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By the end of the nineteenth century Ireland had, in many respects, assumed the aspect of a quintessential Gothic landscape "with all its nationalist and all its Gothic graves, with all its mouldering estates and emerging farms, its Land Acts, and its history of confiscations."[1] The contested nature of the Irish geographical and cultural landscapes meant that these topographies were haunted by the disinherited revenants of colonial misappropriation. Any Romantic sanitization of Ireland's rugged terrain for the purposes of tourism belied the fractious memorial inheritances of the country's disenfranchised population. Indeed, the Gothic had emerged, at least in part, to serve as a form of exfoliant of past injustice; as Leslie Fiedler observes, the Gothic "had been invented to deal with the past and with history from a typically Protestant and enlightened point of view."[2] Fiedler's point resonates with both late nineteenth- and late twentieth-century narrations of Irish history.

The Gothic in Ireland reveals that the past is not easily confined to the composed rhetoric and streamlined contours of historical writing. The Irish landscape, punctuated with the fragments of edifices, bespeaks a culture of discontinuous and unsettled histories. Political writings and speeches before and during the nineteenth century frequently figure Ireland as a haunted country. For example, William O'Brien's speech before the Cork Young Ireland Society in 1885 is saturated in Gothic rhetoric. O'Brien invokes the dead generations, and asserts defiantly that

> When the framers of the penal laws denied us books, and drew their thick black veil over Irish history, they forgot that the ruins they had themselves made were the most eloquent schoolmasters, the most stupendous memorials of a history and a race that were destined not to die. They might give our flesh to the sword, and our fields to the spoiler, but before they could blot out the traces of their

1. Seamus Deane, *Strange Country: Modernity and Nationhood in Irish Writing Since 1790* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 93.
2. Leslie Fiedler, *Love and Death in the American Novel* (London: Paladin, 1970), pp. 133.

> crimes, or deface the title-deeds of our heritage, they would have to uproot to their last scrap of sculptured filigree the majestic shrines in which the old race worshipped; they would have had to demolish to their last stone the castles which lay like wounded giants through the land to mark where the fight had raged fiercest.[3]

More recently, Stephen Regan has offered crucial insights into the ongoing tension that exists between the political conditions of a country and the modes of creative art that are chosen to represent those conditions. Regan's argument assumes that Ireland's colonial history and postcolonial condition have been formative influences on the literary forms that have represented Irish society. In discussing the recalcitrance of Ireland to naturalist representation, he suggests that "we might want to see the Gothic in Ireland as part of a more general reluctance or inability to adopt a stable realist mode of fiction."[4]

With its ability to ventilate and to represent the traumatic, the unconscious, and the Other, the Gothic has proven to be the most elastic of literary genres (if, indeed, it is possible to bracket the Gothic as a "genre" at all).[5] Such elasticity, as Regan implies, lends itself to the narration of extreme violence, abject poverty, or insuperable hurt—all of which are occasions of deep trauma, trauma that already stands in excess of the contours of realist narration. Equally, given Ireland's colonial history, such trauma is not confined to the native colonized population. As the history of the Gothic evidences, the Anglo-Irish population likewise underwent significant crises of conscience, and were victims of brutal anticolonial violences and dispossessions. These aggregated cross-cultural experiences, then, nourish the hauntings, paranoias, guilts, trauma, desires, and hatreds of the Irish Gothic.[6] As Regan concludes, "Given the tortured, violent course of Irish history, and given the disinclination of Irish writing to follow conventional realist models, this penchant for the Gothic shouldn't come as a surprise."[7]

David Punter expresses this point more explicitly in his consideration of the relationship between the Gothic, colonialism, and national narrative in both Irish and Scottish contexts:

3. William O'Brien, "The Irish National Idea," in *Irish Ideas* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1893), p. 4.

4. Stephen Regan, "Irish Gothic," in *Representing Ireland: Past, Present and Future*, ed. Frank Beardow and Alison O'Malley-Younger (Sunderland: University of Sunderland Press, 2005), p. 72.

5. Julian Moynahan observes that "The Gothic seems to flourish in disrupted, oppressed, or underdeveloped societies, to give a voice to the powerless and unenfranchised." Julian Moynahan, *Anglo-Irish: The Literary Imagination of a Hyphenated Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 111.

6. On the Irish Gothic and British colonialism in Ireland, see Luke Gibbons, *Gaelic Gothic: Race, Colonization and Irish Culture* (Galway: Arlen House, 2004).

7. Regan, p. 77.

> What happens in the process of ruination is that the very differentiation of the human is effaced. Under these circumstances, it is perhaps inevitable that what gets erased is at least partly the process of writing or inscription itself. . . . If the language in which they were inscribed has ever been known, it has certainly faded from memory now, to such an extent that the operation of the human hand in forming these vanished signs can no longer be discerned from the parallel operations of nature. . . . The Gothic removal of history does not suggest analogues to past civilizations or cultures, but rather exposes a terrifying abyss in an occupied land, the looming presence of a non-verbal "history" that might not be human or coherent at all.[8]

Punter's mention of "the looming presence of a non-verbal 'history'" provides a direct link to textual and historical readings of Eugene McCabe's work.

