by the page number.

childbirth and sexual concourse and anything else remotely questionable. Furthermore, ‘they must reconcile man to the cruelty of fate, particularly as is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations which a civilized life in common has imposed on them.’ Religion thus constitutes a ‘treasure of ideas born of the need to make human misery supportable.’³

Few writers traded so heavily on misery as McGahern. In his first four novels, his protagonists were dealt the hand of death (*The Barracks*), conformism (*The Dark*), emigration (*The Leavetaking*) or a combination of all three (*The Pornographer*). Throughout these texts, religion was there in the background, and was usually not used for any wholesome purpose. *The Barracks* (1963), McGahern’s first novel and most complex meditation on life and death, is structured around the marriage of Elizabeth Reegan to a widower police sergeant. Her world is claustrophobic, revolving around her husband, the barracks, Reegan’s children from an earlier marriage and the Church. Her first encounter with the local priest sets the tone. She was asked to join the Legion of Mary, which she describes as ‘a kind of legalized gossiping school’, and steadfastly refused.⁴ When the priest pressed Elizabeth for an explanation, she countered by stating that she disliked organisations. The priest replied: ‘So, my dear woman, you dislike the Catholic Church: it happens to be an organization, you know, that’s founded on Divine Truth.’ (*TB* 135) This statement helps support Freud’s assertion cited earlier. The French intellectual Charles Maurras defended Catholicism as an element of political order, and Freud likewise suggested that those with no other moral checkpoints than Catholicism could become dangerous if some other ideal does not take the place of religion before it is completely dismantled. Leaders (such as priests) used coercion to curb human antisocial instincts. As much as we like to believe our great civilisations rested on the opposite, it is impossible to argue against someone’s passions. So destructive is human

3 Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translated and edited by James Strachley with an introduction by Peter Gay (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 22.

4 John McGahern, *The Barracks* (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p. 135. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *TB* followed by the page number.

nature, Freud claims, that 'it is only through the influence of individuals who can set an example and whom masses recognize as their leaders that they can be induced to perform the work and undergo the renunciations on which the existence of civilization depends.'⁵ So Elizabeth is hounded by the priest, 'but she was prepared and able to thwart him' (*TB* 136), yet risked the form of social ostracisation that goes with rebelling against a member of the clergy.

A tribal mentality does not believe in religion *per se* – the denizens of Leitrim could have been worshipping badgers for all it matters – the crux of the issue is that the individual is the enemy of society. According to Freud, religious concepts are transmitted in three ways and thereby claim our belief: 'Firstly, because our primal ancestors already believed them; secondly, because we possess proofs which have been handed down to us from antiquity, and thirdly because it is *forbidden to raise the question of their authenticity at all*' (my emphasis).⁶ Elizabeth is diagnosed with breast cancer and even as she nears death, the priest continues his relentless persecution – he suspects that her weary acquiescence 'wasn't agreement but the evasion it actually was.' (*TB* 180) Faith is a personal issue – a gift from God if you will. Elizabeth is a spiritual person and her attitudes to religion mirror those of the author. She becomes enraptured by her surroundings, conscious of the transient nature of man and is in awe of her own predicament: 'She was just passing through. She had come to life out of mystery and would return ... she'd return into that which she could not know' (*TB* 174).

The mystery of death, nature, routine and the scent and texture of the waking day – these represent the sacred and tangible aspects of Elizabeth's religion. The prescribed religion, the one represented by the crass and intrusive priest, is the religion of the masses. Here, there is no mystery – you go to hell or you go to heaven, and basically you accept things as they are and fall into line. Such an attitude tears the heart out of the divine, where sex or death or childbirth are frightening and wonderful because,

5 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 9.

6 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 33.

in reality, we have no idea what we are doing half the time – we stare into the abyss and it consumes us without consideration of niceties. This is what McGahern is driving at: the Church Inc. has cheapened the mysteries and dished up an *à la carte* religion that seems to offer answers to every conceivable question and tolerates no dissent. So this is Freud's Church – conformism over all considerations and the community sticking with a tried and tested formula. Nobody wants to think about these things and as a policing agent, the Church ensured that if you did question, radical treatment was required. One of the most poignant moments in the book comes when a dying Elizabeth is facing the priest in one final battle of the wills and thinks to herself:

It was hard enough to accept the reality of her situation; but it was surely the last and hardest thing to accept its interpretation from knaves and active fools and being compelled to live in them as in strait-jackets. To be able to say yes to the intolerant lunacy so as to be able to go your own way without noise or interruption was to accept everything and was hardest of all to do. (*TB* 180)

There is a certain amount of confusion over what the Church represents and how the clergy interpreted it. I could explain it simply like this: the actual mystery and wonderment of the scriptures, the glamorous processions and beautiful rituals were like a magic show for McGahern. The priests, however, were like those people who go out of their way to explain how the trick actually works, the ones who reduce theatrics to smoke and mirrors. As the author states: 'Gradually, belief in these sacred stories and mysteries fell away without my noticing, until one day I awoke ... and realized I was no longer dreaming' (*LotW* 149).

McGahern's second novel, *The Dark* (1965), is unremittingly bleak. The protagonist ('young' Mahoney) is a boy preparing for his final exams and is beset by both spiritual and psychological doubts. As with all of McGahern's works, the father figure is a sadist, an unmitigated awful human being. At first, the boy considers the priesthood – not so much for spiritual reasons but to escape from his father's household. He goes to stay with a cousin, Father Gerald, for the summer prior to his Leaving Certificate. The opening sequence of his arrival – the rectory perched by the cemetery, the house full of antique clocks and the pubescent (male) housekeeper – represents

the sort of nightmare scenario that we know, in McGahern's hands, will only get worse. Father Gerald is a figure of peevish snobbery, a man who is very conscious of his role as a priest in the parish. He fusses about in the house, rearranging the mantelpiece to his satisfaction and observes to Mahoney: 'absolutely no sense of taste, a very uncultivated people even after forty years of freedom the mass of Irish are.'⁷ This attitude corresponds to something McGahern remarked upon in his essay 'The Church and its Spire': 'In those days it took considerable wealth to put a boy through Maynooth and they looked and acted as if they came from a line of swaggering men ... though they could be violently generous ... in their hearts they despised their own people' (*LotW* 139).

It comes as no surprise when the priest sidles into bed with Mahoney on his first night in the rectory, 'you don't mind do you – it's easier to talk this way, and even in the summer the middle of the night gets cold' (*TD* 70). The scene is shocking by its ordinariness. The priest questions the boy, 'the roving fingers touched your throat', questions ranging from vocation to masturbation. For a moment, the boy feels solidarity – he asks the priest whether he ever had a similar problem with masturbation during his youth and what follows is silence: 'you were by no means in the same boat, you were out there with your sins' (*TD* 73). As the author wrote in 'The Church and its Spire': 'The ordained priest ... [was] completely cut off from the people, both by training and their sacred office which placed them on a supernatural plane between the judgement seat and the ordinary struggling mortals' (*LotW* 142). Returning to Freud and *The Future of an Illusion*, it might well be said that religious society, characterised by practices and 'realities' external to the individual has its origins in the internal instincts of the individual which are now repressed and manifest themselves in a distorted fashion to produce such a society, which in turn (re) produces the individual. Continuing the theme of repressed instincts and their consequences, Freud points out that culture is created by renunciation

7 John McGahern, *The Dark* (London: Faber & Faber, 1965), p. 64. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *TD* followed by the page number.

of instinctual desires in relation to people's primary experiences of sexuality and power and that religion is the major cultural institution which balances the instinctual forces by socialising us into their renunciation and providing us with 'compensation' for our frustration.⁸

Prohibition creates a desire to transgress it and this stands for both *jouissance* and the puritanical attitudes that are prevalent in *The Dark*. In one sense, the expression of sexual desire in *The Dark* is directly concomitant to a desire for death and closure. In young Mahoney's masturbatory fantasies, in this moment, 'everything is as dead as dirt, it is as easy to turn over' (*TD* 31); 'a drifting death from hole to hole' (*TD* 56); 'the body dead as ashes' (*TD* 118). Then, of course, one cannot escape from the theme of the pilgrim led astray by devilish temptations. When young Mahoney arrives at the Ryans', cognisant that something is amiss, he finds himself staring out the window at Ryan's daughters, dressed in swimsuits, 'lobbing a tennis ball over and back across a loosely strung net' (*TD* 91). Ryan stands behind him and whispers in his ear, 'Tempting?' The biblical analogy between the garden, the 'apple-green' swimsuits (*TD* 92), and the serpentine Ryan cannot be overlooked. Mahoney is again led into temptation on the night of the jibs dance but his attempts at forming a 'natural' relationship are once more thwarted for he views it as a 'world of sensuality from which you were ready to lose your soul' that it would not be, 'so easy to drag ... your mouth either for that one destructive kiss' that it would be 'as hard to lose your soul as save it' (*TD* 177–178). The biblical analogies are again evident and Mahoney's attempt to transgress the cultural symbolic, to view sex as a simple biological function, fails, and fails utterly. He may well be an 'oddity' all his days (*TD* 176).

Both these early novels lend credence to a view of McGahern as a man struggling with his faith, coming down on the side of some kind of Pantheist religion where the term *god* – if used at all – is basically a synonym for nature, seen from the point of view of reverence. This is a similar viewpoint to, say, D.H. Lawrence who saw the soul as pervasive, God as nature, and humanity as the way God is self-realised. John Worthen

8 Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, p. 8.

described Lawrence as being 'religious without religion' and as having spent his life attempting to formulate a new creed that would prove more satisfactory than what he considered to be discredited Christianity.⁹ Lawrence is an interesting comparator in many ways, especially when one considers pronouncements like the following: 'What we want is to destroy our false, inorganic connections ... and re-establish the living, organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family. Start with the sun, and the rest will slowly, slowly happen.'¹⁰ I think the term 'religious without religion' is apt for McGahern in these early works – he never satisfactorily attempted to explain himself save that he was grateful for his spiritual upbringing but that his faith was long gone.

None of this is very conclusive but then again, the greatest danger with trying to read too deeply into McGahern is that we take everything he says at face value. I can only assume that during this early period he was busy trying to rid himself of a religion he associated more with his father (paternalistic, brutal, censorious and arrogant) than with his mother (billowy clouds of incense, mystery, the beauty of rituals, gentleness). McGahern's third novel, *The Leavetaking* (1974), consolidates this view – the section where the (unnamed) mother lies in bed and questions the (young) protagonist about whom he loves most in the world, makes for painful reading: 'I am lucky to have such a lovely mother to love.'¹¹ This is followed by the dream of his ordination: 'it would be [the] fulfilment of her wedding day' (*TL* 27). One could write for pages about the Freudian implications of these scenes but I feel it is unnecessary. The prevalent themes are a Manichean preoccupation with those two opposing forces of light and darkness, where religion is refuge or a place of persecution. The clarity

9 John Worthen, *D.H. Lawrence: The Early Years 1885–1912* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 175.

10 D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and Writings on Revelation – The Cambridge Edition of the Letters and Works of D.H. Lawrence*, edited by Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 149.

11 John McGahern, *The Leavetaking* (London: Quartet, 1977), p. 25. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *TL* followed by the page number.

of these early memories is centred around his dying and saintly mother juxtaposed against the tyrannical father. These images, which forever flit through his work, are evidence enough that McGahern's grasp of religion is best determined by the trauma of separation: 'God had all the angels and saints in heaven and his own mother, and why should he call the one and only one I loved, all that I had' (*TL* 29). It is only in later life that he appeared capable of resolving some of these issues, albeit with characteristic ambiguity.

Reading through one of the last of McGahern's short stories, 'The Country Funeral', the difference between it and the stark, claustrophobic villages and homesteads of the earlier novels is jarring. In previous novels, leading right up to *Amongst Women* (1990), the city was a place of refuge or anonymity. McGahern's characters fled from tyrannical fathers, from ennui or the backbreaking drudgery of the bog and potato pits. In 'Wheels', from his first short-story collection, *Nightlines* (1968), the young protagonist returns home to face his father. There is a confrontation resulting from the father's desire to move to the city with his son who immediately rebuffs the idea. The father states, 'I'd give anything to get out of this dump', to which the son replies, "It's quiet and beautiful". The same hollowness came, *I was escaping*, soothing the conscience as the music did the office' (my emphasis).¹² In 'The Country Funeral', there is an entirely different motivation. Three brothers – Philly, who is home from his job in the Saudi oil fields, the crippled Fonsie and John, a staid and unassuming schoolteacher – make the journey from Dublin to Leitrim to bury their uncle Peter. In their youth, accompanied by their mother, they had spent their summers with Peter but were made aware that they were an unwelcome presence. Fonsie clearly despised his uncle, bitterly resents having to return to Leitrim and will take no part in the funeral. John regards the matter as an obligation to fulfil, part grateful for the excuse to be absent from teaching for a

12 John McGahern, *The Collected Stories* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), p. 9. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation *CS* followed by the page number.

few days. Philly, however, is more gregarious and throws himself into the spirit of the occasion.

The ritual of the official Church is of secondary concern – a decade of the rosary is said at midnight in the wake house, so much a routine that even with all the clocks stopped in the house people instinctively knelt at the appropriate time but '[A]s soon as the prayers ended each room took on its separate entity' (CS 392). At the burial, the priest is late and his appearance recalls that wonderful Larkin poem 'Days' with 'the priest and the doctor in their long coats running over the fields.'¹³ Such prescribed rituals do not detract from the base religious symbolism of the event. In itself, the funeral is *carnivalesque*, as McGahern states: 'It is no surprise that funerals remain our most frequent and important carnivals. Religion, like art and politics, can only safely reflect what is on the ground' (*LotW* 141). Fonsie's reaction to the wake is one of disgust: 'The whole thing was barbaric, uncivilized, obscene: they should never have come' (CS 385). The reaction is apt, but what Fonsie fails to grasp is the comfort that such rituals can often bring for the mourners. Everything follows a time-honoured fashion. For example, Philly tries to pay up-front for the goods but is gently rebuffed: 'we'll settle it all out here later' (CS 388). There is one element that strikes me as being slightly at variance with tradition and it has to do with the drink provided for the wake: 'Maggie Cullen made sandwiches with the ham and turkey and tomatoes ... there were not many glasses in the house but few had to drink wine or whiskey from cups' (CS 391). It is odd that wine is mentioned here because if we look at the list of drinks bought from Luke Henry, the storekeeper, the author makes no reference to the purchase of wine (CS 388), nor is it something commonly served at an Irish funeral.

This might be a somewhat fatuous point but I do believe that McGahern is drawing a connection between the liturgy of the Mass and the custom of the people, a tradition that has become sacred through repeated re-enactment. The gesture of touching the forehead of the corpse

13 Philip Larkin, *Collected Poems*, edited with an introduction by Anthony Thwaite (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), p. 98.

is a similar act in that it mirrors the sacrament of Extreme Unction. One of the curios of these rites is how the Irish adapted custom (or myth) into a sacred tradition. As Sean Ó Súilleabháin notes, wakes were 'far merrier than weddings,' with the young people looking forward to the death of an old man or woman so as to provide them 'a night of turf-throwing and frivolity'.¹⁴ What cannot be disputed is that the Church frowned upon these activities and tried hard to discourage the people from indulging in them, mostly to no avail.

The emphasis in 'The Country Funeral' is on drink – the pints in Mulligan's, buying drink for the wake, Philly bringing the pint out to Fonsie in the car, the cigarettes being dropped into the beer bottles, the drinks taken in the pub after Peter is laid to rest in the church. Philly actually tries to buy a second round of drinks for the mourners but is stopped, 'custom allowed one round but no more' (CS 394). Philly brings the bottles of whiskey to the Cullen's, they have drinks in the hotel after the funeral, there are numerous pints consumed on the journey back to Dublin and then they down the final pints in Mulligan's, which brings the story full circle. There is a spirituality of sorts at work here – not a spirituality of drink but a deeper religion modified by necessity. As McGahern states: 'religion is our relationship with our total environment; morals, our relationship with others' (*LotW* 146). Because Christianity and the environment were so closely entwined, such traditions could be seen as an Irish solution to the puritanical constraints of the official Church. The two operate in tandem and are utterly indivisible. Thus, in writing this story, McGahern was unquestionably influenced by the religious impulse in that he was talking about a tradition that is as much pagan as Catholic. Fonsie, who watches the slow procession of the coffin bearers to the cemetery in the hill, finds the scene 'unbearably moving' (CS 400). However, he jibes Philly about the primitiveness of the burial rite, 'like a crowd of apes staggering up a hill with something they had just looted. The whole lot of you could have come out of the Dark Ages' (CS 405). Philly, however, is more reverential: 'they honour the dead ... people still mean something down there' (CS 404);

14 Seán Ó Súilleabháin, *Irish Wake Amusements* (Cork: Mercier Press, 1967), p. 26.

‘everyone gathered around, and the priest started to speak of the dead and the Mystery and the Resurrection’ (CS 405). Both versions are correct, after a fashion, for to an outsider the rites *are* primitive but to those accustomed to such things, they can be deeply spiritual occasions where the vague terrors of death are banished through custom and prayer.

At the close of the story, Philly makes the decision to buy Peter’s farm and settle down there in early retirement. Rural Ireland has taken on a new and separate guise. For Philly, there is something deeply spiritual, almost, by genetics, *familiar* about Peter’s farm, the neighbours and the small community at large. It cannot be explained by suggesting that such a conclusion is just another example of the general motif of escape so prevalent in the works of McGahern. There is something else at work here which is part religious, part mystery. The draw of the countryside, the need for sanctuary, reaffirmation, that deeper meaning within us which cannot be explained away by those too frightened to have an original thought of their own, that meaning which *is* religious. It is sacred because it confirms within us a primitive need which resembles the way we view death or any other mystery. We can take it apart, assure people that kinship is merely a biological want like the need for love or sex or whiskey. But such a dismantling cheapens an essential dimension of many people’s lives, turns everything into a mathematical formula and allows no respite from those who disdainfully talk down the religious impulse. McGahern holds firm to the mystery, he speaks of it reverentially, he does not have to explain it – either you accept that Philly’s driving force is borne out of the same unexplainable rites as those that accompany all such reverential mysteries or you wonder what the fuss is all about.

McGahern’s *That They May Face The Rising Sun* (2002) could be regarded as a sequel to ‘The Country Funeral’. The novel revolves around a year in the life of a retired couple, the Ruttledges, who have decamped from London to a bucolic existence in County Leitrim. In much the same way as the natives adapted the practice and rites of the organised Church to best suit their own needs in the aforementioned short story, the opening pages of *That They May Face The Rising Sun* help reinforce this view. A neighbour of the Ruttledges, Jamesie, enters the household looking for news. The banter goes back and forth with Ruttledge (mis)quoting John

Bunyan’s poem ‘He That Is Down Needs Fear No Fall’ and Jamesie – misunderstanding the meaning – questions him on why he doesn’t go to Mass, ‘if you are that low?’¹⁵ Ruttledge states that he misses going but:

‘I don’t believe’

‘I don’t believe,’ he mimicked. ‘None of us believes and we go. That’s no bar.’

‘I’d feel like a hypocrite. Why do *you* go if you don’t believe?’

‘To look at the girls. To see the whole performance,’ he cried out, and started to shake with laughter. ‘We go to see all the other hypocrites.’ (TRS 2)

McGahern suggested once that the ordinary country people viewed Catholicism as just another ‘ideological habit they were forced to wear like all the others since the time of the Druids’, turning to it only in dire need and spending the rest of the time ‘observing its compulsory rituals’ with cynicism (*LotW* 150). However, McGahern makes the point in the same essay that the human need for spiritual reassurance, despite ‘material ease’ and ‘scientific advancement’, can never be eliminated (*LotW* 151). This is a fair argument. As mentioned before, McGahern stated that his view of the world could be found in Freud’s *The Future of an Illusion*. The quote comes from an article, ‘God and Me’ which was published only a few weeks before his death. There is some repetition from an earlier essay, ‘The Church and the Spire’, but we may assume this to be McGahern’s final word on the matter. Freud envisioned that one could analytically dissolve religious belief because it is infantile, and replace it with a rational approach to the challenges of life. Optimism and faith would be rooted in a realistic commitment to the ethical rules that facilitate the social life of human beings. McGahern was no polemicist and while one may say his allusion to *The Future of an Illusion* was left hopelessly undeveloped, one can detect some warmth towards his native religion that far exceeds Freud’s analytical superciliousness. There is even a certain hankering for what has been lost, for he closes the essay ‘God and Me’ with the lines, ‘Still

15 John McGahern, *That They May Face The Rising Sun* (London: Faber & Faber, 2003), p. 2. All subsequent references will be to this edition will be denoted by the abbreviation TRS followed by the page number.

sings the Ghost, 'What then?'. This is an allusion to Yeats' poem 'What Then?' and akin to Yeats' troubled permutations, there is a hint that the author, being without true religion and lacking in superstition, ended his days wondering what was it all about? What was the point? Wouldn't everything come to naught?

In some regards, *That They May Face The Rising Sun* is set in direct opposition to the stark atmosphere of, say, *The Dark*. McGahern's father archetype (and all he represented) was buried at the close of *Amongst Women* and for this novel the atmosphere harkens more to his image of the mother: a gentle, nostalgic reverence. The solitary clerical portrait in the novel comes in the guise of Father Conroy, a bluff, easy-going individual who keeps cattle on presbytery grounds and attends the local mart to the amusement or consternation of others. In a brief meeting with Ruttledge, the priest expounds on his own personal faith: 'He spoke with warmth of his mother and his father ... "They believed and brought me into life. What was good enough for them will do for me. That is all the reason I need"' (TRS 227). Ruttledge betrays something of himself when he tells the priest: 'It would be wrong to say I envy you' (TRS 227). On his own terms, Father Conroy is, in the words of Patrick Ryan, 'Plain. The priests had this country abulling with religion once. It's a good job it's easing off' (TRS 86). The people appear content with this arrangement: for example, he hears private confession from Ruttledge's uncle, The Shah, and while Ruttledge upbraids him for 'hauling the poor priest in from the country to hear your confession', the Shah responds, 'It's more than you do anyhow and that poor man you met going out needs a lock of pounds from time to time like everybody else' (TRS 209).

The atmosphere has changed entirely – closed confines have opened up and as Jamesie expansively announces at the close of the novel, 'I may not have travelled far but I know the whole world' (TRS 312). *That They May Face The Rising Sun* closes with a funeral and the same aspects and actions which dominated 'The Country Funeral' are again called into play, elaborated upon and in turn become more than a simple rite. The funeral of Johnny becomes rather an affirmation of a closed community. The barriers which stood in the way of young Mahoney in *The Dark*, have become defences against the onset of change – what was familiar will soon give way

to a more brash, destructive urbanisation that will change the face of Ireland forever. Patrick Ryan is unavailable to dress the corpse, he is in Dublin 'to do work for the Reynolds that have houses there' (TRS 269) – the sort of housing which presaged a crazed fifteen-year orgy of construction and the jettisoning of a way of life so lovingly illustrated in the novel. Indeed, all that remains now is a final wake and at the last, tradition is upheld. As they dig the grave of Johnny, Ruttledge asks whether it 'makes a great difference that his head lies in the west' (TRS 297). Patrick Ryan replies that it makes every difference or no difference at all, for 'he sleeps with his head in the west ... so that when he wakes he may face the rising sun ... we look to the resurrection of the dead' (TRS 297).

To conclude, the argument I made in the opening paragraphs of this essay is that the religious impulse in McGahern's fiction could be explained in some way by the phenomenon of *Old Moore's Almanac*. At first, this might have appeared to be a specious argument. But if you look at the way in which rural Ireland has changed over the past twenty years, it is worthwhile to quote in full the argument McGahern made in his essay 'God and Me', for it is a prescient argument indeed:

When a long abuse of power is corrected, it is generally replaced by an opposite violence. In the new dispensations, all that was good ... before is tarred indiscriminately with the bad. This is, to some extent, what is happening in Ireland today. The most dramatic change in my lifetime has been the collapse of the Church's absolute power. This has brought freedom and sanity in certain areas of human behaviour after a long suppression – as well as a new intolerance. (*LotW* 150)

The argument, I think, is based upon the following premise: the Church in Ireland did not operate outside the public sphere in some hermeneutic space. No, in reality the people pretty much get the Church they deserve and the one they desire. In some ways, the absolute power of the Church is no different than the absolute power allotted to bankers after the sudden collapse of clerical authority in the early nineties. So long as people are willing to tolerate absolutism, absolutism will thrive and whether you are handing out indulgences or crippling forty-year mortgages, the difference in levels of abuse is scant. The difference between the two institutions is this: the Church, for better or worse, focused upon the community whereas

modern Ireland focused on the individual, progress, tearing up the fabric of society to make a quick buck and get out as quickly as they could. The Church leaves a more ambivalent epitaph. For all the abuses they committed, they did offer a service of sorts to people more lasting than an empty housing estate. They offered us the smoke and mirrors which make life (and death) tolerable in the face of the unknown. As McGahern indicates, it matters little what religion the denizens of Leitrim practiced – the ceremonies of the dead, the rituals of life – because all these things are inherently good. They are good because they are necessary; they bring a community together and offer consolation in a time of confusion or distress. This is McGahern's religion – the religion he associated with his mother, the spiritual understanding, the need to make sense of the unknown, of loss and that hidden understanding which binds a community. The religion he associated with his father has been buried under a welter of scandal and I cannot see it regaining a comparative position of power in my lifetime and this is a welcome development. However, we have not yet learned that placing absolute faith in an institution – either religious or secular – is simply another way of mortgaging away our sense of Christian responsibility. The generation after us, burdened with massive debt, may well look on us as we look on our forebears – partly with contempt, partly with despair. This is McGahern's gift, he provides a lasting account of those years between epochs when we could, perhaps, have 'seized the day', had not avarice and stupidity won through instead.

We stopped buying *Old Moore's Almanac* when my grandfather died. It no longer held the same appeal and when I go home now, *Cosmopolitan* and a scatter of home development magazines have taken its place on the coffee table.

PART 3

The Poets and the Playwrights

EUGENE O'BRIEN

'Any Catholics among you ...?':
Seamus Heaney and the Real of Catholicism

'Religion's never mentioned here,' of course.
'You know them by their eyes,' and hold your tongue.
'One side's as bad as the other,' never worse.
Christ, it's near time that some small leak was sprung
In the great dykes the Dutchman made
To dam the dangerous tide that followed Seamus.
Yet for all this art and sedentary trade
I am incapable.¹

So begins section III of Seamus Heaney's poem, 'Whatever You Say Say Nothing,' in *North*, and the dialectical relationship between the words 'never mentioned,' and the paradoxical title of the poem, which urges enunciation but cautions against enunciating anything specific, will be very much the locus of this particular chapter. I hope to analyse the ways in which Heaney could be described as a Catholic poet; to understand the polysemic resonances of that proper adjective-common noun combination in this description; to probe the fluid epistemological status of the Catholicism in question and, also, to unpack the ideological and hegemonic meanings that accrete to those terms. I will argue that the reason that religion is never mentioned in the 'here' of the Northern Ireland of the Troubles is because it constitutes the Lacanian real in its effect on people and, as such, it is only accessible through the glancing, anamorphic perspective of the language of poetry which looks awry at the language of society, culture and ideology in order to present the real of those constructions.

1 Seamus Heaney, *North* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 59.

The work of Seamus Heaney has long been associated with Catholicism. In 1972, when he took his family from the war-torn streets of Belfast to the rural solitude of Glanmore in County Wicklow, in the Republic of Ireland, his decision was described by Ian Paisley's *Protestant Telegraph* newspaper in terms of a 'well-known papist propagandist' leaving the North for his 'spiritual home in the Republic'.² Similar associations have been made by other critics. Blake Morrison, speaking about the poems of the first section of *North*, wrote that it seems as if he is having these poems 'written for him' by his nationalist, Catholic psyche;³ Conor Cruise O'Brien felt that in *North*, Heaney was voicing the atavisms of Heaney's tribe: it was 'the tragedy of a people in a place: the Catholics of Northern Ireland';⁴ while Edna Longley felt that the book achieved its effect 'by concentrating on the Catholic psyche as bound to immolation, and within that immolation, to savage tribal loyalties'.⁵ Clearly the Catholicism in question here is a communal and ideological one. It is that version of religion cited by Eric Voegelin in his *Political Religions*, when he spoke of an ideology that could be called a 'Party-Church', which provided a 'surrogate affective community based on the terrible pathos and plangency of class, race or nation, in which the lonely individual could re-experience the warm fraternal flow of the world'. He also noted that central to this ideological position was the "anti-idea', or the Satanic foe',⁶ which opposed the ideology of the group.

This, I would argue, is this communal sense of Catholicism with which Heaney has been linked throughout his career, and there is some justification for this. He told Dennis O'Driscoll that one of his earliest poems, in 1962, was about Loyalist emblems 'cut into the stone pier beside Carrickfergus Castle', and it is interesting that what he calls 'the sectarian

2 Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of a Poet* (London: Macmillan, 2003), p. 120.

3 Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Methuen, 1982), p. 67.

4 Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'A Slow North-East Wind', *The Listener* (September 25, 1975), pp. 404-405, p. 404.

5 Edna Longley, *Poetry in the Wars* (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1986), p. 154.

6 Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: The Clash of Religion and Politics, from the Great War to the War on Terror* (New York: Harper Collins, 2007), p. 120.

seam of Northern life' was such an important point of departure for his poetic development. This poem would have predated the troubles by some five years but, as he notes, the 'B-Special Constabulary were on the roads at night', 'anti-Catholic speeches were still being delivered by Unionist leaders and 'the whole gerrymandered life of the place seemed set to continue'.⁷ This sense of awareness of the communality of Catholicism and the binary oppositional role of Protestantism has appeared through different poems. In Section VII of his 'Station Island' sequence, he writes about the murder of a shopkeeper, William Strathearne, who was killed late at night when answering his door to men in uniform. He tells Karl Miller that he worried about making the killers in the poem members of the RUC, 'since it had been rogue members of the police force who had committed the actual murder. Policemen who were paramilitaries when off-duty, as it were'. Heaney goes on to explain that Strathearne was killed because he was an 'easy Catholic target, living in a largely Protestant village'.⁸ In the end, Heaney left the poem as politically neutral by not making the murderers members of the police force, and this in itself is an index of his more nuanced form of identification with Catholicism of the communal kind. Indeed I would argue that Heaney's own form of interaction with Catholicism is of a very personal kind, one which attempts to grasp a personal 'real' of Catholicism, a notion which is far removed from the ideological and institutional Church. I use the term 'real' in a sense that is specific to the psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan.

For Lacan, human interaction can best be understood in terms of 'those elementary registers ... known as the symbolic, the imaginary, and the real – a distinction never previously made in psychoanalysis'.⁹ Volumes have been written about these three orders, with the imaginary being the order of ideal dyadic connections and identifications; the symbolic

7 Dennis O'Driscoll and Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney* (London: Faber, 2008), p. 65.

8 Karl Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines Press, 2000), p. 25.

9 Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, translated by Bruce Fink, Héloïse Fink and Russell Grigg (New York: Norton, 2006), p. 255.

order being the formal code of rules in any activity (for example language), and the real being that which is beyond expression. Perhaps the best explanation is given by Slavoj Žižek, in his *How to Read Lacan*, who uses the practical example of a game of chess. He explains that the rules of chess are the symbolic dimension, with each piece being differentially defined: the 'knight is defined only by the moves this figure can make'. The imaginary order here is the way in which: 'different pieces are shaped and characterized by their names (king, queen, knight)', as this is how they are identified, and the player becomes familiar with the shape and name and invests it with a specific meaning. Finally the real is 'the entire complex set of contingent circumstances that affect the course of the game: the intelligence of the players, the unpredictable intrusions that may disconcert one player.'¹⁰

The idea of the real as 'the domain of that which subsists outside of symbolization,'¹¹ means that acquiring knowledge of it is almost impossible. However, Lacan stresses that in every subject, the real 'is there, identical to his existence, a noise in which one can hear anything and everything, ready to submerge with its roar what the "reality principle" constructs there that goes by the name of the "outside world"'.¹² Žižek again provides some cogent examples of the meaning of the real. In his book on *Violence*, and speaking of the logic of capital, he notes that reality is the 'social reality of the actual people involved in interaction and in the productive processes', while the Real is the 'inexorable "abstract," spectral logic of capital that determines what goes on in social reality', and he goes on to exemplify this gap in terms of visiting a country that is in an economic shambles, and noting the misery and poverty to be found in the lived lives of people, but adding that this is not reflected in the 'economist's report that one reads afterwards which informs us that the country's economic situation is "financially sound"'¹³ – what matters here is the real of capital. He adds a parallel example when

10 Slavoj Žižek, *How to Read Lacan* (New York: Norton, 2007), pp. 8–9.

11 Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 324.

12 Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 324.

13 Slavoj Žižek, *Violence: Six Sideways Reflections* (London: Picador, 2008), p. 13.

speaking of Kant and French Revolution. He makes the point that for Kant, in his *Conflict of Faculties* (1795), the Revolution's true significance does not reside in what actually went on in Paris but in the reaction outside France and to the spirit of revolution and freedom which ensued:

To translate this into Lacanian language, the real event, the very dimension of the Real, was not in the immediate reality of the violent events in Paris, but in how this reality appeared to observers and in the hopes thus awakened in them. The reality of what went on in Paris belongs to the temporal dimension of empirical history; the 'sublime image that generated enthusiasm belongs to eternity.'¹⁴

For Lacan, 'whatever upheaval we subject it to', the real 'is always and in every case in its place; it carries its place stuck to the sole of its shoe, there being nothing that can exile it from it.'¹⁵ In Heaney's case, parts of this real are the bread in the bone aspects of being a Catholic, and poetry, for him, will be the best way of trying to examine what it is that is stuck to that metaphorical shoe.

I suggest that for Heaney, the real of Catholicism is not in its sociological conditioning, but rather in the images and underlying symbolic and linguistic core that it has created for him. He has spoken of his work as a 'slow obstinate Papish burn,'¹⁶ a clear motivating factor of his early work, but as he grows older, this sense of communal belonging becomes more nuanced and is gradually deconstructed by a sense of realisation of the other as a position of worth, as opposed to Voegelin's sense of the 'anti-idea'. In an interview with John Brown, in 2002, he referred specifically to the 'Papish burn' quote, and explained it and how much he has changed his position since then. He notes that the term 'Catholic' has become more of a 'sociological term than anything else', and goes on to discuss how:

14 Žižek, *Violence*, pp. 51–52.

15 Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 17.

16 Seamus Deane, 'Unhappy and at Home: interview with Seamus Heaney', *The Crane Bag Book of Irish Studies* (Dublin: Blackwater Press, 1982), pp. 66–72, p. 67.

'Papish burn', I'm sorry to say, caves in to that same old clichéd idiom. It doesn't help. It's not further language. Catholic is less conniving than Papish, but if you describe yourself as a Catholic in the North, it can still sound like a defiance or a provocation. In certain circles in the South, it might even be taken to mean that deep down you are unrepentant about child abuse by priests and not altogether against corporal punishment in orphanages. I exaggerate, I know, but only in order to emphasize the way the common mind tends to react when faced with the fact of religion and religious practice and religious value.¹⁷

So is this the Catholicism with which Heaney identifies and through which he is ideologically constructed? Is he a Northern Irish, Republican, Catholic and are those terms the limit conditions of his view on the world? Or is it part of his project to attempt to transform the constructed reality of these conditions through his work?

He was asked this precise question by Karl Miller who sees Heaney as conveying in the interview a sense that there is a man in his poems who is 'to some degree an adherent of the Republican tradition, and still in some sense a Catholic. Are you that man? The answer is revealing:

Yes. That's clear. Except that, strictly speaking, I'd be better described as coming from the 'constitutional nationalist' tradition. Within Northern Ireland I would be perceived by the Unionist community, rightly, as someone with a Hiberno-centric view of the world, and therefore, as politically suspect, not to be encouraged. In order to have political effect, which I *am* interested in, you don't have to be writing 'political poetry'. Your presence as a poet, and your voice within the polis, is a political effect. The fact that there is someone called Seamus speaking into the polyphony is an effect, and you hold your own politically by doing a good job.¹⁸

It is clear from this that Heaney's Catholicism is a nuanced one and one which has taken into account the problems which the Catholic Church has been having in contemporary Ireland. To be a Catholic poet in the North of Ireland in 1969 is a very different proposition to being a Catholic poet in Dublin in 2010.

17 John Brown (ed.), *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from Northern Ireland* (Clare: Salmon Publishing, 2002), p. 83.

18 Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation*, pp. 51–52.

It is almost a truism today to posit the inexorable march of secularisation and the twilight of religion. In contemporary Ireland, with the various and well-documented scandals that have riven the foundations of the Catholic Church, the state of religious observation has never been more fragile, and the influence of the Church has never been more tenuous. One could well agree with Jean-Luc Nancy when he observes that:

The de-Christianization of the West is not a hollow phrase, but the more that process advances the more it becomes manifest, through the fate of immobilized churches and anemic theologies, that what still attaches us in many ways to the West is the nervation of Christianity itself.¹⁹

And in a specifically Irish context, this nervation of Catholicism is evidenced both in terms of its moral authority, and in terms of its structures of devotional observation. This has been a gradual process. As Eamon Maher has noted, the position of the Irish Church was in decline prior to the Papal visit in 1979, and I think he is correct in opining that the Papal visit 'rather than marking the apogee of Catholic practice in Ireland, was more like the last kick of a dying horse.'²⁰ In the Republic of Ireland, what Catholicism stands for has become increasingly nerved as the moral stance of the Church on sexual matters, on crime, on homosexuality and on artificial contraception has made it an increasingly nebulous presence in the mindset of the ordinary people.

Part of the reason for this is structural. In *Practical Reason*, Pierre Bourdieu makes the point that structures like law, 'myth and religion', achieve their power to a sense of shared agreement and belief:

19 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*. Translated by Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Malenfant and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 142.

20 Andrew Auge, Louise Fuller, John Littleton, Eamon Maher, 'After the Ryan and Murphy Reports: A Roundtable on the Irish Catholic Church', *New Hibernia Review*, Volume 14, Number 1, 2010, pp. 59–77, p. 64.

Symbolic order rests on the imposition upon all agents of structuring structures that owe part of their consistency and resilience to the fact that they are coherent and systematic (at least in appearance) and that they are objectively in agreement with the objective structures of the social world.²¹

For Bourdieu, the effect of these agents of agreement is not overt or even epistemologically warranted by the individuals; instead there is a tacit, affective and emotive connection between structure and subject. There is not, as Weber had believed, any kind of 'free act of clear conscience' involved here but rather a 'prereflexive agreement between objective structures and embodied structures', which has a strong 'unconscious' dimension which is rooted in the 'immediate' experience of the individual.²² This view of the effect of religion would seem to be underwritten by the reaction of people in contemporary Ireland to the current situation in the Catholic Church.

The reaction to the clerical abuse scandals, the cover ups, the duplicity of high-profile priests like Bishop Eamon Casey and father Michael Cleary, along with the Ferns, Ryan and Murphy reports, has not been one of violent rebellion. Instead, it has been to sideline the church and embrace a process of secularisation. The term *à la carte* Catholicism would be an apt one as people tend to send their children to Catholic schools, where they then participate in the sacraments that are appropriate to children – baptism, first communion and confirmation. However, parents and children tend to see these sacraments as symbolic and maturational social markers as opposed to having any real investment in them.

This is best illustrated by the possibly apocryphal tale of the parents whose child was not present at her own communion. The following day, the school photograph was being taken and the girl, resplendent in her white communion dress, duly took her place in the class grouping. Questioned by the teacher as to why the child had missed the ceremony itself, the mother

21 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), p. 55.

22 Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, p. 56.

replied that with all of the preparations for the big event, the tanning, the hairdressing, the preparation of the communion dress and the limousine, by the time it was all done the ceremony had nearly started so the family went straight to the hotel for the meal. Whether true or not, this story illustrates the empty shell that Catholicism has become in Ireland today. Mass attendance has fallen and people have taken on a very postmodern position of selecting their own codes of ethics, morals and behaviour. This attitude to religion underlines Baudrillard's seemingly paradoxical notion that 'it is from the death of God that religions emerge',²³ and 'the phantom of religion floats over a world now long desacralized'.²⁴

In Northern Ireland, as we have seen, religion was far from a phantom; instead it was a classically defined ideological position which was part of what Jacques Lacan would term an inaugural knot, in the symbolic order, which is almost impossible to untie.²⁵ To be republican was to be nationalist and Catholic; to be unionist was to be loyalist and Protestant. And in a situation where religion and ideology were inextricably connected, and were in severe conflict, the adherence of people to their religion was extreme and not in any way nerved, in Nancy's sense. Thus to speak of the Catholicism of Seamus Heaney is very different to speaking of the Catholicism of writers from the Republic of Ireland.