The career of Eugene McCabe (b. 1930) bears witness to the power of "keeping going."[9] While his fictions on the subterranean dynamics of the "Troubles" are admittedly only occasional, they are nonetheless bracing in the manner in which they anatomize the deep-rooted counter-mythologies of both sides of the conflict. McCabe's literary career has, itself, been counterbalanced by his maintenance of a longterm occupation as a farmer; he has engaged at a literary level only when he has felt that he has had "something to say."[10] He still farms near the Monaghan-Fermanagh border, a location at the coalface of cross-border violence and countermeasures during the worst years of the violence in the North. McCabe remained on his farm throughout the "Troubles," intermittently intervening in the situation through the clinical and convincing articulacy of his fictions. When Eileen Battersby speaks of a level of "eloquent reticence" in McCabe's literary career, she refers not simply to his infrequent, measured responses to extreme political conditions, but also to McCabe's occasional choice of literary form: the short story.[11]

McCabe's interventions are, thus, efforts to mediate the injuries of historical dispossession. Just as the Gothic served as a means of ventilation for prior forms of sublimated fear, desire, and paranoid terror, McCabe's tales are structured in such generic terms so as to air similar anxieties within Irish political

8. David Punter, "Scottish and Irish Gothic" in *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, ed. Jerrold E. Hogle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 120.

9. I take the phrase from Seamus Heaney's poem "Keeping Going," in *The Spirit Level* (London: Faber, 1995), pp. 10–12.

10. Eileen Battersby, "A Farmer Who Happens to Write," *Irish Times: Weekend Review*, 8 August 1992, p. 2.

11. Eileen Battersby, "Powerful Polemics Motivated by Injustice," *Irish Times: Weekend Review*, 15 January 2005, p. 13.

and cultural memory. He not only breaks out from strictly realist modes in his appropriation of Gothic mechanics, but also effectively marries these features to the strategic silences of the shorter literary mode. These short stories, then, are explored in terms of the Gothic genre—a literary form that has been widely associated with the extension of Anglo-Irish territorial proprietorship in Ireland.

Chris Morash accents the centrality of form to both the literary and the historical narration of the Famine. Morash argues that

> the form of the literary text is not simply an empty receptacle for an abstract content. Form is content; hence, the form of the conventional Famine novel reinforces a historical narrative of progress by constructing linear sequences of events, and presenting them as if they were reflections of a pre-existing reality. In order to move outside of this teleology, we must turn to texts whose own radical disorder remind us that history has no intrinsic shape.[12]

Under such ideologically inflected readings of the Famine, and its subsequent and contemporary representations, the aesthetic is overwritten by the political and the economic. The tenets of Malthusian political economy historically determine the "writing" of the Great Famine—a point that warrants consideration when we approach McCabe's writing on the catastrophe. His 1999 collection *Tales from the Poorhouse* is characterized by a complexity of narrative registers, none of which adequately contain the horror of the material experience. By means of its plurality of narrative strategies, *Tales from the Poorhouse* is simultaneously a critique of the limits of instrumental liberal political economy, a retrieval of indigenous Irish hope toward the future, and an ecumenical literary account of the lateral destruction wrought by the arrival of the potato blight and the onset of mass hunger and dislocation. The short story cycle engenders feelings of intimacy, of reliance and of interlocking fates; the interlaced sequences suggest that each of these speakers, and by extension, each of these diverse social constituencies, are implicated in the sufferings of one another. McCabe charts a complex moral economy built upon love, bitterness, cynicism, pity, revulsion, despair, and misunderstanding, all of which are implied by the dissonant formal architecture of the collection. All retrospective contemporary narrations of the Famine are clearly influenced by the historical context out of which they arise, as well as by the necessary divergence between memories and facts over time. McCabe's short story cycle is no different.

As such, at the macro-level McCabe's narration of these nineteenth-century events is complicated by the fact that they are, and have been, historio-

12. Christopher Morash, *Writing the Irish Famine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 185.

graphically contested and politically divisive; in other words, the events have become disputed property and are imbued with more than simply "factual" significance. As Margaret Kelleher argues,

> Twentieth-century literary representations were to encounter further difficulties since the famine was now a historical event no longer verifiable by personal testimony and also a central and increasingly controversial event in the national chronology. As Paul Ricoeur has noted, "As soon as a story is well known—and such is the case with most traditional and popular narratives as well as with the national chronicles of the founding events of a given national community—retelling takes the place of telling."[13]

Yet it is equally true—as Kelleher argues elsewhere—that literary representations of the past have as much to do with the prevailing political and cultural conditions of the present as they do with the material events of the past. As she states, "the act of remembering and retelling the past is shaped by its relevance to the present."[14]

In McCabe's case, the shaping influence of the present can be seen in at least two ways. First, *Tales from the Poorhouse* presents an ecumenical representation of the events of the Great Famine; the narratives respond, and give voice, to the disabling catastrophes endured by both sides of the religious divide in Ireland. This inclusive authorial strategy has been a consistent feature of McCabe's oeuvre from the early short fictions in *Heritage and Other Stories* (1978) and, later, in *Christ in the Fields* (1993) and in his novel, *Death and Nightingales* (1992). His tenacious approach is colored by McCabe's proximity to, and concern with, the longer histories of sectarian bigotry and intercommunal violence in the North of Ireland; the stories are efforts to understand and to intervene at an intellectual level, as well as possessing a critical utopian agency. In other words, *Tales from the Poorhouse* urges the reader to cut to the core of human suffering beyond the categories of sectarian affiliation, which is a much more enabling political stance.

The second point at which the shaping influence of the contemporary can be evinced in the collection is that the timing of the publication of *Tales from the Poorhouse* could be considered opportunistic, an attempt to seize a share of "commemorative capital" regarding the Famine, a process that stretched across the 1990s in Ireland.[15] Yet, it seems more likely that McCabe's timing is a con-

13. Margaret Kelleher, "Irish Famine in Literature," in *The Great Irish Famine*, ed. Cathal Póirtéir (Cork: Mercier Press, 1995), p. 241.

14. Margaret Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine: Expressions of the Inexpressible?* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997), p. 110.

15. McCabe's collection of stories was filmed and televised in both the English and Irish languages by RTÉ and TnaG. *Tales from the Poorhouse/Scéalta ó Theach na mBocht* was adapted by McCabe;

fection of these two. McCabe's intervention seems to exploit the exposure of the Famine "industry"—a project that gave rise to a raft of verbal, visual, and televisual enterprises—in order to revisit the sectarian bases of Irish history. In doing so, McCabe appears to want to implant a hopeful germ in contemporary Northern Irish politics through the narrations of cross-communal suffering in the past.

McCabe's collection might be considered a fictional correlative of the heated historiographical debates that ranged across Irish Studies in the 1990s and into the new millennium—debates that were preoccupied both with what should be remembered in historical accounts of the Irish Famine, and equally, and perhaps more crucially, with how and in what forms these traumatic events might be memorialized. The events of the Famine and the events surrounding its commemoration, both in Ireland and among its emigrant populations, throw into relief the dissonances between the presiding methodologies within Irish political and cultural historiography. The sesquicentennial of the famine years witnessed and heightened the self-consciousness of historical and cultural commentary in Irish Studies; according to Kelleher, "Irish Famine scholarship . . . testifies abundantly to the historiographical consciousness and anxiety identified by [Pierre] Nora, and to 'the reflexive turning of history upon itself'."[16]

As a form, the attenuated formal structure of the short story permits "snapshot" exposures to the lives, motives, and emotions of the characters involved. Denied the narrative scale of the novel form, the short story writer portrays fragments of human experience in compressed moments of representation. As Declan Kiberd and others have maintained, the short story is peculiarly suited to the fractured cultural condition of Irish society. A history of political and cultural discontinuity and colonial occupation forecloses access to the narrative lineaments of the integrated realist novel in writing about this history, or about the ethnic warfare in the North of Ireland; literary expression more often assumes nonrealist registers. In a nutshell, the argument is that the fragmentary

translated by John McArdle and directed by Louis Lentin. Produced by *Crescendo Concepts*, they were broadcast separately in the Autumn of 1998. McCabe's daughter, Ruth McCabe played the role of "The Mother." Previewing the broadcast of *Scéalta ó Theach na mBocht* in the *Irish Times*, the critic Mic Moroney wrote, "The whole odd texture of the thing is typical of McCabe's angry, imagistic, lyrical empathy. His story-telling abilities and his needling knowledge of human nature under duress are his main tools here in hubristically recreating those hellish times—in a landscape he knows with physical, even brute, intimacy. After the past few years of official commemorations of the Great Famine, "faminism" almost seems to have taken off as a new genre. But even considering such famine fatigue, *Scéalta ó Theach na mBocht* packs a serious and rather unexpected punch." *Irish Times—Weekend*, 3 October 1998, p. 55.

16. Margaret Kelleher, "Hunger and History: Monuments to the Great Irish Famine," *Textual Practice*, 15, 2 (Summer, 2002), 270.

nature of the short story form lends itself to interrogations of narrative authority and, also problematizes elements of narrative perspective.[17] Clearly, this has relevance to McCabe's literary and political intentions. His work bears out the insight of Ronan MacDonald that "the essential deviousness of the short story form, in which so much needs to be suggested by so little, houses a radical potential: through its reticence, its instinctive chariness of normative representation, the short story can slip through the totalizing narratives of the dominant culture."[18]

McCabe's short story cycle contains four narratives, each focalized through a first-person narrator. The "tales" are "The Orphan" by Roisin Brady; "The Master" by Reggie Murphy, the master of the local poorhouse; "The Landlord" by Lord Clonroy; and "The Mother" by Mary Brady, Roisin's mother. The forms that the narratives take differ from one another. Both female narrators deliver their narratives in standard first-person form, echoing the intimacy of the Irish oral storytelling tradition in the respective tones and themes of their testimonies. Thus, the women's stories, the first and the final in the collection, bracket the textual records of the two male narrators. The master's narrative is presented in the form of a confessional, indeed apologetic, letter to a sister whom he previously abandoned to hunger and death. Likewise, the landlord's narrative is constructed as intermittent entries in his personal diary. In this way McCabe demarcates between oral narration—which is here retained by the female protagonists—and the textual record.