He makes the point that his Catholic upbringing and education at Saint Columb's College in Derry had profound influences on him. These are highly contradictory and complex, and in this chapter I want to trace the different paths that comprise his complex and highly nuanced response to the many and diverse, conscious and unconscious, spiritual and socio-political influences of Catholicism on his work and on his being. At one level, he is all too aware of the nervation of Catholicism of which we spoke earlier, noting that 'mass-going has declined' and that 'the population is

23 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 19.

24 Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulations*, p. 100.

25 Lacan, *Écrits*, p. 87.

no longer in thrall to the man behind the grille in the confessional'. He has suggested that due to the sexual abuse scandals, and the Church's reaction to them, that the 'mystery' of the Catholic Church is now 'vitiated'²⁶ but in this chapter, it is the influence of the Catholic *mentalité* on Heaney that I wish to examine, and I will do this in terms of two influences of that term.

In socio-political terms, Catholicism was really a mark of identity which was imposed on Heaney as a given. Indeed, in *Preoccupations*, he identified the nascent conflict in Northern Ireland in terms which placed the Catholic/Protestant binary as constituent of the violence. Referring back to a poem he had written about the 1798 Rebellion, he went on to add that he had not realised, when writing that poem, that the 'original heraldic murderous encounter between Protestant yeoman and Catholic rebel was to be initiated again in the summer of 1969, in Belfast, two months after the book was published.'²⁷ In 'Freedman', in *North*, he writes about the subtle form of bondage which his Catholic tradition wrapped him: 'my murex was the purple dye of lents / On calendars all fast and abstinence.'²⁸ He was, to quote himself 'mired in attachment'²⁹ from a very early stage of his career and there was an expectation on him to speak for his tribe, and his people. This is also clear in 'Exposure', where he expresses his wish that his gift of writing could be a 'slingstone / whirled for the desperate',³⁰ and where he talks of his 'responsible *tristia*', that sense of collective responsibility to his own socio-religious identity.

Interestingly, this image is revisited in *District and Circle* where, in 'The Nod', Heaney speaks about a sling again but now his focus is on the weight and mass of the object contained in the sling. He is talking about waiting for meat in 'Louden's butcher's shop and gets 'rib-roast and shin' wrapped in brown paper 'but seeping blood' and he speaks of the physical

26 Miller, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation*, p. 36.

27 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968–1978* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 56.

28 Heaney, *North*, p. 61.

29 Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 102.

30 Heaney, *North*, p. 72.

weight of that bloody burden – 'like dead weight in a sling / Heavier far than I had been expecting'.³¹ Here the negative influences of the *tristia* of Catholic and nationalist identity weighs heavily on Heaney who has dealt with this almost tribal imperative towards speaking for his own side throughout his poetic career. The context of this underscores this reading as the nodding of the title is a description of how, on Saturday evenings the 'local B-Men' (B-Specials – members of an armed division of the Royal Ulster Constabulary who were widely perceived as being anti-Catholic), described as 'neighbours with guns' were in a different relationship with Heaney's father as they wore their uniforms:

Neighbours with guns, parading up and down,
Some nodding at my father almost past him
As if deliberately they'd aimed and missed him
Or couldn't seem to place him, not just then.³²

It is as if the neighbourly connections have been displaced and dislocated by the uniform; in their role as special constables, these neighbours no longer recognise Heaney's father as a neighbour: he is now just another Catholic who may be a problematic presence to their state.

And clearly, this ideological weight of Catholicism has had its effect on Heaney. Indeed one could say that his own *ars poetica* is teleologically focused on finding some hermeneutic connection between himself and his religion – to use Bourdieu's terms, he is trying to come to terms with the unconscious aspect of his Catholicism and to unpack the many and various engrained imprints of the particular brand of religion that is operative in Northern Ireland. As he puts it in *Preoccupations*, 'from that moment' (1969) the problems of poetry had now become intermeshed with his own socio-political persona and had moved from being 'simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images

31 Seamus Heaney, *District and Circle* (London: Faber, 2006), p. 33.

32 Heaney, *District and Circle*, p. 33.

and symbols adequate to our predicament.³³ The personal pronoun, first person plural is highly significant here as the 'murex' of his own creed is expressed. In his thinking about poetry, Heaney is now looking for a symbolic code which will crack his own complex identifications. He is looking for a mode of discourse which will allow him to would be possible to encompass 'the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity.'³⁴ That the intensity is religious is striking because this religious dimension has more often than not been elided from political discourse in Northern Ireland. Indeed, Heaney himself participates in such elision, a few sentences later, noting that he is 'not thinking simply of the sectarian division' between Catholics and Protestants when he is using the term 'religious'.³⁵ However, he is well aware of the religious dimension of the killings, in the struggle between 'territorial piety and imperial power', and stresses this in a significant quotation:

Now I realize that this idiom is remote from the agnostic world of economic interest whose iron hand operates in the velvet glove of 'talks between elected representatives', and remote from the political manoeuvres of power-sharing; but it is not remote from the psychology of the Irishmen and Ulstermen who do the killing, and not remote from the bankrupt psychology and mythologies implicit in the terms Irish Catholic and Ulster Protestant. The question, as ever, is 'How with this rage shall beauty hold a plea?' And my answer is, by offering 'befitting emblems of adversity'.³⁶

He is looking for that unconscious affective dimension of agreement of which Bourdieu spoke, and the best way of understanding what he is doing, and indeed why poetry is the most effective discourse in which to enact such critical hermeneutics, is via the work of Jacques Lacan and Martin Heidegger. We have already noted the Lacanian typology of imaginary, symbolic and real, so it is now time to look at what Heidegger has to say on the matter.

33 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 56.

34 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, pp. 56–57.

35 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 57.

36 Heaney, *Preoccupations*, p. 57.

Poetry is the most embodied form of language, given its ability to embody language in somatic bursts of description, image and metaphor. For Heidegger, poetry prioritises and performs 'the physical element of language, its vocal and written character',³⁷ and of all written modes, it is closest to the body given the modes of delivery which are both oral and written. In a sense, to read a poem aloud, to say a poem embodies the words in a way that is significantly different to reading it internally or even writing about it. In this sense the mouth is the point of contact where the thought of the poet touches the thought of the reader but also where the language of the poem touches the body of the sayer of the poem. A poem is very much a moment of Heideggerian presencing where 'body and mouth are part of the earth's flow and growth',³⁸ and where listening to a poem being read aloud, being made present, is how 'we hear the sound of language rising like the earth.'³⁹ So in poetry, aspects of the real are made known to us.

Given the fact that the Catholic experience is a seminal one in his work, it is interesting that the word 'Catholic' itself appears only eight times in his oeuvre: in 'Docker' (*Death of a Naturalist*)⁴⁰; in 'In Memoriam Francis Ledwidge' (*Field Work*)⁴¹; in a note describing William Carleton (*Station Island*)⁴²; in 'The Settle Bed' (*Seeing Things*);⁴³ three times in 'Senior Infants' and one in 'Brancardier' (*District and Circle*).⁴⁴ This paucity of reference would seem to question the perception of Heaney as a 'Catholic' poet, but this is to overlook the enunciation of the real in his discourse and in his poetry, and a classic instance of the real is to be found in his Nobel lecture *Crediting Poetry*.

37 Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, translated by Peter D. Hertz and Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper, 1971), p. 98.

38 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 98.

39 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 101.

40 Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist* (London: Faber, 1966), p. 41.

41 Seamus Heaney, *Field Work* (London: Faber, 1979), p. 59.

42 Seamus Heaney, *Station Island* (London: Faber, 1984), p. 122.

43 Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London: Faber, 1991), p. 28.

44 Heaney, *District and Circle*, pp. 29–32; 48.

On 5 January 1976, near the village of Kingsmill in south Armagh, in Northern Ireland, a mini-bus carried sixteen textile workers home from work in Glenanne, to Bessbrook along the Whitecross to Bessbrook road. Five of these workers were Catholics and eleven were Protestants. Four of the Catholics got out at Whitecross, while the remainder continued on the road to Bessbrook.⁴⁵ Somewhere on this road, the coach was stopped by a group of approximately twelve armed men. Given the ongoing nature of the sectarian violence in Northern Ireland, and the presence of British troops across the whole area, such checkpoints were almost normal. The men in the minibus would have assumed that they were being stopped and searched by a British Army or RUC checkpoint, and when ordered to line up beside the bus, they obeyed. However, at this point, the gunmen ordered the only Catholic, Richard Hughes, to step forward. Hughes' workmates thought then that the armed men were loyalists, come to kill Hughes and tried to stop him from identifying himself. However, when he stepped forward, he was told: 'Get down the road and don't look back.'⁴⁶ The remaining eleven men were shot, with Armalite rifles, SLRs, a 9mm pistol and an M1 carbine, a total of 136 rounds were fired in less than a minute. Ten men died at the scene, and one, Alan Black, survived despite having eighteen gunshot wounds. A police officer who came upon the scene, and who was, presumably, habituated to such sights, spoke of an 'indescribable scene of carnage.'⁴⁷

This horrific scene is one which stands out against the backdrop of the thirty-year conflict in Northern Ireland. Indeed it gained renewed fame when it was re-narrated by Seamus Heaney in his Nobel Prize acceptance speech in Stockholm, on 7 December 1995. Entitled *Crediting Poetry*, this lecture spoke of Heaney's growth as a writer and of his developing intersection with the world around him. It is interesting to note that, despite being seen as a Catholic writer by a lot of critics and commentators, Heaney's first

45 Toby Harnden, *Bandit Country* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1999), p. 134.

46 Harnden, *Bandit Country*, p. 135.

47 David McKittrick, Seamus Kelters, Brian Feeney and Chris Thornton, *Lost Lives: The Stories of the Men, Women and Children Who Died Through the Northern Ireland Troubles*, third edition (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 2004), p. 611.

mention of the Catholic aspect of his poetic environment comes, not in connection with his early life, nor in connection with any form of spiritual context, but in his retelling of the Kingsmill massacre. He outlines how the minibus was stopped and how the men were lined up and then asked: 'any Catholics among you, step out here.'⁴⁸ He goes on to note that the presumption must have been that the Catholic among them was about to be murdered in a sectarian killing. He then outlines the next stage of the story:

It was a terrible moment for him, caught between dread and witness, but he did make a motion to step forward. Then, the story goes, in that split second of decision, and in the relative cover of the winter evening darkness, he felt the hand of the Protestant worker next to him take his hand and squeeze it in a signal that said no, don't move, we'll not betray you, nobody need know what faith or party you belong to. All in vain, however, for the man stepped out of the line; but instead of finding a gun at his temple, he was thrown backward and away as the gunmen opened fire on those remaining in the line, for these were not Protestant terrorists, but members, presumably, of the Provisional IRA.⁴⁹

Some 3,600 people were killed in the conflict in Northern Ireland and one might well ask why Heaney chose to discuss this atrocity in his Nobel lecture. I would suggest two reasons for this: firstly, because in this particular case, what we might call the Lacanian real of the Northern Irish situation found expression, in the haptic nature of the contact (both destructive and constructive) between Catholic and Protestant that is to be found in this encounter, because for Heaney, the real that is to be found here is in that poetic language which allows the body to speak and which faces death and disaster with some gesture towards the transcendent, with some reaching towards the transcendent and towards the other.

He makes the point that this interaction, voiced under the name Catholic, is one which is part of the context of the politico-religious conflict in Northern Ireland. He remembers thinking of a friend who was imprisoned on suspicion of involvement in a politically motivated murder, and

48 Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry* (Dublin Gallery Press, 1995), p. 17.

49 Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, p. 18.

wondering if, by such an act his friend might be 'helping the future to be born, breaking the repressive forms and liberating new potential in the only way that worked, that is to say the violent way – which therefore became, by extension, the right way.'⁵⁰ However it is in the next point that the real of Heaney's Catholicism, a real which influences his poetry in its reaching towards the transcendent in the other, is to be found. He notes that the 'real' hope for the future in this incident is surely in the 'contraction which that terrified Catholic felt on the roadside when another hand gripped his hand, not in the gunfire that followed, so absolute and so desolate, if also so much a part of the music of what happens.'⁵¹ Here the touch of the other is the real of the experience, a reaching out to another human being and a sense of shared identity in the face of death. In this Heaney's sense of the real of Catholicism comes close to the views of Maurice Blanchot when he notes that 'a poem is not without date, but despite its date it is always to come (*à venir*), it speaks itself in a 'present' that does not answer to historical markers. It is foreboding (*pressentiment*), and designates itself as that which is not yet, demanding of the reader the same foreboding to make an existence for it that has not yet come.'⁵² There is also a resonance of Heidegger's view of the special relationship of the poetic with what we would term the Lacanian real, as he speaks of the 'essential relation between death and language flashes up, but is still unthought. It can however give a hint of the manner in which the essence of language draws us into its concern and so relates to itself.'⁵³

The upshot of his *Crediting Poetry* lecture is the ability to see the real of the 'marvellous as well as the murderous' that can come out of the religious polarities of his life. The hands that pull the trigger are motivated by a sense of Catholicism as a symbolic and ideological position, but so is the hand that reached out to the other. Interestingly, for Heaney, the

50 Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, p. 18.

51 Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, p. 19.

52 Maurice Blanchot, *The Work of Fire*, translated by Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), originally published as *La part du feu* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949), p. 112.

53 Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, p. 107.

use of the term Catholic is always haunted by its binary opposite, and in *Seeing Things* we again find the binary relationship enacted in 'The Settle Bed': where he speaks about the 'bedtime anthems of Ulster', and goes on to see these as:

Protestant, Catholic, the Bible, the beads,
Long talks at gables by moonlight, boots on the Hearth.⁵⁴

Here there is that polyphony of which he spoke earlier and there is an intersubjective dialogue at work and I would suggest that this is the real of his Catholic experience that has become an important part of the work of Seamus Heaney. Catholicism for Heaney comes as an inheritance, and this is something that has existed in the past but which is capable of transformation in the present and in the future:

And now this is 'an inheritance' –
Upright, rudimentary, unshiftable planked
In the long ago, yet willable forward
Again and again and again, cargoed with
Its own dumb, tongue-and-groove worthiness
And un-get-roundable weight.⁵⁵

This weight is the same as that of which he spoke of in 'The Nod'; it is an aspect of the real that can only be seen in the presencing language of poetry. The weight is still a factor but it can be born and can be transformed as he moves from past to future, towards, what he terms in 'Lupins, in *Electric Light*, 'an erotics of the future',⁵⁶ in which 'whatever is given/can always be reimagined'.⁵⁷ It is this project of reimagining the historical, cultural, linguistic and societal givens that I see as central to his understanding of the real of Catholicism.

54 Seamus Heaney, *Seeing Things* (London; Faber, 1991), p. 28.

55 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 28.

56 Heaney, *Electric Light* (London: Faber, 2001), p. 5.

57 Heaney, *Seeing Things*, p. 29.

It could be seen as the deconstruction of an imaginary identification with religion by a heightened sense of the real, and this conflict is enunciated in a later poem 'Flight Path' in *The Spirit Level*, where he is asked by an interlocutor: 'When, for fuck's sake, are you going to write/Something for us?', and the response is: 'If I do write something/Whatever it is, I'll be writing for myself'.⁵⁸ And here again is what I would see as his embrace of the real of Catholicism, as he notes in an interview that for him, 'poetry has as much to do with *numen* as hegemony',⁵⁹ and Heaney's sense of religion is just this – a presence (the English meaning of *numen*) that is felt in objects and places – could there be a better description of the real? Interestingly, etymologically the word meant 'nodding', and we are again brought back to that poem of the same title, where so much is signified by that bodily gesture – a signification that I would see as a presencing of the real. And it is found in the language of his Catholic childhood and in the cultural and symbolic capital that is expressed in this language.

So in conclusion, is he a Catholic poet? The answer is yes, but with qualifications. His identification with his religion is through the real, the nod, the numen, the reaching out to the other. It is an identification that is based on language, image and symbol. He has observed that his notion of poetry as 'grace' derives from his 'early religious education' and adds that ultimately this may be far more important in his 'mental formation than cultural nationalism or the British presence or any of that stuff:'. It is that ability to sense the numinous that has been a driving force in his *ars poetica*, that desire to sense the real in events and in ideological motivations.⁶⁰ He speaks of the given Catholic universe as a 'light-filled, Dantesque, shimmering order of being',⁶¹ and he adds:

But, in maturity, the myths of the classical world and Dante's *Commedia* (where my Irish Catholic subculture received high cultural ratification) and the myths of other cultures matched and mixed and provided a cosmology that corresponded

58 Heaney, *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1996), p. 25.

59 Miller, *Heaney in Conversation*, p. 32.

60 Miller, *Heaney in Conversation*, p. 32.

61 Miller, *Heaney in Conversation*, p. 36.

well enough to the original: you learned that, from the human beginnings, poetic imagination had proffered a world of light and a world of dark, a shadow region – not so much an afterlife as an afterimage of life.⁶²

This is what he found in the Kingsmill massacre, that sense of a hand which could reach out to, or destroy, the other. This is the real of Seamus Heaney's numinous sense of Catholicism.

62 O'Driscoll and Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, p. 471.

JOHN MCDONAGH

‘Hopping Round Knock Shrine in the Falling Rain’: Revision and Catholicism in the Poetry of Paul Durcan

Paul Durcan broke his leg in 1958. His Aunt Sarah informed her thirteen-year-old nephew that fifteen circumambulations of the Knock Shrine would do the ‘trick’. The stricken Durcan proceeded to fulfil the request, enduring torrential downpours, dodging wavering pilgrims and avoiding the temptations of sticks of ‘Knock Rock’. His broken leg, however, remained stubbornly broken, but for the young poet this experience was to act as a form of *hegira*:

The trick did not work
But that was scarcely the point:
That day was a crucial day
In my hedge school of belief
In the Potential of Miracle
In the Actuality of Vision.¹

In these lines Durcan offers an early glimpse of the source of his extraordinarily visionary poetry, a conflation of everyday observation with a passionate faith in the transformative power of the imagination. The ‘Potential of Miracle’ is an acknowledgement of the constantly mysterious nature of everyday life and is a testament to Durcan’s unflinching ability to eke out the extraordinary in the ordinary. His fervent belief in the ‘Actuality of Vision’ prevents any sentimental romanticisation of life and provides his poetry

¹ All quotes taken from ‘Hopping Round Knock Shrine in the Falling Rain: 1958’, in *Jesus, Break His Fall* by Paul Durcan (Dublin: Raven Arts Press, 1980), p. 25.

with its contrapuntal strength. As a serial commentator on the slippery Irish *Zeitgeist* Durcan has no poetic peers and it is in the poems relating to the Catholic Church that he has consistently found his sharpest social and cultural critique. What gives Durcan's poems added import is the empathy he exudes for his subjects, caught as they are in the cross-hairs of his relentless pursuit of the hypocritical, the pompous and the duplicitous. The strong impression created in many of his poems is that Durcan is out to mug some over-blown and self-regarding ideology, but the victim will not even be aware that this has happened.

Teresa's Bar, first published by the Gallery Press in 1976, is Durcan's fourth solo collection and it contains poems that deal with what were latterly to become trademark Durcan subjects. From the environmental consequences of economic change on the Irish landscape to new emerging models of the traditional family, Durcan charts the teetering steps of a new Ireland, no longer content to live by the shibboleths of its religious and political leaders but unsure of what is going to replace them. Indeed, a clue to Durcan's complex philosophy of life is contained on the collection's fly leaf where a quotation from Pope John XXIII rubs shoulders with one from Bob Dylan, a statement of intent by the poet that the traditional arbiters of Irish identity now face significant competition from new Gods of popular culture. Interestingly, the Papal quotation – 'As does any other man on earth, I come from a family and from a particular place' – stresses the humanity of the man and is a tacit recognition of the human side of a pontiff noted for his championing of ecumenism and for calling the revisionist Second Vatican Council in 1962. Dylan, meanwhile, is quoted from his song 'Minstrel Boy', released on the 1970 album 'Self Portrait', in which he ponders the loneliness of the artist as well as the desire for recognition that so often eludes:

Who's gonna throw that minstrel boy a coin
 Who's gonna let it roll
 Who's gonna throw that minstrel boy a coin
 Who's gonna let it gawn easy to save his soul.²

2 Paul Durcan, *Teresa's Bar* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1976), p. 11.

When reading many of Durcan's poems, it is often useful to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion in relation to the narrative voice being adopted. Indeed, it is not entirely certain that he actually broke his leg in 1958 and his hopping around the shrine at Knock could equally be yet another narrative voice, although it should be noted that most of the poems he sets in Mayo tend to be more or less autobiographical. Stylistically, Durcan is adept at utilising a variety of first person narrative voices, from seasoned television reporters to pulpit-thumping bishops, and these voices give his poetry an immediacy and accessibility that is heightened by the impression of being directly spoken to.