But at another level, McCabe also permits the cultural and historical freights of these two representational traditions to come into tension within the same broad narrative frame. Despite the differentiated narrative forms and registers deployed within the cycle, none seem capable of convincingly representing the insuperable despair that occupies the Irish landscape. While each character is afforded the platform of a discrete story, each of the stories and lives is implicated into all of the others. There are intersections between family histories, political investments, economic actions, and sexual practices across the collection. Such an interleaving of narrative action is a staple of the short story cycle as a genre; but McCabe structures the "tales" in a fashion that goes beyond the narration of the local and the ordinary, and which, in fact, contributes to a discernible Gothic texture across the stories. Chris Baldick explains that "for the Gothic effect to be attained, a tale should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into dis-

17. Ronan McDonald, "Strategies of Silence: Colonial Strains in Short Stories of the Troubles," *Yearbook of English Studies*, 35, 1 (2005), 249–53.

18. McDonald, 250.

integration."[19] The point accords well with McCabe's fictional *mise-en-scène*: there is a tangible sense of the past impinging upon, or haunting, the ravaged landscape, a feeling of the arrival of revenant terrors in both the private and the public worlds. Similarly, the manner in which the four stories are mutually implicated engenders an atmosphere of doomed "claustrophobia"; the cataclysm is all-embracing and the slide into disintegration is universal.

The Gothic form has always been an aggregation of dissonant narrative codes that compete, contradict, and chafe within the confines of the text. In Gothic writing, the naturalized authority of the written literary text is interrogated or fractured by the intrusion of the narrative devices of the demotic, the fantastic, the unconscious, or the oral. The textual fissures in McCabe's narratives are evidenced not only in the competing registers of first-person narration, but are also created by the intrusion of the felt absence of the Irish language and the fevered subjectivity represented in McCabe's employment of the confessional diary of the landlord. The form is an effort to cohere the "unrepresentable," but its piebald formal strategies tacitly acknowledge that such a pursuit of coherence is futile. The very act of presenting the tales in a collection is a formal compromise between the abbreviated, fractured thread of the short story, the passionate unreason of the oral tradition and the native Irish language, and the desire to cohere that is implicit in the articulations of each of the protagonists.

Fredric Jameson's remarks on the relations between despair and hope seem to manifest explicitly in the narrative action of McCabe's *Tales from the Poorhouse*. Conceding, and accepting, the universality of anxiety in human lives, Jameson suggests that "one can at least transform it into that positive anticipation which is its correlative."[20] Going further and invoking the experience of despair, he asserts that despair

> whether personal or historical, remains an emotion oriented to the future, one which "intends" the future in as total a fashion as hope . . . horror and the black emotions are infinitely precious insofar as they also constitute forms of that elemental ontological astonishment which is our most concrete mode of awareness of the future latent in ourselves and in things.[21]

This version of hope—derived from Ernest Bloch's utopianism—is not, as Jameson makes clear, a facile substitution of despair for hope, of the positive for the negative. Rather, it asserts the value of the negative toward the future, and

19. Chris Baldick, "Introduction," *The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales*, ed. Chris Baldick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. xix.

20. Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 133.

21. Jameson, pp. 133–34.

locates "the positive within the negative itself."[22] The negative, the despair of the Famine and its deathly toll, is embodied in the diverse lives and narratives of McCabe's text, which portrays the crushing despondency of hunger and imminent starvation or ruination.

But it is in the figures of the twin Brady sisters that we can divine traces of utopian energy toward the future; out of their individual and collective—and in Bloch's terms, necessary—despair, McCabe's famine cycle most explicitly commits a hopeful gesture. Out of their somatic decay, hope emerges in the form of sexualized somatic assertions. In the landscape of mid-nineteenth-century Ireland, a terrain rife with starvation and populated by a semi-revenant populace, McCabe's gesture toward a possible future and the persistence of hope is embodied by the volatile, but nonetheless vibrant, sexuality of the adolescent Brady sisters.

In the Gothic, female sexuality is figured as an ambivalent yet strident force; it is threatening and voracious, inasmuch as it harbors the possibility of living on beyond the prevailing cultural cataclysm. In McCabe's short story cycle, as in his novel *Death and Nightingales*, female sexuality is figurated in terms of an array of animalistic or beastly tropes. One can find traces of an assertive female sexuality as a socially subversive force in McCabe's fictions. Yet at the same time the modes employed to repress such bodily agency charted in the fictions, and recorded historically, can equally be understood as McCabe's awareness of historical efforts to deny an interest in the future to strains within native Irish culture. Conceived in this manner, the female sexual assertion of McCabe's tales becomes a mark of native Irish resilience in the face of a social and cultural disaster, a response to the prospect of obliteration.[23]

The female body is a dominant figurative referent in the opening story, "The Orphan," appearing in a range of resonant allusions to menstruation, childbirth, desire, athleticism, sexual prowess, and virginity.[24] In the prevailing norms of behavior of mid-nineteenth-century rural Ireland, the somatic articulations of the feminine could only be abhorred. Margaret Kelleher, in examining the literary representation of the Famine, alludes to the gendered semiotic configurations of these literary narratives. She argues that "throughout famine representations, female images are chosen to represent famine's worst consequences, in characterisations ranging from heroic self-sacrifice to 'monstrous'

22. Jameson, pp. 133–34.

23. On the Irish Gothic and female sexuality, see Siobhan Kilfeather, "Origins of the Irish Female Gothic," *Bullán: An Irish Studies Journal*, 1, 2 (Autumn, 1994), 35–45.

24. On the Gothic, *Dracula,* and menstruation, see Maria Parsons, "Vamping the Woman: Menstrual Pathologies in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies* Issue 1 (2005), http://irishgothichorrorjournal.homestead.com/maria.html.

perversions of 'Nature.'"[25] Her comments clearly apply to the stigmatized Brady sisters. It is worth speculating whether the incessant disquiet registered at the twins' behavior is not in some sense linked to the Famine conditions themselves; in other words, that there is a maternal paranoiac conviction that their immorality is causally linked to the severity of the collective hunger.

The girls are repeatedly questioned about their conduct. Their mother, convinced of their libertine sexual pursuits, interrogates the vibrant sisters about their actions on evenings outside the family home. Her views are buttressed, and compounded later in "The Orphan" by the accusations of the local Catholic priest. In his view, the sisters are wanton harridans; the reputed promiscuous actions of the Brady siblings are thus figured as a second blight on the local community. The physicality of these sexually emergent female bodies is framed as infective threats to the moral welfare of a community that is simultaneously being ravaged by the physical punishment of the widespread hunger. When the mother scolds her daughters, she registers her disapproval in terms of animalistic behavior that is instinctual rather than cognitive or rational: " 'What would the priest and the neighbours think of her two daughters were near hoors out dancin' and gallivantin' like mad heifers in heat and half the parish half dead from hunger?' "[26] Here, the female body—consistent with Gothic tradition—is transmuted into that of a subhuman creature, incapable of tempering carnal urges. Similarly, McCabe juxtaposes the animal "in heat" with the starving nation; on the one hand we have the vibrant sexual potency of the feminine, and on the other, the disintegrating nation and culture under the onslaught of famine.

Crucially, however, while McCabe explicitly invokes Gothic tropes in his fashioning of the gendered body, such tropes are not restricted to the representational containment of a volatile agency. Instead, the sisters' bodies constitute a latent, utopian regenerative energy within the population. The mother's motives for maintaining control or surveillance over her daughters' blossoming sexual bodies is a matter tinged with stubborn pride. Yet, her surveillance is not confined simply to verbal warnings. Despite the devastating hunger sweeping the landscape, which has brought disease and death to their own household, Roisin—"The Orphan"—reveals that "No matter how hungry we were she'd always have bought soap in the house or if there was no money she'd make it herself . . . Water costs nothin', she'd say, and by God you girls'll keep your bodies clean and your souls pure as long as you're in my care" (*TP* 15). Here, we see an admixture of that same stubborn pride, a watchful eye on the community's

25. Kelleher, "Irish Famine in Literature," p. 239.

26. Eugene McCabe, "The Orphan" in *Tales from the Poorhouse* (Oldcastle: Gallery, 2000), p. 11; hereafter cited parenthetically, thus: (*TP* 11).

moral economy and a gesture toward religious judgment: the statement inescapably references baptism. But the cleanliness, both physical and moral, of the girls' bodies does not end there. Roisin describes the protracted and policed ritual purgation that their mother demands. What begins as hygeine is, in the end, a symbolic and penitent cleansing rite under which these sexualized bodies are normalized:

> She smelled of carbolic herself and made sure we did too. It was out to the turf-shed every mornin', summer and winter, with the tin jug and basin, teeth first with soot, then strip down while she watched to make sure we'd wash neck, ears, back passage and up between our legs, and there was stuff in that soap went up into you like a bee sting. (*TP* 15)

Not only does this scene reiterate the animalistic figuration of the sisters and their bodies, but the act of washing is also plainly witnessed as a punitive act; further, it is socially demanded and morally sanctioned as part of the policing of these female bodies. Roisin Brady is quick to recognize the function of the ritual imposed on her and her sister by the mother as retributive. When asked by her sister Grace, "Why does she put us through that washin' 'torture'?" Roisin is alert to the implicit motivations of her mother: "Because we smell young and natural. . . . She hates that. Snig off our rosebuds if she had her way and tell us the Devil put them in there to make us sin" (*TP* 15). Again, the mother attaches a paranoiac guilt to the girls' actions; but in a larger, social sense, is there also a guilt attached to the arrival and endurance of the Famine itself? This specific familial punitive act of atonement in the face of the communal suffering, and the spectacle of cleansing that we witness can easily be understood as a form of Kristevan abjection on the part of the girls' mother.[27]