However, the very multitude of these voices creates a difficulty for the reader as the use of 'I' in so many of what appear to be autobiographical works is no guarantee of authorial authenticity. Whereas this is nothing new in contemporary poetry, it raises particular hermeneutical problems given the confessional nature of so many of Durcan's poems. It is a difficulty that is also to be found with many of his contemporaries. In the introduction to his 1990 selection *A Time for Voices*, Brendan Kennelly, for example, notes: 'This use of the first person is a great distancer from my point of view; by saying 'I' in such poems I experience a genuine sense of freedom, of liberating myself from myself'³. Clearly, then, the Durcan reader has to exercise a great degree of discernment when picking which poems to label as autobiographical and those where he is adopting a particular persona. Indeed, the very looseness of the personal nomenclature adds a hermeneutical frisson to Durcan's work, his poem appearing to oscillate from the public to the private with head spinning velocity, even within individual works. However, much of the strength of his work resides in these shifting perspectives, a restlessness that is continually struggling with the complacencies of self and these multitudinous voices ensure that the slippage between signifier and signified remains fascinatingly frustrating. It is in the gaps and cracks in Durcan's *personae*, the nooks and crannies of these often fictive selves, that the illusive truth can be seen to tentatively

3 Brendan Kennelly, *A Time for Voices* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990), p. 12.

emerge. Durcan's often booming voices, from *über*-confident politicians and builders to belligerent television correspondents and golfers, more often than not implode under the weight of their moral inconsistencies and the inherent doubts that underpin the certainties of their declarations.

The public scandal surrounding the behaviour of Bishop Eamon Casey, which culminated in his resignation in 1992 following newspaper revelations that he has fathered a child with Annie Murphy, is regularly cited as a crucial contemporary moment in the decline of the influence of the Catholic hierarchy in Ireland. Bishop Casey had for many years been the poster boy for the bishops of Ireland, reaching his zenith when directing a youth mass at Galway racecourse during the papal visit of John Paul II on 30 September 1979. Indeed, in the recent history of the Catholic Church, that visit is increasingly being seen as a turning point, a high watermark of public displays of loyalty to the Church and a Pope that would be rendered unimaginable in the current social and cultural climate. Ironically, Bishop Casey's partner that day was Fr Michael Cleary, another cleric whose reputation was shattered by revelations soon after his death in 1993 that he had fathered two children with his housekeeper, a fact that was long suspected but never proven in his lifetime. As if any more grist were needed for Durcan's mill, the Pope's speech to the estimated 200,000 crowd at Ballybrit included a warning that 'the desire to be free from external restraints may manifest itself very strongly in the sexual domain'⁴, a delicious and hard to ignore irony given the warm-up acts on the day. These two scandals and the public reaction to them can, in retrospect, be viewed seminal moments in the decline and fall of the influence of the Catholic Church in Ireland, but these events can equally be seen as latter catalysts in a decline that Paul Durcan had been charting in his poetry for many years previously. The inherent moral rigidity of the Church's teaching on, for example, contraception and divorce, are staples in Durcan's poetry, as is the elision of women from the heart of the Church's power structures.

4 Quote taken from an *Irish Times* article by Joe Carroll entitled 'A Visit that Inspired and Rallied Irish Catholics' available at http://www.irishtimes.com/focus/papal-death/article_p4a.htm.

For decades he has consistently challenged the almost indomitable position of the Church in almost every aspect of Irish life, from issues pertaining to private sexuality morality to a monopoly over the state primary school system. In his introduction to the contemporary poetry section of Volume III of *The Field Day Anthology*, Declan Kiberd notes that, in relation to the social and cultural turmoil obvious in Ireland in the early years of the 1970s, 'with only rare exceptions, the leading poets of the period have had remarkably little to say about these things'⁵ and it can certainly be argued that Durcan is one of those rare exceptions. Kiberd proceeds to note the 'studied impartiality' of southern poets *vis-à-vis* the political sphere and it is an observation such as this which highlights the uniqueness and importance of the critique offered by Durcan from his earliest collections. The often overtly political nature of his poetry sets him apart from his contemporaries and places him more at one with the American Beat poets of the 1950s who offered more radical and alternative perspectives on the dominant social and moral order.

'The Seminary' is a poem from *Teresa's Bar*, published three years before that Papal visit, a visit which marked the high water-mark of twentieth-century Irish Catholicism, and arguably its last great hurrah. Durcan's seminary is perched high above an unnamed town and he describes, in a typically surreal series of images, a young seminarian's suicide over his fear that his mother has been written to concerning his 'ecumenical views.'⁶ Durcan's exasperation with the Catholic Church is palpable throughout the poem and his references to various Popes, living and dead, are unambiguous. The poem marks a clear definition of Durcan's dislike of the conservative wing of the Church, epitomised in the reign of Pius XII (Pope from 1939 to 1958) – 'He of the telephone and the solitary table' – and his admiration for Pope John XXIII (Pope from 1958–1963), lamenting the fact that the latter 'is no more paid heed to'. Significantly, in the poem, Durcan identifies

5 Seamus Deane, ed., *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Literature, Volume III* (Derry: Field Day Publications, 1991), p. 1316.

6 All quotations for the poem taken from Paul Durcan, *Teresa's Bar* (Dublin: Gallery Press, 1976), p. 19.

the latter by his pre-Papal name, Angelo Roncalli, emphasising the essentially empathetic nature of the man rather than the office bestowed upon him. As Pope, Roncalli initiated the reformist Second Vatican Council in 1962 but he died only a year later, and it is a quotation from Roncalli that adorns the book's flyleaf. Durcan's depiction of the Church is one of an institution collapsing under the weight of its own inability to embrace change, the strict nature of its teachings contrasting sharply with a rapidly changing Irish society. It also has to be remembered that this critique is explicitly political in its nature and is not disguised behind any complex imagery or oblique reference. No other mainstream Irish poet in the 1970s was as overt a critic of the Catholic Church as Durcan and the final image of 'The Seminary' is not only apocalyptic, but visionary:

Like some vast museum of a declining empire
The seminary is falling down.⁷

Equally, what is notable about the poem is the fact that it focuses once again on a favourite Durcan theme, namely the almost total separation, as he sees it, of the Church from the reality of the lives led by those who are supposed to make up its dedicated followers. This isolation is ultimately damaging to the Church and its plight in the first decade of the twenty-first century can be seen, at least in part, as a direct consequence of the aloofness and detachment of the hierarchy and its moral teachings from the society it seeks to lead. Durcan charts the rise of an institution that ultimately regarded itself as above and beyond any form of moral reproach. The consequences in the short term were spectacular, a small group of men wielding enormous influence over the social, cultural, political and legislative life of the state. However, as Durcan points out, with no in-built checks or balances, this power was to eventually almost destroy the very organisation in which it was housed, epitomised by the hierarchy's repeated failure to deal with clerical child sex abusers, a failure brought into stark relief by the Murphy and Ryan reports in 2009. The Church of Durcan's early poetry is

⁷ Durcan, *Teresa's Bar*, p. 19.

an unforgiving, self-obsessed institution that brooks no opposition, and is chiefly marked by an utter lack of any form of accountability.

Despite his withering critiques, it would be wrong to simply portray Durcan's parodying of the Catholic Church as mere carpings from the sidelines. In all of even his most satirical works, Durcan exudes a natural empathy with the human condition, in all its various manifestations. The titles of two of his most important collections, *A Snail in my Prime* (1993) and *Cries of an Irish Caveman* (2001), attest to his modest self-perception and his constant desire to deconstruct not only self but the social and cultural world that surrounds him. His default emotional position appears to be an acute sensitivity to the absurdities of the pressures of contemporary living and the heavy toll even ordinary, everyday life can take on an individual. He posits the view that life is difficult enough as it is without adding the extra burden of an external and unwarranted guilt for even the most simple of pleasures. It is this natural empathy that allows Durcan to get beneath the skin of the Irish psyche and to attempt to understand the very complex relationship between it and Catholicism. Indeed, to attempt to stand outside the Catholic influence in Ireland is extremely difficult and requires both planning and effort, given the almost seamless blending of Church and State that has occurred in Ireland over the past century. From primary education through marriage and even in the cultural rituals surrounding death, the Catholic Church continues to have a central role in the important rituals in Irish life. It is this close intermeshing of faith and culture that fascinates Durcan and he is sensitive to the difficulty faced when attempting to separate one from the other.

His poetry attempts to explore this interface between faith and society in an Ireland where the dominant position of one particular Church appears to be disappearing, to be replaced by something of a moral vacuum in which competing ideologies are finally given some sort of free expression. Indeed, in the presidency of Mary Robinson (President of Ireland from 1990–1997) Durcan finally begins to see the fruits of this divergence. In a series of poems about President Robinson in his 1999 collection *Greetings to Our Friends in Brazil*, he notes how she represented a new Ireland, one more concerned with inclusion, concord and a broader vision of what it means to be Irish in the last decade of the twentieth century. It is in the

years of her Presidency that Durcan sees the fruits of the collapse he predicted almost thirty years previously, although it has to be noted that, in Durcan's view, this was a short lived renaissance. Post-1997, Ireland became what he terms 'the Celtic Elk'⁸ and all the hope of the preceding seven years evaporates under 'the hooves of a hairy economy'. It is in the intervening years, embodied in Ireland's first female President, that Durcan feels closest to an emerging model of Irish identity, however fragile that model ultimately proves to be.

One of Durcan's favourite poetic techniques is to utilise a form of surreality in which he places a variety of characters in situations that they otherwise would be most unlikely to be found. These situations often place oppositional forces in the same environment, forcing them to confront each other and in so doing to question the essential nature of what appears to divide them. These poems are often absurd and invariably hilarious encounters that ultimately act to highlight the inconsistencies inherent in even the most fervently held polemic. Conservative and liberal, gay and straight, developer and environmentalist, believer and non-believer, to name but a few, all congregate in the circus tent of Durcan's poems to find themselves lampooned, ridiculed and ultimately dissected, their strongly held and more loudly expressed beliefs reduced to shibboleths and clichés. He relishes the juxtaposition of apparent opposites and not merely for the entertainment of his readers. What emerges from these poems are Durcan's essential humanity and empathy; he is invariably on the side of those who, for whatever reason, are marginalised, judged and condemned by those in a position to do so. He offers no easy resolutions and the notion of a reasoned debate between equals often descends into farce and ridicule. His favoured targets include politicians, academics, the judiciary, journalists and most notably the Catholic Church. In Durcan's hands, the surreal is a most effective critical weapon and he is without doubt its greatest proponent amongst contemporary Irish poets. In Durcan's poetry, this juxtapositioning is very carefully constructed, as a subtle balance has to be

8 Paul Durcan, *Greetings to our Friends in Brazil* (London: Harvill Press, 1999), p. 252.

struck between perceptions of a quantifiable reality and its absurdist flip-side. Durcan often moves freely in time and space, largely unrestricted by temporal concerns but always acutely consciousness of the hermeneutical layers that such poetry creates. The poems can work only if the opposites being presented actually speak to each other in some way and Durcan is consistently careful to ensure that this open-ended dialogue remains at the heart of these poems.

Without doubt, the Catholic Church has been one of Durcan's favourite targets throughout his writing career and he uses these poems to interrogate what he perceives to be inflexibility of the Church's moral code and the lengths to which people will go to get around it. If the Channel Four television programme *Father Ted* (1995–1998) can be viewed as a high point of Irish Catholic satire, then surely the poems of Paul Durcan set the foundations for the repositioning of the Catholic Church that would have been unthinkable in the late decades of the twentieth century. A brief review of the titles of some of these poems speaks for itself: 'Irish Hierarchy Bans Colour Photography'; 'The Archbishop Dreams of the Harlot of Rathkeale'; 'Archbishop of Kerry to have Abortion'; 'Bishop of Cork Murders his Wife' and 'Priest Accused of Not Wearing Condom'. These wonderful titles, playful reworkings of tabloid newspaper headlines, are written in a heavily ironic reportage style in which Durcan brilliantly satirises not only the moral stances of the Catholic Church but the headline-hungry media only too willing to simplify a complex issue in the name of volume sales. Indeed, Durcan's caustic attitude to the print media can be summed up in his epigrammatic 'Newsdesk', published in *The Laughter of Mothers*:

The bad news is that I buy a newspaper every day.
The good news is that I don't read it.⁹

The poems are mini-reports, the voice alternating between that of an earnest newspaper, TV or radio reporter, and many of the poems end with the reporter identifying themselves and where they are speaking from,

9 Paul Durcan, *The Laughter of Mothers* (London: Harvill Secker, 1997), p. 58.

exactly as was first pioneered on ITV news in the UK. Durcan's fondness for real places is a stylistic trademark, and there are few towns in Ireland that have not, at one stage or another, appeared in one of Durcan's works. The poem 'Irish Hierarchy Bans Colour Photography', published in *Sam's Cross* in 1978, typifies this uniquely Durcanesque genre, placing the most absurd and surreal images and concepts in a poem that heralds the waning influence of the Irish Catholic Hierarchy. What emerges from the poem is a hierarchy utterly aloof and distant from the very people they purport to represent, and although the poem relies upon a fundamentally comic conceit, the undertone is a serious critique of the inability of the hierarchy to respond to the rapidly changing reality of the lives of the majority of people in Ireland. Durcan has, on many occasions, questioned the morality of the Church's opposition to contraception and divorce, and in this poem that opposition finds expression in the somewhat surreal opposition of the hierarchy to colour photography. Their spokesman, the delightfully monickered Fr Marksman, declares that after a meeting in Maynooth the Catholic hierarchy has decided to issue a total ban on the use of colour photography, but one could easily substitute colour photography for contraception, abortion or divorce, the great triumvirate of Catholic moral theology. The reasons for the ban are laid out by the earnest cleric:

He stated that if the Press corps would countenance an unhappy pun
 He would say that negative thinking lay at the root of the ban;
 Colour pictures showed reality to be rich and various
 Whereas reality in point of fact was the opposite;
 The innate black and white nature of reality would have to be safeguarded.¹⁰

The mock seriousness of the report echoes Orson Welles' infamous *War of the Worlds* radio broadcast of 1938, when widespread public panic ensued after Welles' sixty-minute broadcast from a New York theatre was presented as a series of simulated news reports indicating that an invasion of Martians was actually underway. Durcan regularly utilises this news bulletin urgency in his poems, instilling in them a breathless pace laced with a good deal of

10 Paul Durcan, *The Selected Paul Durcan* (Belfast: The Blackstaff Press, 1982), p. 89.

shock value. However, Fr Marksman's declaratory statements are destined to fall on somewhat deaf ears, as the narrator notes:

The general public, however, is expected to pay no heed to the ban;
 Only politicians and time-servers are likely to pay the required lip-service;
 But the operative noun is lip: there will be no hand or foot service.
 And next year Ireland is expected to become
 The EEC's largest money-spender in colour photography:
 This is Claudia Conway RTE News (Colour) Maynooth.¹¹

This rejection of the hierarchy's dictat comes as no surprise in the poem. The definitive tone of Fr Marksman's statements is designed to set him and the hierarchy up for quite a fall. Indeed, Durcan not only hints at a negative rejection of the advice of the hierarchy. He suggests a polar opposite reaction, the Irish people embracing colour photography to such an extent that they become the heaviest users in Europe! Durcan is suggesting, in no uncertain terms, that the statements issuing forth from Maynooth are not only ignored but actually they act as a spur to move in entirely the opposite direction. Very often, when a previously untouchable organisation like the Catholic Church begins to lose its moral control over its people, its pronouncements are not only ignored but can elicit an entirely oppositional response, and it is precisely this counter-production that Durcan captures in the last few lines of the poem. The lack of belief emanating from the people is palpable, and is utterly lost on not only Fr Marksman but on the hierarchy as a whole. In many ways Durcan's poem proved to be prophetic, given the following changes in Irish civil and constitutional law. In 1979 the laws proscribing contraception were relaxed; in 1993, homosexuality was decriminalised; in 1995 the Irish people voted in favour of divorce; in 2002, a referendum that proposed a significant tightening of abortion legislation was defeated. Since the early 1980s, therefore, it can be argued that the Irish people, in referendum after referendum, have rejected the often explicit but more latterly implicit moral advice of the Catholic Church. The prophetic last lines of 'Irish Hierarchy Bans Colour Photography'

11 Durcan, *Selected Paul Durcan*, p. 89.

consequently highlight that Durcan's surrealism has always been framed by a perceptive eye on the shifting Irish nature if Irish identity.

The social and cultural revision of the position of the Catholic Church in Ireland is not simply a recent phenomenon. In the literary field, this revisionism has been active for decades, clear in the poetry of Patrick Kavanagh as early as *The Great Hunger* of 1942. In this seminal work, Kavanagh presages Durcan's critique by attempting to disentangle his deep personal spirituality from the interpretation placed upon that spirituality by the Catholic clergy. This poem is hugely important for this very reason. The protagonist, Patrick McGuire, is engaged in a constant emotional battle between his conscious desires and the subconscious guilt associated with a clerical model of what is deemed to be acceptable social behaviour. McGuire is tormented by the juxtaposition of sexual desire and the constant threat of sin, his life a testimony to the soul-destroying obsession of the Catholic Church with sexual morality. This obsession in turn not only warps his relationships with women, but also contributes to a more sinister sexual deviance when McGuire fantasises over young schoolgirls passing by his door:

He had an idea. Schoolgirls of thirteen
 Would see no political intrigue in an old man's friendship.
 Love.
 The heifer waiting to be nosed by the old bull.
 That notion passed too – there was the danger of talk
 And jails are narrower than the five-sod ridge
 And colder than the black hills facing Armagh in February.¹²

Allied to this crippling sexual obsession with the unattainable, the clergy emerge with little credit from Kavanagh's epic poem. The priest visits McGuire's mother every Saturday, ostensibly to listen to her troubles and fears, but Kavanagh makes it abundantly clear that it is the five pounds she offers him for saying Mass that provides his real motivation. The social role of the priest, as detailed in *The Great Hunger*, is far more significant than that of a pastor to the faithful, and his influence extends far beyond

the Sunday homily and right into the heart of Irish social, cultural and political life. For Durcan, the disentanglement of this unwarranted involvement has been a notable and constant feature of his poetic career and this again marks him out from many of his contemporaries. His critique of the Catholic Church, strident and constant from the mid-1970s onwards, has always been based on his perception of the chasm that exists between the expressed morality of the clergy and hierarchy and the difficult, tangled and complicated moral choices faced by ordinary people in everyday life. For Durcan, life is not, as Fr Marksman would profess, innately 'black and white', but is intensely 'rich and various'.

12 Peter Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems of Patrick Kavanagh* (New York, The Peter Kavanagh Hand Press, 1996), p. 100.

VICTOR MERRIMAN

‘To sleep is safe, to dream is dangerous’: Catholicism on Stage in Independent Ireland¹

Because we cannot go back, we are forced to go on. The counter-revolution is forced upon us because the spiritual and moral are real. They insist upon being in spite of all denials whether implicit or explicit.²

For most of the twentieth century the accumulation of religious capital was central to the creation and maintenance of an Irish Catholic social elite that permeated the fields of commerce, government, the civil service, the professions and the semi-state sector. The history of this linkage and how it operated has yet to be written.³

In March 2003, Gerard Mannix Flynn presented *James X*, an account of a childhood and adolescence stolen by Church and State, at the Project Arts Centre in Dublin.⁴ *James X* is a solo performance, set in the ante room of a state tribunal inquiring into the abuse of young people in church-run state institutions. At the play’s end, James X makes the decision not to participate in the tribunal, and explicitly confronts Inglis’s ‘Irish Catholic social elite’:

- 1 Paul Vincent Carroll, *Shadow and Substance* (London: Samuel French Limited, 1944), p. 43.
- 2 Desmond FitzGerald, 1932, cited in John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter-Revolution 1921–1936* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2001), p. vi.
- 3 Tom Inglis, ‘The Religious Field in Contemporary Ireland: Identity, Being Religious and Symbolic Domination’, in Liam Harte and Yvonne Whelan, *Ireland Beyond Boundaries: Mapping Irish Studies in the Twenty-first Century* (London, Dublin, Ann Arbor, 2007), p. 119.
- 4 www.irishplayography.com records an earlier version presented at the Temple Bar Music Centre in 2002.