Yet, despite the opprobrium and uncleanliness attached to the twins' nocturnal activities, it is not McCabe's intention simply to demonize their displays of youthful vigor, but to celebrate such intuition. In telescoping the vibrancy of these ripening female bodies McCabe deliberately proposes an Other to the decaying bodies of the wider populace. The sisters are figured as morally corrupt, and corrupting. This accords with the features of the Gothic writing. But for McCabe, that sense of vibrancy and sexual energy is a force of regeneration, even of cultural resistance. The sisters, in their different ways, represent an interest in the future denied under the mass mortality of the Great Famine. In the midst of a cataclysmic leveling of the Irish landscape and population, the twins' sexuality constitutes an assertion at most, a trace effect at least, of personal liberation and of cultural survival. Yet, the relative attitudes and worldly

27. Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

knowledge of both sisters cannot be collapsed into each other; Roisin is evidently more attuned to the workings of the wider world, but Grace remains vulnerable in her innocence. Their sexual pursuits, then, are provocative, even titillating; yet Grace's retain a level of naiveté, while Roisin develops a keen sense of the material value of her sexuality. The narrative of the burgeoning sexual lives of the Brady twins is nested within McCabe's broader representation of cultural ruination. Surrounded by maternal stricture and insuperable famishment, the girls share stories about their respective sexual encounters. These micro-narratives are intimate respites or counter-narratives to the decay that has so thoroughly enveloped the wider community, and that is the essential background to McCabe's larger cycle of short narratives.

The sisters escape the terminal space of the cottage at night, engaging in illicit meetings with young men from the surrounding area. These nocturnal meetings animate the sisters' conversations, narratives that leaven the presiding tone of despair of the Famine story cycle. Huddled together, Roisin and Grace share these sustaining secrets with one another: "At night we'd lie close and talk and giggle about the boys and the kind of them, who was good for a court, and who was shy, and who'd we'd let and how far we'd let them" (*TP* 17). There is a compound of volition, desire, and innocence in these expressions of sexual agency; there is a future-oriented momentum inherent to these actions, and to their subsequent narration by the blossoming Brady sisters.

Grace, the more innocent of the Brady twins, is the first to lose her virginity and in due course realizes that she is pregnant. Given the mother's attitude to her daughters' bodily expressiveness, this pregnancy becomes a marker of shame and moral bankruptcy in her eyes. Her degenerate daughters have simply served to fulfil her low expectations, and her reaction is savage. As Roisin narrates,

> She took Grace up to the cockloft by the ear, put a cow's chain round her neck and closed it tight with a blacksmith's pincers. Then she nailed the end of the chain to the roofbeam with nails as big as the ones they used on Christ and kept her up there with a bowl and a bucket. (*TP* 19)

The allusion to Christ suggests the apparent sacrifice of youth or redemption by the mother, and Grace—and by implication, female sexuality itself—is also further figured in terms of the animalistic and the beastly. The mother's literal "stabling" of her pregnant daughter is an extension of her earlier cleansing ritual, which in itself harbored distinct biblical resonances. On the night that the child is born, Roisin is absent from the cottage, aptly losing her virginity with a local man, John Joseph Duffy, and on her return she is witness to a scene of bloody and merciless death in her home: "Grace was stretched dead as any dead thing you'd see in a ditch or bog. It was a great flood of bleeding did it. I saw after where the blood dripped down through the cockloft to the group of

the byre below. . . . The babby, she said, was dead born. It made no shape to breathe at all, only a wee gurgle" *(TP* 25–27). Grace's baby, a girl, is interred in a shallow grave nearby, and so, it seems is the force of her female sexuality; the pregnancy, however illicit or immoral, is, at first, a poignant symbol of life beginning under the shadow of national death. Whatever may be imputed about the immediacy of sexual desire expressed by the Brady sisters, the unborn child is a seed of hope beyond the immediate confines of the contemporary cultural cataclysm. Yet that same child is dead, whether by natural causes, or, one suspects, by the hands of her grandmother. And while its death may be read as another to be added to the toll of the Famine, the very facts of its conception and birth are stubborn potentials implanted by McCabe toward the future. But it is the child's aunt, Roisin, who is the most resistant to the embrace of hopelessness and despair and who exhibits a mature and tenacious inclination in her efforts to outlive the Famine.