Holding up the [official] file about his past, he describes it as the property of 'the state, the church, their servants and agents, and you the citizens.' He flings it to the ground and walks out amongst the audience.⁵

In this gestural sequence, Flynn encapsulates the principal contribution of dramatic art to public understanding of Irish experiences: it takes statements ('This file contains the story of my life.') and turns them into questions ('Who says this file contains the story of my life, and in whose interests is that statement made?'). *James X* is a moment in which the victim repositions himself as a target, exposes the deliberate quality of the actions of those who violated him, and inaugurates a moral imperative for Irish people to excavate the motivation for those actions. Flynn's work marks a specific cultural moment, the emergence into public space of persons devastated by a theocratic compact entered into during the Irish counter-revolution.⁶ This unholy alliance was forged between a Church in the grip of a fantasy of manifest destiny, and an emergent political elite of 'men who freed their nation, but who could never free their souls from the ill-effects of having been in slavery.'⁷ As a result of this arrangement, for most of the twentieth century, 'in order to gain access to proper housing, a decent education, a good job or membership of a social club,'⁸ a citizen of Independent Ireland had to perform unquestioning fealty to the Catholic Church. By vesting schools, hospitals, sporting and leisure facilities in the hands of the Catholic Church, the state gifted to that church extraordinary power over people's intimate lives. *James X* stages 'the tribulations that beset a child's passage through a country that is portrayed as grim, authoritarian and deeply prejudiced against him and his kind.'⁹

5 Patrick Lonergan, *Theatre and Globalization: Irish Drama in the Celtic Tiger Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 167.

6 See John M. Regan, *The Irish Counter Revolution 1921–1936: Treatyite Politics and Settlement in Independent Ireland* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 2001).

7 M.J. Molloy, 'Preface to *The Wood of the Whispering*', ed. Robert O'Driscoll, *Selected Plays of M.J. Molloy* (Colin Smythe, 1998), p. 111.

8 Inglis, 'The Religious Field', p. 133.

9 Bruce Arnold, cited on http://www.abbeytheatre.ie/whats_on/event/1187.

Ongoing revelations of the scale of sustained and violent theft of the dignity of vulnerable people suggest that the field exposed by Inglis is in urgent need, not only of mapping, but of excavation. Where Ireland's social historians have been reluctant to tread, however, its dramatic artists have long been busy. In 1906, Bernard Shaw commented acidly on an immanent tendency in anti-colonial Catholic nationalism toward theocratic domination of the majority population, post-independence: 'The British Government and the Vatican may differ very vehemently as to whose subject the Irishman is to be; but they are quite agreed as to the propriety of his being a subject.'¹⁰ The notorious riots which greeted the original production of J.M. Synge's *The Playboy of the Western World* (Abbey Theatre, 1907) were seen as a response to the play's perceived blasphemous slurs on the unique modesty of Irish Catholic womanhood. To that extent, in the ferment of the theatre auditorium, the outraged audience acts as a surrogate for a prudish Church, and plays out the cultural logic of the power relations described by Shaw. More generally, the *Playboy* riots offer a telling performative example of what would deteriorate during the first half-century of independence into a social order in which critique and progress are silenced by reactionary voices which 'continually shout down others.'¹¹ The calcified and fearful environment thus generated guaranteed a society in which J.J. Lee remarked, there was little or no market for ideas. In such an environment, what Inglis identifies as a paucity of historiographical interest in the interpenetration of economic, religious and political elites in Independent Ireland comes as no surprise. Silence is not neutrality, however, as Peadar Kirby observes: 'far too much academic output in Ireland is functional to the persistence of a highly inequitable society and to the requirements of the elites who benefit from it.'¹² Benefitting from a public culture of silence, and despite

10 G.B. Shaw, 'Preface for Politicians', in Shaw, *John Bull's Other Island* (London and New York: Penguin, 1984), p. 19.

11 Luke Gibbons, 'Narratives of the Nation: Fact, Fiction and Irish Cinema', in *Theorizing Ireland*, ed. Claire Connolly (Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 75.

12 Kirby, Peadar, *The Celtic Tiger in Distress: Growth with Inequality in Ireland* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p. 204.

the critical dramas of Shaw, Synge and others, the reactionary Church/State arrangement had remarkable success in domesticating its claims and practices as an unquestionable status quo, post-independence.¹³ The bitter continuity between Synge's and Shaw's prophetic insights and Flynn's historical witness foregrounds two important features of Irish experience in the twentieth century: by substituting control by a nexus of Church, State and commerce for colonial domination, Independent Ireland postponed decolonisation; dramatic representations of Irish reality, both prophetic and testimonial, offer Ireland a resource for critical self-understanding which is ignored only at great cost.

The dramatic world of *The Playboy of the Western World* is set in the storied West of Ireland among a peasantry posited by nationalist myth-making as 'native subject(s) locked in a prehistoric and hence apolitical past.'¹⁴ The play stages a paradox: the social order is rigorously structured around Catholic religious capital, and the people adhere to cultural practices which Catholicism is radically unable to control. This paradox is inscribed in the figure of Father Reilly, whose influence is ubiquitous, but who never appears on stage. His creature is Shawn Keogh, who is to marry the vigorous Pegeen Mike, only child of Michael James O'Flaherty, in whose shebeen the dramatic action takes place. Shawn's nemesis is Christy Mahon, a young stranger who purports to have killed his own father. The gulf between the kind of respectability emerging in the nascent Church/State compact, embodied in the unequal relationship of Shawn and Father Reilly, and the everyday proclivities of Michael James and his cronies is evident from the beginning of the play. The men are eager to be off to Kate Cassidy's wake, and have been delayed because of Pegeen's refusal to be left alone. Paralysed by the prospect of scandal, Shawn Keogh will not remain unsupervised in the house with his intended before they are married. Christy stumbles in to look for shelter, and un.masks himself as

13 As one senior clergyman in the now notorious diocese of Ferns put it, over thirty years ago, 'There are three institutions in Ireland that will never fail: the Church, the GAA and the Fianna Fáil party; because they're all run by the same people.'

14 Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson (eds), *De-scribing Empire: Post-colonialism and Textuality* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 233.

a passionate, fearsome, patricide. At Pegeen's prompting, he is offered a position as pot-boy to the shebeen, and settles in for the night. This solution enables Michael James to travel to the wake:

MICHAEL: Well, God bless you Christy, and a good rest till we meet again when the sun'll be rising to the noon of the day.

CHRISTY: God bless you all.

MEN: God bless you. [*They go out except Shawn who lingers at door*]

SHAWN: [*To Pegeen*] Are you wanting me to stop along with you and keep you from harm?

PEGEEN: [*gruffly*] Didn't you say you were fearing Father Reilly?

SHAWN: There's be no harm staying now, I'm thinking, and himself in it too.

PEGEEN: You wouldn't stay when there was need for you, and let you step off nimble this time when there's none.

SHAWN: Didn't I say it was Father Reilly ...

PEGEEN: Go on then to Father Reilly [*in a jeering tone*], and let him put you in the holy brotherhoods and leave that lad to me.¹⁵

Shawn's craven pursuit of clerical approval over the pleasures of the wake or Pegeen's company specifically locates him as an internal outsider in this economy of revelry and desire. Despite their ostentatious usage of the language of benediction, the wake to which the men are going is a site of pagan excess, involving the ingestion of inordinate amounts of alcohol:

MICHAEL: ... wasn't it a shame I didn't bear you along to Kate Cassidy's wake, a fine, stout lad, the like of you, for you'd never see the match of it for flows of drink, the way when we sunk her bones at noonday in her narrow grave, there were five men, aye, and six men, stretched out retching speechless on the holy stones.¹⁶

Even more transgressively, Act III stages what amounts to the pagan wedding of Christy and Pegeen, at which her father, Michael James O'Flaherty, officiates:

15 Ann Saddlemyer (ed) *J.M. Synge, The Playboy of the Western World and Other Plays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 107–108.

16 Synge, *Playboy*, p. 138.

PEGEEN: Bless us now, for I swear to God I'll wed him, and I'll not renege.

MICHAEL: [*standing up in the centre, holding on to both of them*] It's the will of God, I'm thinking, that all should win an easy or a cruel end, and it's the will of God that all should rear up lengthy families for the nurture of the earth. What's a single man, I ask you, eating a bit in one house and drinking a sup in another, and he with no place of his own, like an old braying jackass strayed upon the rocks? [*To Christy*] It's many would be in dread to bring your like into their house for an end to them maybe with a sudden end; but I'm a decent man of Ireland, and I'd liefer face the grave untimely and I seeing a score of grandsons growing up gallant little swearers by the name of God, than go peopling my bedside with puny weeds the like of what you'd breed, I'm thinking, out of Shawneen Keogh. [*He joins their hands*] A daring fellow is the jewel of the world, and a man did split his father's middle with a single clout should have the bravery of ten, so may God and St Mary and St Patrick bless you, and increase you from this mortal day.

CHRISTY and PEGEEN: Amen, O Lord!¹⁷

The stage directions which organise Michael James's gestures here position him unambiguously in a sacerdotal capacity. Marriage may be blessed by God, the mother of Christ and the patron saint, but it is profoundly a matter of the body, its temporal and economic contingency and corporeal needs. These three episodes put in question Inglis's characterisation of vernacular practices as vestiges of a 'type of magical-devotional oriented religion associated with traditional forms of Catholicism.'¹⁸ The 'traditional forms' staged here predate formal religious prescriptions and attract popular allegiance on the basis of appeal to a sensual life. In this way, Synge's dramaturgy resonates with Yeats's idea that people turn to the drama in search of 'a fuller, more opulent life'. The fictional world stages a tense standoff between the codifications of the institutional Church, Irish people's spiritual and corporeal needs, and the rituals and practices by means of which those needs are expressed. In the description of Kate Cassidy's interment, the sacred – 'holy stones' – is wholly compatible with excess of the flesh; indeed, the presence of the sacred is signified by ritual drunkenness. In a clear repudiation of the Jansenist tone of the Irish Church, God's blessings and God's will are evoked to dignify manifestations of specifically carnal

17 Synge, *Playboy*, p. 140.

18 Inglis, 'The Religious Field', p. 111.

practices – the funeral bacchanal, and the coupling of male and female. The offspring of the most ostentatiously devotional person in the community will be 'puny weeds,' and those issuing from the patricide will be 'gallant little swearers by the name of God.' Among these embedded cultural contradictions, Shawn Keogh is Shaw's pusillanimous Catholic incarnate.¹⁹ Nonetheless, he reads the coming times astutely, and by the play's end, will possess Pegeen by default.

As the twentieth century progresses this 'type of magical-devotional oriented religion'²⁰ retains, in the theatre at least, a potent charge. Synge's social and spiritual standoff re-emerges in the dramatic action of the iconic play of the early 1990s, Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa* (Abbey Theatre, 1990). The play was an instant success in Ireland, where it seemed perfectly in tune with President Mary Robinson's invitation, 'Come dance with me in Ireland.' It toured internationally, extensively and at length, and received many accolades, including a Tony Award for director, Patrick Mason. *Dancing at Lughnasa* dramatises women's experiences as a function of remembrances formed when Christina's son, Michael, the play's narrator, was seven years of age. In production, however, its elegiac tone – and remarkable dance sequence – tends to blur the contours of the ideological warfare under way in the actual world out of which the dramatic action emerges. Popular reception of the dance sequence at the play's core, which has tended to misrecognise it as a celebration, exemplifies the problem:

Audiences usually perceive this dance ... in wholly positive terms as a liberating outburst of repressed energy that expresses the pent-up protests of the sisters against De Valera's Ireland ... The dance is a sensual frenzy, then, but its rapture is not a wholly positive one: there are suggestions of a disfiguring surrender to cruelty and pain as well.²¹

19 'The Catholic is theoretically a Collectivist, a self-abnegator, a Tory, a Conservative, a supporter of Church and State one and indivisible, an obeyer.' Shaw, 'Preface for Politicians', p. 18.

20 Inglis, 'The Religious Field', p. 111.

21 Joe Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology in Contemporary Irish Culture', in *Writing in the Irish Republic: Literature, Culture, Politics 1949–1999*, ed. Ray Ryan (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 124–125.

The dance is a frenzied 'Yes!' to life desired: a physicalisation of the terrifying recognition that postponement of desire has institutionalised conditions in which it will never be fulfilled. This crucial misreading disables the critical charge of the play's pivotal moment, and is compounded in Frank McGuinness's screenplay,²² which moves this most private frenzy out of doors, framing it as an affirmation of sisterhood rather than a cry of pain. This is not the only instance in which the screenplay alters the dramatic narrative significantly. In another case, however, McGuinness interpolates a scene which overcomes the play's tendency to place the audience at a distance from the social context in which the intimate narrative is embedded. The camera is taken into the outhouse where Christina's occasional lover, Gerry Evans – Michael's father – is obliged by the matriarchal Kate to spend the night. Christina goes to the outhouse to join him, and the 'poor lovers' are overlooked by a photograph of massed and marshalled throngs of Irish people assembled in the Phoenix Park in Dublin in obeisance to Rome, on the occasion of the Eucharistic Congress in 1932, four years before the remembered action of the play occurs: 'All Ireland', as Austin Clarke put it, 'keeping company with them.'²³ There is a terrible pathos in that moment, as it dramatises the awful difficulty of living an ordinary life in the gap between Catholic Ireland's 'grim, authoritarian and deeply prejudiced'²⁴ corporate mind, and the embodied desires of lived experience. And yet, the episode has the power to reveal not domination, but contestation and contradiction. The controlling gaze of the Church Triumphant penetrates through to the outbuildings of a frugal homestead, to disrupt moments of human intimacy. The memento of the triumphalist ceremony hangs, however, not in the parlour or the hallway, but in a debased apartment at one remove from family life. The pomp and circumstance of a rampant clerical aristocracy is thus ironically juxtaposed with the stable at Bethlehem, mapping Chris and Gerry's unorthodox arrangements on to the 'basic unit' of

22 Pat O'Connor, *Dancing At Lughnasa* (Ferndale Films, 1998).

23 Austin Clarke, 'The Envy of Poor Lovers', *Irish Poetry After Yeats*, ed. Maurice Harmon (Dublin: Wolfhound Press, 1979), p. 39.

24 Arnold, www.abbeytheatre.ie.

Irish state ideology – the (holy) family. Thirty years on from Christy and Pegeen's pagan wedding, the lovers' recalcitrance to Catholic orthodoxy yields, not benediction and the promise of human continuity, but stigma and internal exile. However, this image, and all reservations notwithstanding, Friel's drama makes clear that their story will join the list of 'silenced voices [which] inevitably emerge.'²⁵

The year is 1936, and, in Dublin, De Valera's draughtsmen are moving to and fro between state buildings and Archbishop's House in Drumcondra, the better to align the document that will become *Bunreacht na h-Éireann/The Irish Constitution* (1937) with Archbishop McQuaid's version of Catholic social doctrine. Apart from Christina and Michael, the Mundy household shelters the unorthodox figure of Father Jack, ailing brother of the five sisters. He has returned from missionary work in Uganda, and it gradually emerges that he pursued, and still clings to a preference for African animist spirituality over corporate Vatican discipline. His presence in the household places the family increasingly beyond the pale inscribed by Church, State and Commerce, exemplified in the ideal family of the prosperous and pious Austin Morgan, once a suitor to Kate. The price of perceived recalcitrance plays out in Kate's expulsion from her post in the local, Catholic-controlled state primary school, and the loss of her modest income brings about the destruction of the extended family unit. The women's gradual degradation is not staged, but is sublimated in the lyricism of the closing monologue, in which the deliberate cruelty of their fates disappears in the warm glow of their remembered pre-lapsarian presence around which the adult Michael's nostalgia is woven. For Cleary, the problematic relationship between historical reality and theatrical representation to which *Dancing at Lughnasa* points speaks of a society 'with neither the imaginative resources nor the strategies required to meet the challenges of the future.'²⁶ There is indeed a risk with so compelling an

25 Edward Said, 'Afterword: Reflections on Ireland and Postcolonialism', in Clare Carroll and Patricia King (eds), *Ireland and Postcolonial Theory* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2003), p. 182.

26 Cleary, 'Modernization and Aesthetic Ideology', pp. 126–127.

artefact that it becomes, as it were, the exemplary script by which popular memory narrates 1936–1937. To the extent that it diverts the gaze from the social reality of that time, it re-mystifies history as simple quaintness, and generates, not anger at the betrayal of generations of Irish people by a Church/State compact, but nostalgic mourning for an innocence – if not a paradise – lost.

One year after *Dancing at Lughnasa* opened at the Abbey, Druid Theatre Company staged *Shadow and Substance*, by Paul Vincent Carroll, which had premiered at the Abbey Theatre, on 6 May 1937. Carroll, ‘the first major Catholic playwright of post-Treaty Ireland’,²⁷ was a fierce critic of a philistine church’s grip on the intimate lives of Irish people, and his plays were hugely popular in the 1930s. In *The Things That Are Caesar’s* (1932):

A father and mother fight for the soul of their daughter. The mother wants her to marry a wealthy local, a match which would bring money to renovate her pub and prestige to her family. The father has always instilled in his daughter a fierce sense of independence and distrust of religion and much of society’s prevailing values. She is much more her father’s daughter, but ultimately accepts that she must deal with the opportunities she has, not ones she would hope for.²⁸

This drama stages a 1930s version of the vernacular resistance captured in the image of Christina and Gerry in McGuinness’s outhouse, and contests clerical triumphalism in its defining moment: the Eucharistic Congress of 1932. Ultimately, Church power rested in its dual character as both ‘a conduit for the supernatural and a source of religious capital.’²⁹ Its impact on public life in Independent Ireland was decisive, and intellectual life declined to such an extent that the president of University College Dublin banned a performance of *The Importance of Being Earnest* during the early 1930s.³⁰ The impact of the Censorship of Publications Act (1929) was so

27 Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 129.

28 www.irishplayography.com.

29 Inglis, ‘The Religious Field’, p. 125.

30 Diarmaid Ferriter, *The Transformation of Ireland 1900–2000* (London: Profile Books, 2004), p. 431.

severe that W.B. Yeats, in 1928, ‘left politics, disillusioned at the manner in which a prohibition ethos was developing’,³¹ and ‘formed the anti-censorship Irish Academy of Letters in 1932.’³² Against this tidal wave of repression of critical consciousness, *Shadow and Substance* confronts the social and personal consequences of the dramatic upward revaluation of religious capital in Independent Ireland. The play also explores the problem posed for the Church’s hegemony over the supernatural by the endurance of ‘magical-devotional oriented religion’³³ in the central figure of Brigid, a poorly educated young woman in service to Canon Skerritt, the Parish Priest of Ardmahone. Brigid has visions of St Brigid, a local saint with strong pre-Christian associations, and her obsessive attachment to her patron at a time of local cultural ferment will cost her life, by the play’s end.

The canon regards himself as a cultivated, scholarly gentleman, and a connoisseur of life’s finer things: classical music, quality wines and Spanish culture. In all of these matters he is the polar opposite of his curates, Father Corr and Father Kirwan, who embody the kind of ostentatiously peasant³⁴ curate which will staff the Irish church for the next half-century:

FATHER KIRWAN: Is he an Irishman at all?

FATHER CORR: His father was Irish. It’s his mother was the Spaniard.³⁵ They met in Brussels.

FATHER KIRWAN: It’s a pity she didn’t stay at home instead of gallivantin’ about the Continent. Sure you’d think he hadn’t a drop of Irish Ireland blood in his veins. I’ll bet me boots he’ll side with that book agin the Confraternity and the Football Club.³⁶

31 Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, p. 343.

32 Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, p. 343.

33 Inglis, ‘The Religious Field’, p. 111.

34 FATHER CORR: (*rising with fire*) I’m a farmer’s son, Canon, and I’m not ashamed of it. Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 20.

35 It is worth noting the playful performative potential of the use of the epithet, ‘the Spaniard’, which was freely applied to Eamon De Valera.

36 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 33.

In 1937, however, Spain was a figure which defined in Ireland a stark politico-religious cleavage. Spain's tragedy remains, in Carroll's play, as in *Dancing at Lughnasa*, at the level of shadow, while the substance of both plays – Brigid's turmoil and Michael's memories – remains relentlessly local. Skerritt is, after all, the parish priest of Ardmahone, which translates as 'Up my own backside'. In his office as parish priest, Skerritt is *de jure* manager of the local primary school, of which his nemesis, Dermot Francis O'Flingsley, is principal teacher. The immediate *casus belli* between them is the canon's disgraceful neglect of his responsibilities to maintain the school buildings in good order. O'Flingsley's explicit refusal to accept the degradation of children and teachers by an arrogant and undemocratic church lies at the heart of Murray's view that in Carroll's work, 'the early Joycean, Catholic *non serviam* is heard in the theatre for the first time.'³⁷

CANON: *You* have complaints, O'Flingsley? I did not think it was considered a – a suitable attitude in a teacher to have complaints.