Indeed, a sense of sex as a potential currency to be used toward a better life is implicit in her final comments at the end of "The Orphan" after she has entered the poorhouse:

> I'll do anythin' to stay alive and, with luck, I'll get my hands on five golden guineas and get away to America, because no place in the world could be worse than this except hell itself, and no girl ever had to shamed like me . . . and anyway I knew well what to expect when I said, I'll take the red ticket. (*TP* 34)

As the master of the poorhouse, Reggie Murphy, testifies, Roisin's beauty and sexual allure has a significant impact on her life in the institution. Indeed, Murphy becomes the primary recipient of Roisin's deliberate sexual advances and his portraits of her are an admixture of the earlier animalistic figuration of Roisin and Grace, and his own aggressive lust:

> A raving beauty now seems an odd description for a girl who opens her legs more readily than she opens her mouth, though, when she does speak, it's to ask pointed questions. . . . Clean well-water, the leftovers of fresh bread, the cuttings of cheese and meat scraps she gets from my table. That's what she wants; that's what brings her to this bed. (*TP* 39–40)

Despite his understanding that Roisin's compliance to his sexual urges is founded on her singleminded ambition of flight to America, Murphy is a willing participant. In "The Master" we receive a first-person account of the effects of a more mature and self-aware female sexuality. What conjoins the two portraits is the possibility that such sexual emergence can, in some way, offer hope of survival or of escape from the worst excesses of the Famine. As above, in the second narrative, it is understood by Murphy that Roisin's sexual relations with him are certainly manipulative, as she seeks to barter her body for a route away

from the poorhouse. As Murphy admits, "I've no guilt about what happens in this bed, or this room, because the more I see of death the more I crave congress every night" (*TP* 44).

Tellingly, as McCabe introduces the transgressive sexuality of the Brady girls, he also invokes another group of clandestine actors, the Ribbonmen and similar agrarian groups that committed "outrages" against landowners in defense of the rural poor. Such groups had deep roots as far back as the eighteenth century, and were active at a heightened pitch in the second half of the nineteenth century.[28] The covert, yet enlivening, adolescent female conversation is a nocturnal narrative consolation to the sisters; it provides narrative material with which to combat the disintegrating force of the Famine. Roisin's own comparability to these night-time protesters—when, for instance, she trespasses on the estate of the local landlord, Lord Clonroy, searching for scraps of food—are a part of a continuum of submerged, illicit protest. In this instance, her activities are explicitly wedded to the subversive campaigns of the Ribbonmen: "Each time in the black dark I could hear the German wolfdogs over a mile away up at the big house. They were kept in a special yard alongside the prize cattle and sheep penned in every night for fear the gangs of Ribbonmen would slash their tendons" (*TP* 19). Likewise, the romantic trysts—as well as their subsequent girlish narration by the sisters—all occur within a diverse system of native Irish protest against the perceived misappropriations of British colonialism, and the imminent death and the probability of a widespread cultural catastrophe owing to the Famine.

McCabe's treatment of the twin sisters as sexually provocative in the face of maternal and institutional censure parallels the Malthusian critique of the sexually active body. Malthus diagnosed the repression of sexual activity among those populations adjudicated to subsist under archaic economic systems as a means of preventing economic shortage, or fatally, food shortage. As Stuart McLean suggests in his study of the Famine, "The vigorous, sexually active body, far from betokening a well-ordered society was viewed as the harbinger of a society overrun by emaciated, diseased bodies, placing impossible demands upon a comparatively underdeveloped subsistence base."[29] An economic imperative toward chastity segues into equivalent, and complementary, suites of

28. On the Ribbonmen and Irish rural subversion, see: Luke Gibbons, *Transformations in Irish Culture* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1995), pp. 134–47; Gibbons, "Between Captain Rock and a Hard Place: Art and Agrarian Insurgency," in *Ideology and Ireland in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Tadhg Foley and Sean Ryder (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1998), pp. 23–44; Stephen Gibbons, *Captain Rock, Night Errant* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2004); and James S. Donnelly, Jr., *Captain Rock: The Irish Agrarian Rebellion of 1821–1824* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009).

29. Stuart McLean, *The Event and its Terrors: Ireland, Famine, Modernity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), p. 53.

moral codes. Indeed, one might proceed further: perhaps the Famine represented an occasion under which the bodily excess of the economically profligate and temperamentally "irrational" native Irish population might be enduringly tempered. Economic wastefulness, superstition, and somatic performance were precisely the characteristics adjudged by moralizing observers as contributing to the "barbarism" of the Irish population. McCabe's insertion of the twins, and especially Roisin, represents an effort to divine a resistant energy that has an interest in the future and that will strive to outlive the consuming starvation and to transcend the arbitrary containing gestures of moral stricture. The female body is, then, a site of contestation, an index of resistance and a figuration of hope in McCabe's fiction.