O'FLINGSLEY: You forget, Canon, that I am 'that man O'Flingsley' first, and your schoolmaster second.

CANON: Very novel, and shall we use that hateful word, modern?

O'FLINGSLEY: If it's something ancient, very ancient you want, here you are: No coal, no handle on sweeping-brush, no caretaker for the school, no windows that aren't stuck fast; eighteen crumbling desks, six broken panes of glass, no lighting on dark days, and the public highway of Saorstát Éireann for a playground. And these complaints render my attitude – unsuitable.

CANON: ... These alleged deficiencies are not complaints. They are officially termed 'Recommendations in Writing to the Very Reverend Manager.'

O'FLINGSLEY: Or alternatively, 'Words Scrawled on the Sands by an Innocent.'³⁸

The play's dramatic standoff is enhanced by the fact that, while he may be right on important matters, O'Flingsley is otherwise not particularly appealing. Like Skerritt, he affects a superior air, and is both arrogant and vain. These traits enable him, however, to oppose the monstrous clericalism of the Catholic Church, and he has published a polemic against its excesses,

37 Murray, *Twentieth-Century Irish Drama*, p. 9.

38 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 53.

I Am Sir Oracle, under the pseudonym, Eugene Gibney. As the play opens, the curates are busy inciting local worthies to burn copies of the book and to plan retributive action against the author, should he be identified. Corr and Kirwan are graceless individuals, whose attraction to modernity and its passing fancies – motor cars, for example – affronts Skerritt's veneration of the enduring monuments of European culture.³⁹ While for most of the play's action curates and people cower before Skerritt's merciless disapproval, the tragic denouement delivers to their militant, reactionary conservatism, the future. Following O'Flingsley's dismissal from his teaching post for authoring *I Am Sir Oracle*, the curates incite a mob to attack him at his home. Brigid, wandering ecstatically toward the shrine of St Brigid on the saint's feast day, is caught in the violence, struck by a brick, and mortally wounded. The play ends as O'Flingsley and Skerritt:

draw the coverlet over Brigid's face. Their eyes meet fully for the first time, and hold each other over BRIGID's body. Then each moves slowly back in different directions.⁴⁰

While the dramatic narrative – and Brigid's fate – centres on the playing out of O'Flingsley's well-founded antipathy toward the canon, the script indicates from the outset that, in moral terms he may be less Skerritt's opponent than his doppelganger:

BRIGID: You hate one another. Sure I know, be now ...

O'FLINGSLEY: I suppose we do.

BRIGID: Isn't it funny now that I think there's no one like aythur of yours? Would that not mean that the two of you are maybe the wan? Or am I blatherin'?

O'FLINGSLEY: You certainly *are* blatherin', Brigid. If you love *him*, you hate *me*; and if you love *me*, you hate *him*.⁴¹

39 This places Skerritt as a neo-Thomist, and, in Regan's analysis, aligns him with a studied antipathy to modernity which exerted, via the writings of Maritain, 'an important influence over a limited but influential number of right-wing political Catholics in Ireland, as well as in France, Spain and Belgium between the wars.' Regan, *Irish Counter-Revolution*, p. 281.

40 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 75.

41 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 6.

Brigid's choice here is posited in absolute terms: hers is the duty of loyalty to male authority; the only decision to be made is to which version of paternalistic direction and control she will offer allegiance. O'Flingsley, a fictive surname with echoes of 'unflinching' about it, suggests the moral steel of the man, the only person in the hinterland who is the canon's intellectual match. His decision, as a citizen, to call Skerritt to account for his failings aligns O'Flingsley with a kind of protestant sensibility which was finding Independent Ireland to be a very cold house indeed:

many of the instances of religious discrimination that have punctuated the history of post-independence Ireland, such as the appointment of a Protestant librarian in County Mayo in 1931 ... can be seen as attempts by the Irish Catholic Church to symbolically dominate Protestants.⁴²

In the person of O'Flingsley, *Shadow and Substance* dramatises the reality that a great deal of energy went into curbing and coercing recalcitrant Catholic minds also. The antagonism to Protestantism was always also a way of establishing an absolute right to social domination *tout court*, and was as much about internal church discipline as it ever was about primacy in a theological contest. Skerritt explicitly condemns a request from a local deputation to meet with him to discuss *I Am Sir Oracle* as an invitation to 'agree to a – a descent into Lutheranism and a sort of a Kirk session.'⁴³ O'Flingsley's dismissal from his position, and his replacement by the pusillanimous laughing-stock that is Francis Ignatius O'Connor⁴⁴ suggests that Skerritt's immersion in European high culture is a gesture both elitist and cynical:

O'FLINGSLEY: As a scholar who knows what he won't publicly admit, you loathe and detest the whole miserable fabric of things here. You detest that disgraceful apology of a school down there, even more than *I do* ... Why then do you

42 Inglis, 'The Religious Field', p. 127.

43 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 34.

44 The stage direction for Francis's entrance in Act II reads: '*Francis is a sheepish, obsequious youth, his whole being in the grip of an inferiority complex. He is awkward and without confidence*', Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 27.

deliberately prepare to perpetuate it through that poor spineless imbecile there beside you?⁴⁵

In terms of theatre history, his dismissal aligns O'Flingsley with Christy Mahon, usurped in a place he no longer wishes to remain, by a puny weed 'the like of what you'd breed, I'm thinking, out of Shawneen Keogh.'⁴⁶ O'Connor, who 'know(s) Lord Macaulay inside out,'⁴⁷ seems perfectly aligned with the kind of social quietism encapsulated in Skerritt's admonition to Brigid, 'To sleep is safe, to dream is dangerous.'⁴⁸ He is lifted by clerical power into a position O'Flingsley has come to hold in contempt: 'an Irish schoolmaster ... a clerical handyman, a piece of furniture in a chapel house, a brusher-out of barn schools, a Canon's yesman.'⁴⁹ O'Flingsley, like Christy Mahon before him, will face 'hog, dog or divil on the highway of the road.'⁵⁰ He does so with some equanimity, however, as he realises his fall from security into uncertainty brings with it the restoration of a human dignity he had subordinated to protecting his position in the education system of the Catholic state:

O'FLINGSLEY: I'll always owe you something for taking me by the scruff of the neck out of a mouse's hiding place and putting me back on the high road.⁵¹

The social world of Ardmahone is revealed as a rural Irish microcosm of a place produced by and for 'a new establishment of Church and state in which imagination would play no part and young men and women would emigrate to the ends of the earth not because the country was poor, but because it was mediocre.'⁵² Synge's prophetic adumbration of a lifeless

45 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 55.

46 Synge, *Playboy*, p. 140.

47 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 48.

48 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 43.

49 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 55.

50 Synge, *Playboy*, p. 106.

51 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 56.

52 Frank O'Connor, cited in Ferriter, *Transformation of Ireland*, p. 344.

people in a famished place, in *The Playboy of the Western World* is made flesh, thirty years later, in Ardmahone.

Postcolonial readings of cultural production in Independent Ireland frequently attempt to tease out narratives and images of consciousness resistant to the repressions of the successor state. O'Flingsley's story is a very clear example of such a narrative. Of his replacement by O'Connor, who is to marry Skerritt's preposterous niece, Thomasina, he remarks:

O'FLINGSLEY: Hurrah for the Catholic ideal! A rebel knocked out; a niece married off; and a school made safe for a stagnant tradition all in one move! Canon, you deserve a seat in Maynooth.⁵³

In the figure of Brigid, what is important is not what is absent, repressed or unwelcome, but that which endures and cannot be eradicated. Hers is a consciousness recalcitrant to either of the cultural formations at war over the soul of Ireland in the 1930s, either Skerritt's theocratic fantasy of pre-modern refinement, or O'Flingsley's democratic utopianism. Ultimately, her story is one which counterpoints their versions of 'modernity critically by representing, however weakly or even self-destructively, alternative ways of living.'⁵⁴ When Michael James O'Flaherty blesses the union of Pegeen and Christy Mahon, he does so in the names of God and St Mary and St Patrick. The Mother of Christ is given the archaic appellation, St Mary, and the national patron saint, Patrick is included. Mary's presence alongside Patrick draws attention to the exclusion of St Brigid, co-opted to Catholic nationalism as the latter's female equivalent, and 'Mary of the Gael'. In *Shadow and Substance*, Brigid recognises in St Brigid a prototypical nun, and expresses her desire to enter a convent. This dismays Skerritt, and when, at the end of Act II, an agitated Brigid discloses that she is in daily conversation with St Brigid, he prescribes a rest cure:

53 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 55.

54 David Lloyd, *Irish Times: Temporalities of Modernity* (Dublin: Field Day, 2008), p. 3.

CANON: Rest to the body, Brigid, is like prayer to the soul. And you will then forget these imaginings of yours.

BRIGID: But in bed, how can I forget, if her face is there in the curtains and the mark on her cheek where she struck the loveliness out of her face?

CANON: Now, now, now! I am trying not to be angry. There is no historical authority for that at all. The Church in its wisdom does not confirm it. It is probably just a myth. A myth, Brigid ...

BRIGID: What is a myth, Canon?

CANON: A legend, child.

BRIGID: And what is a – a legend, Canon?

CANON: Brigid, this is very trying! An old tale, that may or may not be true.

BRIGID: Then – it could be true, Canon?

CANON: Now, which of us knows best about these things, Brigid?

BRIGID: You, Canon.⁵⁵

This dialogue turns on the tale of St Brigid's voluntary disfiguration in refusal of the world, and her many suitors, marriage to whom would have confined her within the limits set for her gender. When Brigid is fatally injured, O'Flingsley describes her wound as 'side of the head and upper part of the face.'⁵⁶ The centrality of the saint's story to the dramatic action is flagged in Carroll's epigraph to the published script:

SPECIAL NOTE

A legend connected with St Brigid relates how in order to escape the attentions of persistent suitors, she disfigured the loveliness of her face at Faughart, her birthplace, near Dundalk, Ireland.⁵⁷

As an abbess, St Brigid is said to have been a formidable figure, the match for any male with authority in the Ireland of her time. As such, she is an exemplary figure of female capacity, at some remove from the docile nuns of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Both the imperative to control her, and her power to disturb, is evident in the dialogue cited. Skerritt dismisses St Brigid as insubstantial, but in order to do so, he must submit to Brigid's

55 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, pp. 41–42.

56 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 73.

57 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 4.

catechism, which raises the substance of shadows, and the politics around the right, not only to narrate but to interpret realities. In the end, Skerritt asserts the mystique of his clerical authority to terminate the discussion. He imposes an ending that fails to bring Brigid's search to a conclusion, as the tragic denouement confirms, for the simple reason that he lacks the power to do so. He may force O'Flingsley onto the highway of the road, to confront his terrors 'that I'd have no money and be hungry,'⁵⁸ but in the face of Brigid's utopian desires, he is helpless.

Rhetorically, the fabric of life in Independent Ireland is woven from the cloth of State Catholicism. As that cloth becomes threadbare, the cultural prescience of Synge's dramaturgy and Shaw's criticism has, in stark contrast, worn well. What Synge stages goes beyond illustrating Shaw's cultural politics, as the dramaturgy contains within it evidence of a living consciousness not easily cowed by colonial modernity, either British or Roman. As the twentieth century progresses, the Abbey stages 'generations of playwrights', of whom Carroll is acknowledged as the first and most significant author of Catholic experience from the inside, as it were. It is equally clear, in the distance travelled between Christy Mahon and James X, that images and narratives are worked and re-worked in an effort to arrive at what Seamus Heaney calls 'symbols adequate to our predicament.'⁵⁹ Performance efficacy is not solely a function of words or of stage action, and has a great deal to do with audience response and expectation. In 1907, the stage was eclipsed by pandemonium in the auditorium, and the *dramatis personae* of *The Playboy of the Western World* were silenced by the servants of a nascent theocratic successor state. Almost a century later the descendants of those who founded and shaped that state through counter-revolution, and of those who had to endure its furtive cruelties, are left together alone in an auditorium by James X. His walk-out on official Ireland asserts that the dignity of refusal remains available as a 'weapon of the weak' even to the most abject. It is precisely their damaged quality

58 Carroll, *Shadow and Substance*, p. 9.

59 Seamus Heaney, *Preoccupations* (London: Faber, 1980), p. 56.

that establishes the credentials of survivors of the various crimes of State and Church as a cultural resource:

Paradoxically, the very acknowledgement that they have suffered damage and were prevented from unfolding the extent of their potential guards against nostalgic projection: these remnants are not the regressive images of some impossible golden age, and their promise of alternatives could only be realised with the advent of the justice whose absence they protest.⁶⁰

As Catholic Ireland implodes, and Ireland Successful crumbles, perhaps the damaged histories of James X, Brigid and the Mundy sisters re-emerge as exemplary narratives, not of defeat, but of struggle. In Irish theatre, even as an aggressive theocratic version of anti-colonial nationalism gets into its stride in the early twentieth century, a pattern of representing intimidating clerical power as always contested is established. Critical interrogation of theatrical representations offers insight into Catholic supremacy and the social and political arrangements which enabled it. In addition, it draws attention to popular resources with the potential – if mobilised – to set a different direction for what may need to be re-imagined and re-wrought, a century later, as a Second Republic. In such an entity, to dream would not be dangerous, but would be valued as a form of critical consciousness indispensable to the common good.

60 Lloyd, *Irish Times*, p. 3.

TONY CORBETT

Effing the Ineffable: Brian Friel's *Wonderful Tennessee* and the Interrogation of Transcendence

Wonderful Tennessee contains a large number of apparent rituals and is imbued with a mystical and religious sub-text borrowed from Greek, Celtic and Christian, particularly Catholic, traditions. Religious suggestion pervades the play, but is treated with a deliberate and thorough ambiguity. The play constructs itself as a series of possibilities, offered and recanted by both the characters and by Friel himself as the controlling discourse. The result is not a religious play, but a play in which religion functions as an absent presence, a deliberate ambiguity which functions as a meditation on the place of religion and the existence of the ineffable.

The wilderness as a place to encounter God or the devil is an ancient motif, occurring repeatedly in the Old Testament. Moses climbs Mount Sinai to find God; Jesus goes into the desert and is tempted by Satan. Catholic tradition is littered with holy hermits, and those who retreat from civilisation to contemplate the soul. The Romantics believed in Nature as a restorative, or as a spiritual teacher. The idea of the Irish countryside as either or both, while prevalent in the Irish National myth, is an ambivalent one in Friel. Attachment to place appears in *The Enemy Within* (1979, repr. 1992), where Ireland is an emotional attachment that Columba is trying to transcend. *The Gentle Island* (1973, repr. 1993) is set on another supposed Eden, yet the name belies the repression and violence of the island, unleashed by the strangers. In *Volunteers* (1989), the archaeological dig is a cross-section of the Irish landscape, from the television aerials of the 1970s to the skeleton of the Viking past, but the interpretations of the dig, and of the play, are deliberately ambiguous. In *Translations* (1981, repr. 2000), Yolland refers to the landscape, in typical Romantic fashion, as 'heavenly',

and is immediately contradicted by Owen.¹ It is the same landscape that harbours dirt, ignorance, poverty and violence, and which will, at the end of the play, be afflicted by blight. In *The Communication Cord* (1989, repr. 1999), Friel lampoons, if not the landscape itself, then certain over-pious attitudes to it. It is uncertain whether contact with the landscape contains some authentic experience, an ineffable return to edenic origins, or whether the characters are paying lip-service to Irish national and nationalist pieties. It is, therefore, rather dangerous to ascribe, as Christopher Murray does, an overtly religious character to the pier. He describes it as: 'like a temple ... a living sacred space.'² The six characters in *Wonderful Tennessee* arrive on what may or may not be Ballybeg Pier in search of some transcendent experience, although some are unaware that they are searching, or for what. It is one of Friel's most allusive plays, slyly and deliberately inviting comparisons with *Six Characters in Search of an Author* and *Waiting for Godot*, alluding stylistically and through the use of motif to his own earlier work, and using music and story to create a connotative space in which Greek, pagan and Christian myths can be manipulated.

The technical notes describe a pier surrounded by water on three sides, with the mainland on stage left. It is set in northwest Donegal, one of the remotest parts of Ireland. Ballybeg is seemingly in the northwest of the county, while the pier thrusts into the sea and further isolates the characters. From the beginning of the play, it is unclear whether they are, in fact, on Ballybeg Pier, or whether they have arrived at the wrong place. Trish is unable to remember if they are in Donegal or Sligo. Given the interrogation of their lives that takes place in the play as the characters slip into middle age, the symbolism of being possibly in the wrong place is apt.

The characters occupy a liminal space, between land and sea, as if to emphasise the liminality of their existence. In their lives, they are leaving behind the last vestiges of youth and sinking into middle age. George is on the cusp of death. Berna is recovering from a mental breakdown. Terry

1 Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 45.

2 Christopher Murray, Introduction to *Brian Friel: Plays 2* (London: Faber & Faber, 1999), pp. xvii–xviii.

is broke, Frank has left his career and is trying to finish a book. Angela has returned to lecturing, which she hates. Her field is classical studies, which locates her between the past and the present. Trish, throughout the play, is an emblem of bewilderment, unsure of where she is, or the details of her own life. Her not very poised uncertainty is yet another borderline.

The 'listing and rotting wooden stand, cruciform in shape, on which hangs the remnant of a life-belt'³ is an emblem of the play as a whole. It is at once a cross, a symbol of the ineffable, because it is cruciform, and a Celtic cross, symbol of Irish spirituality, because of the positioning of the lifebelt. If it is a cross, then the lifebelt functions as the body, and is merely a remnant. No deposition, no resurrection has taken place. If it is a Celtic cross, it is neglected and rotting, an icon of physical decay as well as a symbol of transcendent religion. No privileged reading is given for the lifebelt, but it functions as more than a set decoration.

When Angela hangs her hat on one of the arms (*WT* 28), Friel is careful to specify the positioning, because it would look too much like a scarecrow or a comic crucifixion if the hat were placed on top too soon. At the opening of Act Two, Berna's scarf also hangs on the stand. As she removes it, Angela comments that the structure is: '[l]ike a hall-stand' (*WT* 68). The offerings at the end of the play also centre on the lifebelt. A scarf, a belt, a bracelet, a handkerchief and, lastly, a piece of torn shirt, are attached to it. Friel, in the stage directions, refers to the items as 'votive offerings' (*WT* 89). We are never told in what sense they are votive. It may be an offering in fulfilment of a vow, or merely expressive of a wish. In Catholic terms, votive means an offering to a saint, or to God. In secular terms, it is an outward expression of a promise or wish. This liminal space between the sacred and the secular is where the play functions at its strongest. It not only allows, as Csilla Bertha pointed out, ordinary gestures to be raised to the level of ancient rite,⁴ but it allows the sacred to be reduced

3 Brian Friel, *Wonderful Tennessee* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1993), p. 8. All subsequent references will be denoted by *WT*, followed by a page number.

4 Csilla Bertha, 'Six Characters in Search of a Faith: The Mythic and the Mundane in *Wonderful Tennessee*', in *Irish University Review*, 29:1 (1999), pp. 119–135 (p. 122).

to a mundanity, and forces one to consider the possibility that religious sense and ritual are merely aspects of the ordinary, elevated by the desire to believe in something transcendent. From one perspective, religious ritual sanctifies the mundane, but from another, the mundane simply disguises itself in specious significance. Bertha claims that Friel is not one of those writers 'who present the dissolving of all certainties,'⁵ but this itself is uncertain. In *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (1997), Tom Connolly drinks: '[t]o the Necessary Uncertainty' of life.⁶ Ballybeg Pier may just be a disused pier, and Oileán Draíochta just another uninhabited island.

One of the functions of music in the play is the elision of boundaries. Friel uses it as part of the play's argumentative structure, blurring categories and creating uncertainty between the ineffable and the mundane and trivial. George's playing provides incidental music to the play, and, at times, an ironic commentary on it. The choice of music fits the varying moods of the play, but not the facts of the characters' lives.⁷ Most of it, in fact, would have been familiar to the young Brian Friel in the Thirties and Forties. George's instrument, the piano accordion, apart from being portable, and therefore theatrically useful, is a loud, brash instrument, the staple of showbands and céilí music. To use it as a subtle and sensitive index of mood changes and thematic tensions is brave, and makes considerable demands on the skill of the player. The initial shift between 'Happy Days are Here Again', 'O Mother I Could Weep for Mirth', 'I Want to be Happy' and 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' is not as extreme as might appear at first reading. All of the pieces are concerned in some way with happiness. Two are popular songs from the 1920s and early 1930s, two are religious; of these, one is a traditional Catholic hymn, the other a piece of high culture by J.S. Bach. The four together form an initial musical statement, with sacred and secular alternated. Initially, the music is an accompaniment for the tipsy day-trippers. It may be that we are to believe that 'O Mother

5 Bertha, 'Six Characters in Search of a Faith', p. 119.

6 Brian Friel, *Give Me Your Answer, Do!* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1997), p. 80.

7 Tony Corbett, *Brian Friel: Decoding the Language of the Tribe* (Dublin: The Liffey Press, 2nd edn, 2008), pp. 77, 110.

I Could Weep for Mirth' has significance for the group. The music is used throughout to suggest a shared history. George's playing of 'I Want to be Happy' is greeted with: '[c]heers and mocking laughter at the choice', and the dialogue continues over it (*WT* 12–13). The *glissement* between the sacred and the profane in the music confuses and obscures the boundaries between the wonder of religion and the wonder of life, representing both the ineffable and the inexpressible, and mere entertainment.

The oxymoronic 'weep for mirth', and its emphasis in performance suggests a connection between happiness and misery, which is borne out by the exuberance of the group contrasted with Berna's depression, and indeed the fact that, despite their outward high spirits, their lives are unhappy. Friel manipulates the tempo and volume of the song, to suggest variations and ambivalences within the performances. Angela sings 'defiantly' at 'half the song's usual tempo' (*WT* 16). Berna sings it 'very privately, almost inaudibly'. The others enter 'singing lustily' and dancing a conga line with 'a hint of the maenadic' (*WT* 17). As the song comes to an end, Frank attempts 'In the Good Old Summer Time', but is drowned out by George playing 'a very formal 'Amen' cadence' (*WT* 18). Uncertainty is again a feature of the exchange between George and Angela moments later:

ANGELA: 'Wonderful! I know another happy song, George.

Angela sings the first line of the refrain of 'I Don't Know Why I'm Happy'. George picks it up immediately.

Yes! He's a genius!

She sings the second line of the refrain. (WT 21, italics original)

After crowning George with seaweed and calling him 'Dionysus', Angela thinks of yet another 'happy song', one that encourages Trish and Terry to join in. Angela improvises lyrics to suit the situation, and the sequence ends as she 'flops onto a bollard' (*WT* 23). A number of tropes are being both supported and deconstructed by the music. On the level of characterisation, the opening music is an icon of the group's carefree spirit. As yet, the religious music that intrudes has had no verbal or thematic reinforcement, other than the lifebelt, and that is as yet without a context that would encourage one to interpret it from a religious perspective. The persistence of the happy

music trope is problematised by Berna and becomes a strain (*WT* 15, 22). Finally, it begins to collapse under the weight of forced jollity.

The music interfaces with the religious motifs in the play in a number of ways. Firstly, the religious music represents itself. It has an existence outside the world of the play, and has, therefore, connotations that Friel cannot control. What he can be reasonably certain of is that Irish Catholic audience members of a certain age would react in similar ways to, for example, 'Bring Flowers of the Rarest'. It becomes more problematic for audience members not in their mid-forties and older, who may never have heard the tunes at all, and to whom the lyrics are unknown. To non-Irish non-Catholics, they may connote nothing. Secondly, the religious music creates, from the outset, an environment receptive to religious suggestion. The tone and cadence of the music suggest worship even to those unfamiliar with specific pieces. It becomes an almost subliminal substrate into which Friel can introduce a notion of the transcendent. Thirdly, music problematises both the mood and the connotations it has created. The tones and cadences that suggest religion in the opening scenes are parodied by George as he plays secular music in a sacred style. He plays 'Down by the Cane-Brake' in a style which '*endows the song with the tone and dignity of a hymn. It sounds almost sacred*' (*WT* 41, italics original). Conversely he plays Wagner's Wedding March '*very softly, with a reverence close to mockery*', or interjects an elaborate 'Amen' to drown out Frank's singing or Angela's speech (*WT* 62, 18, 24). This is the play's fundamental dramaturgical and discursive method, in which a proposition is advanced, and, if not undercut, then disputed by the text which follows it.

The song which gives rise to the play's title, 'Down by the Cane Brake', is a vaudeville piece in the style of Stephen Foster. The lyrics promise Nancy Dill happiness when they go 'down to Tennessee'. The song is aspirational, and the lovers never go there. Bertha cites Mircea Eliade's definition of the sacred as a spiritual 'Centre' close to the meeting point of the three cosmic regions, earth, heaven, and hell.⁸ In Bertha's interpretation, Ballybeg Pier is 'in the vicinity of the sacred island of pilgrimage', and the nature of the

8 Bertha, 'Six Characters in Search of a Faith', pp. 126–127.

characters' experience is that they can get close to, but not penetrate the sacred mysteries contained on the island. As the importance of the island as a sacred site is dependent on belief and custom, and belies the reality of what happened there, its status as a holy place is suspect, but it, nevertheless, represents some attempt to site the transcendent topographically. In 'Down by the Cane Brake', the spiritual centre is represented by Tennessee, a place which is never reached, but which would, if it were, result in a happiness beyond anything experienced before. Tennessee becomes 'an architectonic symbol of the centre'. The centre is:

pre-eminently the zone of the sacred, the zone of absolute reality ... The road leading to the center is a 'difficult road' ... and this is verified at every level of reality: difficult convolutions of a temple ... pilgrimage to sacred places ... wanderings in the labyrinth; difficulties of the seeker for the road ...⁹

Although Ballybeg Pier, and the means by which the six characters arrived there satisfy Eliade's criteria, Friel illustrates the deficiencies of such symbols by shifting his focus to Oileán Draíochta/Tennessee, and turning his pilgrims into tipsy middle-aged day-trippers. The myth of the sacred Centre may therefore be as much a fantasy as a spiritual *omphalos*. Heaven is reduced to Tennessee, and the ineffable to a harmless delusion in the face of death.

Nevertheless, the fabric of the play is interwoven with ideas of pilgrimage. When Terry introduces the island in Act One, it is as a former place of pilgrimage, where barefoot pilgrims spent time in fasting and prayer (*WT* 29–30). It is based on Station Island in Lough Derg, County Donegal. The penitential beds exist, as does the custom of walking barefoot around the island to a series of 'stations' dedicated to particular saints, fasting and praying, in this case for three days and nights. In Act One, the puddle is referred to as a 'holy well' (*WT* 53), recalling countless Irish local pilgrimage sites where parishioners would process to a holy well, mass rock, or other

9 Mircea Eliade, *The Myth of the Eternal Return, or Cosmos and History*. Translated by Willard R. Trask, Bollingen series 46 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), pp. 12, 17–18.

holy site. Moments after, Frank proclaims: 'Lord, it *is* good for us to be here! Isn't it ...?' (*WT* 54). The line, though bathetically deconstructed by the comic 'Isn't it ...?', is a quote from the words of Peter to Christ during the Transfiguration, itself a peregrination to a mountain top to encounter God.¹⁰ Typically, the '[i]sn't it ...?' inserts uncertainty into the status of the allusion. Berna's story contains the names of two famous pilgrimage sites worked into the text. The story of the murder contains two pilgrimages, one to the Eucharistic Congress, and one to the Island. Berna's leap off the pier into the water is recalled by Angela's story of the Elusinian Mysteries, which began with ritual purification in the sea, a ritual which itself recalls baptism by immersion. The use of pilgrimage as both structuring device and trope adds to the sense of the play as approaching something transcendent and ineffable. The fact that the pilgrimages are undercut or unavailable as privileged readings problematises their interpretation as straightforward religious images. Their iconography, to borrow another religious term, is deliberately confused.

Each character tells a story at some point, giving the play more than a faint whiff of *The Canterbury Tales* and those other pilgrims on their way to Becket's shrine. Berna, recovering from her breakdown, tells the story of the Holy House of Loreto, a cabin reputed to be the house in which the Virgin Mary was raised, and in which the Annunciation took place. According to tradition, angels translated the house from Palestine to Italy in 1291, and after landing in several locations, finally settled in Loreto three years later. Friel omits the relocations, streamlining the story for dramatic impact. Berna tells the story because it is 'an offence to reason', a miracle inserted into the ordinary. It is a story that admits the possibility of divine intervention in ordinary life. Berna calls the story 'stupid, futile defiance' (*WT* 57–58). She is attempting to find something that defies reason. It is possible that her crisis is connected with the idea of death as annihilation, and she is desperately reaching after some intimation of immortality. Friel, however, delicately and surgically undercuts the story by naming the doctor who told Berna the story 'Walsingham.' In the town of Walsingham, in the

10 Matt 17:4, Mark 9:5, Luke 9:33.

southeast of England, a replica of the house in which the Annunciation was said to have taken place was built by Richeldis de Faverches. It was built, we are told, on the instructions of the Virgin Mary, who appeared to him in a dream around 1061. The house became a major pilgrimage site during the Middle Ages and is still, despite the fact that the location of the house is now uncertain, having been destroyed during the Reformation. Friel's 'intense young Englishman' thus reduces the story to the status of artifice. The uncertainties of Loreto are multiplied by the uncertainties of Walsingham, and the authority and status of the story within the text become suspect and, by association, all the transcendent experiences in the play are brought into question.

Trish's story, in keeping with her character, is confused and confusing, told as much by the others as by her. It is a much corrected and contradicted account of her wedding, and the fact that George had been late, had arrived on a motorbike, and had had to change in the organ loft. Trish also has her uncertainties, but they are expressed comically. Her bewilderment is universal, but she does not perceive it as existential. This is consonant with her character from the opening line of the play: 'Help! We're lost!' (*WT* 11). The line resonates throughout the play, but leaves Trish untouched. She appears to have come to terms with the facts of her existence by accepting that she will never understand them. For this reason, the stylistic construction of her story is as important as the narrative details. While Trish is the narrator of her own story, and one of its central figures, her narration is not allowed privilege. Everyone but Berna makes a contribution. Scott Boltwood suggests that her narration is evidence that: 'even personal memories are as unrecoverable as history',¹¹ thus fitting her into a series of unreliable narrators and historians, including Lombard in *Making History* (1989), Casimir in *Aristocrats* (1980, repr. 1999) and Frank in *Faith Healer* (1991). In the process of Trish's story, Friel inserts some suggestion as to the status of stories in general. Possibly using Frank as *raisonneur*, although with Friel that is never a safe assumption, it is asserted that: 'All we want of

11 Scott Boltwood, *Brian Friel, Ireland and the North* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 182.

a story is to hear it again and again and again and again and again'. Frank claims that: 'boring is soothing' and 'boring reassures', and asks Trish to 'sedate' them (*WT* 61, 60). The suggestion is that the familiarity of an old story is comforting and evokes continuity and stability. Once again, the fact that Friel deliberately alienates the narration from the *fabula*, and the putative narrator from both, makes these assertions doubtful.

Frank's story is not from his past, but is of an experience he has just had, an encounter with dolphins at daybreak:

for thirty seconds, maybe a minute, it danced for me. Like a faun, a satyr; with its manic, leering face. Danced with a deliberate, controlled, exquisite abandon. Leaping, twisting, tumbling, gyrating in wild and intricate contortions. (*WT* 70)

The dance of the dolphins recalls two other pivotal dances of Friel's *oeuvre*, the sudden intrusion of dance into the Mundy household in *Dancing at Lughnasa* (1990),¹² and the 'wild and furious dance' from *Molly Sweeney* (1994).¹³ In *Dancing at Lughnasa*, the dance is an explosion of atavism that cuts through the heavily repressed lives of the sisters. It represents the passion and lust for life that is locked away, and is a momentary, passing thing. It is used to suggest other lives, other possibilities in a dramatic shorthand. It also connects with the tribal dances described by Father Jack, Christina's dances with Gerry, and the vague and, it turns out, inaccurate, descriptions of the Lughnasa celebrations in the back hills. The dances, as in many Friel plays, suggest an aesthetic beyond the verbal, an intrusion of some atavistic and ineffable force into mundanity.

The dance in *Molly Sweeney* is a similar release for pent-up emotion. On the night before the operation to restore her sight, Molly dances in 'a rage of anger and defiance ... a wild and furious dance'. It is at once abandoned and controlled. She overturns nothing, brushes against nobody. She simultaneously displays her control of her life as she has experienced it and her frustration as the site of the conflict between Frank and Mr Rice. In many ways, Molly's dance serves the same purpose as Berna's story of the

12 Brian Friel, *Dancing at Lughnasa* (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), pp. 21–22.

13 Brian Friel, *Molly Sweeney* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994), p. 31.

Holy House of Loreto: it is a protest against her perception of the order of things, and her despair at that structure. It is an attempt to destabilise the perceived order by inserting a lever of uncertainty at a pivotal point.

Although no doubt intended to recall these dances, the dance of the dolphins resembles neither. The dancer is not human, and we are not privy to the emotions of the creature, whether anthropomorphised or not. We are encouraged, instead, to look at the watcher rather than the dancer. Frank's description of the appearance of the dolphins is lyrical in the extreme, perhaps too much so. Friel may be undermining the story by allowing it to wander into the discourse of romance or fantasy. Dolphins have been presented throughout the play as quasi-mythical. Oileán Draíochta disappears into the mist and leaves tumbling dolphins, the pirates who accost Dionysus leap overboard and are transformed into dolphins (*WT* 29, 32). Typically, each account is accompanied by Trish's bathetic 'Will we really see dolphins? God, I love dolphins' (*WT* 32, 70). Frank's own contemptuous dismissal of them as 'porpoises' destroys their signification as links to the ineffable and undermines their already uncertain status.

The inclusion of Frank's proposed book: *The Measurement of Time and Its Effect on European Civilisation* has a double purpose. Firstly, part of Frank's thesis is that the visions of medieval monks were induced by lack of sleep. He attempts to explain rationally, or to explain away, the intense mystical experiences of the monks. In the scheme of the play, this is the imperative that seeks to reduce the ineffable to the level of the ordinary and the explicable. Secondly, the mensuration of time is, in the play, analogous to the craniometry in *The Home Place* (2005), in which Richard Gore attempts to reduce race to a series of numbers. The division of time into conventional units might be seen as an attempt to control and measure life beyond the natural. It is the imposition of a template on the world, but a seemingly rational scientific one, as opposed to a religion or a philosophical system. Friel seems to be implying that one is no more natural or fundamental than any other, they are merely differing, and equally partial, methods of trying to comprehend and encompass existence. The book, the music, the stories, the little rituals, and the pervading religious atmosphere all have this one thing in common, they are patterns imposed on reality. The book charts an attempt to pattern time, music imposes structure on

sound, stories impose patterns on reality itself, and religious ritual may be no more than an action repeated until it achieves significance in the minds of the participants. If one has no more authenticity or authority than another, then sacred and secular, sound and silence, life and death, all become equal.

But it is also Frank who is determined to find a supernatural or mystical explanation for the dance of the dolphins. He insists that it was a 'ceremonial dance'. He uses words such as 'performance', 'aware', 'considered', 'disturbing', 'knowing', 'almost human'. The core of his narrative is that for a time during the dance, the dolphin: 'never once touched the water – was free of it – had nothing to do with the water' (*WT* 70–71). He has been presented in the play as an unconvinced rationalist. When explaining his book, he opines that: '[t]he mystery offends – so the mystery has to be extracted' (*WT* 52). While he contends that the visions of medieval monks were caused by disorientation due to lack of food, sleep-deprivation, and by the repetitious chants of the Office, he is unconvinced by his own hypothesis. He doubts the tenets of rationality, and wonders if the monks on Oileán Draíochta had been in contact with some kind of mystical level of existence: 'because their acceptance was so comprehensive, so open, so generous, maybe they *were* put in touch – what do you think? – so intimately in touch that maybe, maybe they actually *did see*' (*WT* 52). He lives in a world of rationality, but longs for an experience of the Absolute, of that which lies beyond the ability of rationality to explain, or of language to express.

The reception of the dolphin story is undermined by Friel. Frank's camera has run out of film, and he is unable to record the event. This is a cliché motif of contact with the supernatural in popular literature, movies and television. The malfunctioning or empty camera precludes proof and therefore the ghost or the yeti, the UFO or the alien remain mysterious. If Friel is using such a well-worn cliché, it can only be for the purpose of subverting the authority of the story. Angela, Trish and Berna all but ignore the story and continue with their throwing game; the significance, if any, of the event is lost on them. Frank's comment: 'Left them speechless, didn't it? My Ballybeg epiphany' (*WT* 70) is charged with irony and ambiguity. In religious terms, an epiphany is a manifestation of the divine.

It seems unlikely that God, or a god, is appearing to Frank in the guise of a dolphin off Ballybeg Pier. It takes the 'religious' atmosphere of the play and punctures it by exaggeration. In its literary sense, as used by Joyce, Frank's encounter is not an epiphany, because there has been no 'sudden spiritual manifestation' in which the soul has leapt 'from the vestment of its appearance'.¹⁴ No revelation of truth has been made, no turning point has been reached, no divine immanence has manifested itself. Instead, what we get is a New-Age experience, a non-specific spirituality in which the natural world is perceived as permeated with divine revelation. Frank reacts with embarrassment:

FRANK: ... Another apparition, Terry.

TERRY: Maybe.

FRANK: So I saw a porpoise or a dolphin or something leap out of the water and dance about a bit. Wonderful. (*WT* 70)

The use of the iconic and, by this point, ironic 'Wonderful' sites Frank's experience alongside all the other inconclusive, disappointing, and bathetic experiences of the play. Terry's guarded 'Maybe' is an indication of his approaching story of the ritual murders on the island.

Terry's story has elements of horror and bathos. The island was neither a haven for supernatural dolphins, nor a gateway to the Elysian Fields, but the site of a particularly savage killing. He tells the story of seven young men and seven young women who, after returning from the celebration of the Eucharistic Congress in Dublin in 1932, had stolen a boat from Ballybeg Pier, sailed to Oileán Draíochta, and, fuelled by drink and religious ecstasy, had ritually sacrificed and dismembered a young man named Sean O'Boyle. The details of the date of the murder and the fact that the perpetrators were returning from the Eucharistic celebrations in Dublin are central to Friel's construction in the story.

In 1932 the fledgling and almost bankrupt Irish Free State engaged in a conspicuous celebration of its Catholicism. Dermot Keogh, quoting *Congress News*, states that the number of masses, celebrations and acts of

14 James Joyce, *Stephen Hero* (St Albans: Triad/Panther, 1977), p. 188.

piety and devotion, by the end of the Congress, had reached 314,460,345.¹⁵ The government enacted the *Eucharistic Congress (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 1932*, changing the liquor licensing laws for the duration of the Congress and making a number of other provisions, both practical and odd.¹⁶ Hundreds of priests, bishops, archbishops, and cardinals descended on the capital, along with vast crowds of the faithful. Although centred on the climactic Phoenix Park mass in Dublin on June 26th, celebrated by the Papal Legate, with hymns sung by John McCormack, the Congress was a countrywide expression of the unity of Church and State, land and God. It was perceived as a manifestation of a nation obedient to the now openly congruent authorities of Dublin and Rome, a sign that the Free State was approved of by the Papacy. Politically, it aligned the Irish Free State with the empire of the Roman Church, rather than with the British Empire, and was seen as the ‘culmination of the great Irish drama’¹⁷ that would restore the fortunes of the Irish nation and its Catholic people.

Friel uses this icon of Irish Catholicism as the catalyst for pagan ritual murder. Although there is a strong element of bathos to the suggestion that the Eucharistic Congress could act as the motivation for an orgy, there is also a more disturbing point being made. The use casts doubt over the specificity of religious experience, as if one kind of atavistic arousal could easily segue into another. It brings together the highly stylised sacrifice of the Catholic mass, and imbricates it with something far more bloody and uncontrolled. Suddenly there is real blood, rather than the esoteric and institutionalised Communion wafer. Suddenly there is a religious event as savage as it is authentic, with none of the packaging and sanitisation connected with the Holy House of Loreto, the not-quite-fairytale wedding, and the dancing dolphins. Here is the dark and ensanguinated aspect of primitive religious feeling, sating bodily lusts and appeasing brutish gods. Typically with Friel,

15 Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-Century Ireland: Nation and State* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1994), p. 70.

16 Government of Ireland, ‘Eucharistic Congress (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act (1932)’, in *Irish Statute Book* (Dublin: Oifig na bhFoilsithe Poiblí, 1999) [CD-ROM].

17 David G. Holmes, ‘The Eucharistic Congress of 1932 and Irish Identity’, in *New Hibernia Review*, 4:1 (2000, pp. 50–78), p. 63.

although the experience, the ritual, and the emotions are authentic, the existence of gods, savage or otherwise, cannot be confirmed.

The aftermath of the story has elements borrowed from folklore. The parish erupted in confusion and violence until the intervention of the bishop. He made the thirteen swear never to divulge the secret of the events on the island, and compelled them to leave the country. O’Boyle’s parents died within a year, and the neighbourhood became depopulated. The local belief was that the area was cursed. Secrecy, exile, death within a year, the lands accursed, Friel composes a narrative that is familiar yet ambiguous, mythical and folkloric, yet, within the text, ostensibly real. There is uncertainty whether the depopulation was caused by the curse, the war, or economic circumstance. The belief that nothing would prosper in the area is undermined by constant mention of the beauty of the surrounding countryside, and by Berna’s wild flowers, given to her by Frank:

BERNA: (*To Frank*) These grew. (*Her flowers*)

FRANK: What’s that?

BERNA: He said nothing ever grew again. These did. (*WT 75*)

It is a theatrical aside, a throwaway, but it makes the status of the curse uncertain. Of course, Berna is the character recovering from mental illness, and who has told the story of the flying house, so another layer of uncertainty is placed atop the first. What is certain from the story is that the desire for transcendence has led to violence, horror and death.

The final story is Angela’s brief retelling of the Eleusinian Mysteries. There is little to tell, because, according to her, the participants had sworn to keep the rituals secret, so the details died with them. She invokes fasting, purification in the sea, initiation into the mysteries, music, dancing, singing, and sacrifice. Angela’s story re-affirms the play’s religious meta-narrative, suggesting that their own games and music had somehow slid into ritual, that ritual significance was inescapable, or that humans inescapably build transcendent meta-narratives into everyday actions, desperately imbuing them with supernatural resonances. The story also implies that the end of religious mystery, by nature of its secrecy, is oblivion, or that religious ritual is culture-specific, and cannot, perhaps even should not, survive the death

of that culture. Frank responds with: 'What's your point – that they had bishops too?' (*WT* 84), and then comments on the weather.

The characters participate in several para-rituals in the play, sometimes deliberately, sometimes ironically, sometimes unwittingly. Their communal singing has a ritualistic element, meant to induce and maintain a sense of euphoria and belonging. Like many rituals, its effectiveness is questionable. Their storytelling has a formal, ritual feel to it, as they narrate to understand and, indeed, to create the world around them. It is, however, towards the end of the play that the action exfoliates into recognisable ritualistic actions, mimicking those of religious practice, and demanding attention by the nature of the formality of the actions themselves, rather than by any connection to God, gods or a *genius loci*.

Initially, the actions centre on the life-belt stand. Angela takes her scarf and 'knots it on one of the arms of the stand', while Frank watches. Then he buckles his belt around the upright, watched by Terry and Trish. Trish hangs her bracelet on the arm opposite Berna's scarf, then demands George's handkerchief and knots it beside her bracelet (*WT* 76, 77). Angela places the tinned honey cake on top of a bollard. In a moment of Catholic irony, Frank throws away the remnants of the cherry brandy:

FRANK: Anybody mind if I pour this out? (*Reads*) Cherry Brandy.
He empties it out.
 God, that's a sin, isn't it? (*WT* 78)

In the context of the ritual that has been going on, Frank's pouring out of the blood-coloured cherry brandy is a libation, liquid spilled to honour a god. It is simultaneously a sin, in the context of Irish Catholic horror at wasting food. Angela's furious stamping out of the small fire made by Trish in order to burn the rubbish is charged with ambiguity. On one hand, she is affirming the nature of the place as holy ground, which cannot be defiled, while on the other, she claims her actions were motivated by lack of sleep, recalling Frank's theory of monastic visions.

Sleep-deprivation and the sense of unreality they are sharing is the lead-in to the next para-ritual. Frank invites Terry to 'leave a visiting card' on the lifebelt stand. He offers money (a fairly normal Catholic offering

to the Church). Trish comments that money is useless, presumably because it lacks any personal involvement, thereby nullifying more than a thousand years of offerings, penances, and bought indulgences. The decision to remove Terry's shirt with comic force is a moment of intrusive physical action in a play that has been quite static. This intrusion, like Berna's leap into the sea, is meant to focus attention on itself. It recalls, comically, the manner in which ritual and ritual feeling can spill over into violence. It is, in effect, a re-enactment of the ritual murder of Seán O'Boyle. Angela takes no part in the flaying of Terry, but stands aside, watching. The irony of the scene may be the way in which the characters' actions have segued into real ritual from comic enactment, or in the blurring of the boundaries between a pastiche or a mimesis of ritual and the ritual itself. It may be that the pulling off of Terry's shirt has no significance other than itself. The hanging of the fragment on the stand may be no more than a 'Terry Martin was here' (*WT* 81), an affirmation of existence rather than an offering to something ineffable.

The exotic food and drink provided by Terry are another element of the mythic substrate of the play. The list is exaggerated: champagne, venison and apricot compote, tinned honey cake, cherry and mandarin charreusse, marrons glacés, marinated quail and quince jelly, brandied peaches, Romanian truffles, Coleraine 1922 whiskey, and cherry brandy (*WT* 24, 40–41, 44, 49, 54, 78). These are at once the exotica of the conspicuous consumer and the mysterious foods provided by, eaten by, or offered to the gods. They are the manna of Hebrew and Christian tradition, the Greek nectar, or ambrosia, with its magical properties, or the fruit of the forbidden tree in the Garden of Eden. Even the Catholic Eucharistic rite is, fundamentally, a meal in which bread and wine are transformed and eaten. All these foods have the ability to enhance, or preserve, or magically feed the faithful or the initiate, and express the desire for the transcendent through the very immanent act of eating.

The tinned honey cake becomes both a half-mocking gift for Carlin and an offering to placate local gods. Both honey and honey cake are ubiquitous in mythologies: Zeus was nurtured on honey, itself a symbol of the divine for the Greeks. Honey was used to anoint the dead, while honey cakes were included in funerary rituals to appease Cerberus. The Hebrews'

god promised them a land flowing in milk and honey. Honey and bees are sacred symbols in Norse and Celtic mythologies also. The Catholic Church still specifies a minimum beeswax content in its candles, possibly because the wax was produced by virgin worker bees, and was thus considered pure. Mythic and religious significances pile up against a gesture made ambiguous by the uncertainty of the dialogue and stage directions:

He [Frank] now sees the tin of honey cake and picks it up.

FRANK: What's this?

TERRY: That's for Carlin.

FRANK: Like hell. I'm taking –

TERRY: Leave it, Frank.

FRANK: Sorry ...

Nobody moves, they look around. Nobody speaks. Finally:

TRISH: Nice place all the same ... Isn't it? (*WT* 85)

Friel uses the uncomprehending Trish to break the moment, the bathos allowing the scene to continue.

The play's humanist apotheosis comes towards the end. Terry, who has been ritually 'killed', reveals that he is bankrupt. His response is defiant: 'Things will pick up. The tide will turn. I'll rise again, Oh, yes, I'll rise again' (*WT* 87). Terry is confident of his own resurrection, through his own agency, rather than by any divine intervention. It is his confidence of renewal and return that sparks Angela's pastiche of Molly Bloom:

Yes, we will! Next year – and the year after – and the year after that! Because we want to! Not out of need – out of desire! Not in expectation – but to attest, to affirm, to acknowledge – to shout Yes, Yes, Yes! Damn right we will Terry! Yes – yes – yes! (*WT* 87)

The use of 'attest', 'affirm', and 'acknowledge', even at this closing stage of the play, is both religious and legal. Angela's assertion of the supremacy of desire and of her own existence over need and obligation is caught in a web of ambiguity that words cannot escape.

The final, parting ritual, accompanied by secular music played in George's 'sacred style' is a simple circling of the mound of stones, taking one from the bottom and placing it on the top, then touching their 'votive

offering' and moving offstage. In leaving part of themselves behind on the pier, they are in some way attempting to assure their return. It is at once a self-consciously secular affirmation of their own existence and an ineluctable *glissement* into the numinous, as if they have been drawn into ritual by some atavistic impulse, some fundamental instinct which sees significance in repeated, patterned communal actions. Angela refuses to participate in this, as she refused to participate in the shirt ritual. She is attempting, as far as possible, to remove herself from any acknowledgment of the ineffable. When she does place her hat at the top of the stand, it is in defiance (*WT* 90). Placing her hat at the top is a gesture of arrogance, of supremacy. Friel was careful to avoid placing a hat, or anything on top of the stand earlier in the play, precisely to make way for this gesture. She is defying, for want of a better word, the gods. Her gesture is not out of respect for a deity, but a reification of herself and of George. It is not a desire for an experience of the ineffable, but a declaration of her humanity. Her concluding shout:

ANGELA: (*Defiantly*) For you, George! For both of us! (*WT* 90)

is one of denial, a railing against the darkness, as much as it is an affirmation of herself. The final epiphany of *Wonderful Tennessee* is that there are no epiphanies.

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Index

- Abbey Theatre, 195, 199, 202
 Anastasia, St, 62
 Aquinas, St Thomas, 50
 art form, 14–18, 22, 26, 95
- Bach, Johann Sebastian, 216
 Baudrillard, Jean, 167
Simulacra and Simulations, 167
 Beckett, Samuel
Waiting for Godot, 214
 Bertha, Csilla, 215–216, 218
 Blanchot, Maurice, 174
The Work of Fire, 174
 Bloom, Molly, 16, 18, 20, 24–25, 230
 Boltwood, Scott, 221
 Bourdieu, Pierre, 165–166, 169–170
Practical Reason, 165–166
 Bridget/Brigid, 49
 Browne, Michael (Bishop), 75
- Cahill, Edward, 71
Canterbury Tales, The, 220
 Carlson, Julia, 5–6
 Carroll, Paul Vincent, 2, 193, 202
Shadow and Substance, 193, 202–210
 Carruthers, Mary, 15, 21
 Catholic Social Teaching, 73
 Chandler, Daniel, 16
 Christianity, 1–4, 8, 9, 26, 29, 31, 33,
 38–39, 45, 48–49, 53, 58–59, 72,
 75, 88, 91–98, 101–103, 105–106,
 121, 148, 151, 156, 165, 203,
 213–214, 229
 Clarke, Austin, 92, 200
 Cleary, Joe, 199
- Clerical abuse, 6, 73, 88, 100, 135, 155, 164,
 166, 168, 193
 clericalism, 102, 204
 cognitive, 14, 27
 Communism, 52, 72, 102
 Connolly, James, 50, 52, 56–60
 countryside, 142, 152, 213, 227
 Craig, Patricia, 132, 139
 cultural dissonance, 14, 26
- Dalsimer, Adele, 76–77, 80, 84, 87, 101
 dancing, 217, 226–227
 Darwin, Charles, 92
 de Certeau, Michel, 6
 De Lorriss, Guillaume, 13
 De Meun, Jean, 13
 Derrida, Jacques, 32–36, 40, 43
 Dollinger, 45, 53
 Druid Theatre Company, 202
 Dudley Edwards, Ruth, 59–60
 Durcan, Paul
A Snail in my Prime, 185
Cries of an Irish Caveman, 185
Greetings to our Friends in Brazil,
 186
The Laughter of Mothers, 187
The Selected Paul Durcan, 188
- Dylan, Bob, 180
- Eco, Umberto, 21
 Edward VII, 51
 Eliade, Mircea, 218–219
 epiphany, 224–225, 231
 Eucharistic Congress, 49, 200, 202, 220,
 225–226

- Fahey, Tony, 72
 Ferriter, Diarmaid, 202
 Flynn, Gerald Mannix, 193
 James X, 193–194, 210–211
 Fogazzaro, Antonio, 45, 53, 65
 Francis, M.E., 62, 64
 Francis, St, 45, 50, 53
 Fremantle, Anne, 72, 74–75
 Freud, Sigmund
 The Future of an Illusion, 142–147, 153
 Friel, Brian, 2, 199, 201, 213–233
 Aristocrats, 221
 Dancing at Lughnasa, 199, 201–202, 204, 222
 Faith Healer, 221
 Give Me Your Answer, Do!, 216
 Making History, 221
 Molly Sweeney, 222
 The Communication Cord, 214
 The Enemy Within, 213
 The Gentle Island, 213
 Translations, 213–214, 233
 Volunteers, 213
 Wonderful Tennessee, 2, 213–215, 231
 Fuller, Louise, 72–73, 165

 Gibbons, Luke, 195
 Greene, Graham, 106, 125, 139
 Gonne, Maud, 2, 46–55, 61–63, 65

 Heaney, Seamus, 1, 2, 159–177, 210, 235
 Crediting Poetry, 171–174
 Death of a Naturalist, 171
 District and Circle, 168–171
 Electric Light, 175
 Field Work, 171
 North, 127, 159–160, 164, 168, 221
 Preoccupation, 53
 Seeing Things, 171, 175

 Station Island, 161, 168, 171, 219
 The Spirit Level, 176
 Heidegger, Martin, 170–171, 174
 Henke, Suzette, 23
 hermeneutics, 19, 170
 Herring, Phillip, 24
 Hicks, Patrick, 133, 136
 homosexuality, 165, 189

 iconic realism, 13–14, 16, 19, 25–28, 233
 iconography, 1, 13–21, 25–28, 49, 199, 220, 225, 233
 Inglis, Tom, 193–195, 198–199, 202–203, 206
 interpretation, 4, 14–16, 19–20, 22–23, 25, 39, 65, 145, 190, 218, 220
 Irish America, 107, 113, 114
 Irish Catholicism, 4, 15, 45, 60, 63, 65–66, 73, 101, 122, 183, 226
 Irish Constitution (*Bunreacht na hÉireann*), 69–70, 72, 74, 82, 84–85, 201
 Irish literature, 234
 Iser, Wolfgang, 26–27

 Jaus, Hans Robert, 22
 Joyce, James
 Dubliners, 1
 Molly Bloom, 16, 18, 20, 24–25, 230
 Ulysses, 1, 13–16, 20–22, 24, 29, 30, 31–41

 Kavanagh, Patrick, 190
 Kavanagh, Thomas, 17
 Keane, Patrick J., 20
 Kennelly, Brendan, 181, 234
 A Time for Voices, 181
 Kenny, Mary, 74
 Keogh, Dermot, 71–72, 225–226
 Kingsmill Massacre, 172–173, 177

- Lacan, Jacques, 7, 159, 161–163, 167, 170, 173–174
 Écrits, 161–163, 167
 the real, 132, 163
 landscape, 2, 180, 213–214
 Lawrence, D.H., 147–148
 Lee, J.J., 195
 Leo XIII, 58, 74
 liminality, 108, 214–215
 linguistics, 21
 Lloyd, David, 208
 Locke, John, 19
 Lonergan, Patrick, 194
 Lourdes, 49

 MacBride, John, 46, 49–50
 MacCurtain, Margaret, 84–85
 Madonna, 21, 24, 40, 61
 Manning, Cardinal, 50
 Mannix, Cardinal, 61
 Markievicz, Casimir, 55
 Markievicz, Constance, 46, 53–65
 Markievicz, Staskow, 61
 Martin, Augustine, 4
 Mary Magdalen, 96
 Mason, Patrick, 199
 Mass, 1, 37, 48, 62–63, 111–112, 129–132, 139, 150, 153, 167, 190
 McCormack, John, 226
 McGahern, John, 1–3, 5–6, 139–156, 233–234
 Amongst Women, 149, 154
 Love of the World, 142
 Memoir, 3, 111
 The Barracks, 143
 The Dark, 142–147, 154
 The Leavetaking, 143, 148
 McGuinness, Frank, 200, 202
 McInerney, Ralph, 105
 Some Catholic Writers, 105

 McQuaid, John Charles, 71
 medieval, 14–18, 20, 25–26, 92–93, 223–224
 Medievalism, 233
 Mercier, Vivian, 51, 69, 72, 151
 Middle Ages, 15, 92, 94–95, 221, 233
 Miller, Karl, 71, 161, 164, 168, 176
 Mitchell, W.J.T., 18–19
 Mithen, Steven, 17
 Molloy, M.J., 194
 Moore, Brian, 1–2, 125–127, 132–133, 136–139
 Catholics, 1, 5–6, 30–31, 46, 49, 62–63, 74, 94, 104–107, 116, 122, 125, 127, 134–138, 159–160, 170, 172–173, 182, 205, 218
 Cold Heaven, 128
 No Other Life, 128, 130
 The Emperor of Ice-Cream, 137–138
 The Feast of Lupercal, 133–134
 The Lonely Passion of Judith Hearne, 125, 128–129
 Moore, George, 62–63, 235
 Murphy Report, 6, 165–166
 Murray, Christopher, 202, 214

 Nancy, Jean-Luc, 2–3, 8–9, 51, 116, 165, 167, 218
 nationalism, 53, 62, 65, 71, 99, 176, 195, 208, 211
 Natural Law Theory, 72
 Newman, John Henry, 45
 Nietzsche, Friederich, 8–9
 Northern Ireland, 127, 133–134, 159–160, 164, 167–173

 O'Brien, Kate, 1–2, 69–70, 76, 81–104, 234
 Angèle Maury, 80, 99
 Hannah Kernahan, 70, 80, 82–83, 85

Mary Lavelle, 69, 88, 90, 99–103
 Matt Costello, 69, 75, 103
 Nell Mahoney, 74
Pray for the Wanderer, 1, 69–70,
 74–75, 82, 85, 103
The Last of Summer, 70, 80, 81–82,
 88, 95, 99–100
 Tom Mahoney, 70, 76, 80
 Una Costello, 70–71, 76–78, 80, 82,
 84–85
 O'Connor, Edwin, 105–124
 Edge of Sadness, 109–122
 The Last Hurrah, 108–110, 112–114
 O'Connor, Joe, 125
 O'Connor, Pat, 200
 O'Donnell, Mary, 1
 O'Donoghue, Jo, 137
 O'Toole, Fintan, 6
 occult, 48

 Papal Encyclicals, 71–74, 82, 85
 Casti Connubii, 75
 Quadragesimo Anno, 73
 Rerum Novarum, 72–74
 parochial dissonance, 16, 24–25
 Péguy, Charles, 50
 phonology, 23
 Piaget, Jean, 14
 The Child's Conception of the World,
 14
 pilgrimage, 218–221
 poetry, 2, 6, 19, 20, 77, 108, 138, 159–160,
 163–164, 169–171, 174–176, 179,
 181–187, 190, 235
 Pope Leo XIII, 51, 57, 72
 Pope Pius XI, 73
 Protestantism, 64, 104, 133–136, 160–161,
 167–168, 170, 173, 175, 206

 realism, 14–16, 22, 25–27, 70
 Regan, John M., 193–194, 205

Reichardt, Mary, 8
 Reynolds, Lorna, 69, 87, 94, 103
 Ricoeur, Paul, 7–8
 ritual, 7, 45, 48, 56, 150, 198, 216, 220,
 224–231
 Robinson, Mary, 185, 199
Roman de la Rose, 1, 13–15, 18, 20, 25–26
 Roosevelt, Theodore, 45
 Roper, Esther, 54–56, 62
 Ryan Report, 88
 Ryan, Joan, 76

 Said, Edward, 201
 Sampson, Denis, 126–128, 132–133, 136
 school meals, 52
 Schwartz, Tracy, 23
 secularism, 4, 8, 50, 58, 137, 156, 215–218,
 224, 230–231
 semiotics, 14, 17, 27, 233
 Shaw, G.B., 195
 Sheehy Skeffington, Hanna, 55
 Socialism, 52, 56–57, 72
 spirituality, 1, 24–25, 31, 34, 36–37,
 39–41, 48–49, 56, 65, 93, 98,
 108–109, 114, 120–123, 142–145,
 148, 151–153, 156, 160, 167, 173,
 190, 193, 198–199, 201, 213, 215,
 218–219, 225
 St Brigid, 203, 205, 208–209
 storytelling, 107, 228
 symbol, 17–18, 26, 47, 70, 77, 81, 89, 176,
 215, 219, 229
 Synge, J.M., 2, 92, 114, 195–199, 207, 210
 The Playboy of the Western World,
 195–197, 208, 210

 Teresa of Avila, 97
 Third Order of St Francis, 51
 Tiffin, Chris, 196

 unionism, 62

Valdés, Mario J., 19–20
 Victorian, 16, 18, 20, 23–25, 53

 Walsh, Archbishop, 53, 61
 Walshe, Eibhear, 70, 83, 101
 war, 29, 52, 79–83, 88, 127, 160, 208, 227

Yeats, W.B., 51

 Žižek, Slavoj, 162–163
 How to Read Lacan, 162
 Violence:
 Six Sideways Reflections, 162