In the next two stories we are presented with male narrators. Both men hold positions of relative, if diminishing, authority. The content of their respective "tales" reflects the dissolution of their authority; but so, too, does the tone and form of these testimonies. Reggie Murphy's and Lord Clonroy's narratives are both textual records of their individual, yet mutually implicated, struggles in the face of the Famine. Both narrators strive to explain the events around them and to find justification for the misfortunes; yet, in the end, neither realizes any convincing sense of understanding or respite. The first-person voice of these textual records bears witness to the dire external effects of the hunger, but is equally under immense subjective, internal strain; both Reggie and Lord Clonroy are racked with feelings of guilt, abandonment, and vulnerability. Their individual efforts to impose some verbal pattern—a sense of textual logic to the external chaos of the Famine and its attendant psychological and emotional impacts on themselves—are severely compromised, if not entirely undermined. No less than the oral records of Roisin Brady and her mother, the mens' testimony is prone to incoherence and implosion.

The psychological condition of Reggie Murphy, the poorhouse master and narrator of the second narrative in the cycle, is reflected upon in Lord Clonroy's later narrative, the third in the cycle. Murphy enters Clonroy's diary as an allusion, and the reference indicates something of the mental and emotional decline of the poorhouse master. On April 2, 1848, Clonroy writes,

> Murphy still locked in his room. The Brady girl says he eats almost nothing. Tried talking through the door. Sounds unbalanced. Muttered about entering the poorhouse as a pauper. I pretended not to hear that. Told him I'd have behaved as he did, with firmness and courtesy. How else could he have guessed that she was his sister, being a child herself when he last saw her? They say she screeched, ballyragged, cursed and left in a great huff with her child next morning. Terrible the way she was found with her child the next morning. Deeply grieved since then. (*TP* 72)

Reggie Murphy refused to recognize his sister when she confronted him at his poorhouse. Separated since childhood, their reunion becomes the occasion for her death and that of her infant child. Realizing that her brother will not betray any sense of familial emotion before his employed underlings, Annie Murphy instinctively flees the poorhouse only to be found dead, as Clonroy indicates, the next morning.

Murphy's narrative, then, is the most keenly emotional of the four in the collection, as it takes the form of a tortured confession. Murphy's confession fleshes out the space of the poorhouse, detailing the physical exhaustion, desperation, and emotional fragility tenanted within its walls. His confession is an impassioned—but ultimately futile—attempt to justify and to understand his actions as well as the conditions under which he is forced to act. Similarly, the confessional narrative is an effort to construct some form of habitable space that is not provided by the poorhouse; the poorhouse heaves with the dead, yet in and through his narrative, Murphy strives to maintain some link with the living. The confessional speaks to his sister most directly, but is also symptomatic of Murphy's need to assert his own subjectivity in a coherent narrative voice. Just as the poorhouse is haunted by its dead—its past dead and its future dead—so, too, is Reggie Murphy himself. Inching toward the psychosis suggested by Clonroy, Murphy's confession ends with the appearance of all of his ghosts:

> And now it all comes flowing back. Oh God, let me not think on how they ended. The hurt and loneliness. When I saw you Annie, you lay in death like a curled finger. Cradling your dead child. Thumb into forefinger. Thus. Oh Mama, Dada, why did you leave us? Oh my poor sister, my poor sister forgive me, and may almighty God forgive me. Jesus, mercy; Mary, help. (*TP* 70)

Lord Clonroy's narrative, the third in the collection, is ostensibly cast in the form of a personal, private, journal that relates his incomplete efforts at containing the events of the Famine within some discursive form. Yet even at a superficial level the textual integrity of his testimony is undermined. It is fashioned from personal letters; snatches of poetry from the *Nation*; extracts from such newspapers as the *Times* and the *Farmer's Gazette*; a quotation from Shakespeare; and an Irish-language epigram, "Pratai i maidi / Pratai san lo/ Agus ma eirighim san oiche / Pratai a geobhainn," or "Potatoes in the morning, potatoes at noon, and if I were to get up in the middle of the night it's potatoes I'd get too" (*TP* 95). This collated text, thus, self-consciously assumes the form of many of its Gothic predecessors. The sporadic diary of Lord Clonroy is not only fractured at a formal level—a feverish textual effort to narrate the past into a semblance of coherence under pressure from the imminent cataclysmic reckoning—but also populated by a congeries of the living, the dead, and, of course, the half-dead. In literal terms, the half-dead may still be counted among the liv-

ing, but in Lord Clonroy's tale there is a clear distinction between the functioning of these two constituencies. The "living" body and the "starving" body are brought into focus as occupants of differential ontological spheres. The presence of living ghosts on the landscape, as well as in the overheated first-person narrative of Lord Clonroy's diary, introduces the idea of spectrality. In spectrality, the "liveliness" of figures who possess distinguishing evidence of irreversible decline and decay subverts the neat, and consoling, dichotomy between life and death. Again, the body, and especially the famished body, becomes a site of instability—a conduit through which subversion is channeled and imagined.[30]

Encounters between the famine victims, governmental relief administrators, and occupant landlords are encounters between life and death—and also encounters between that which is acceptable and that which must be abjected. The anchorage of the consoling binarism—a clear understanding of who is dead and who is alive—is undone. The physical space of the present is invaded by the deathly figures of the famished; so too are the "time" and conceptions of ontological time sundered with their very presence. The distinction between life and death is no longer cemented, and the integrity of the living "self" is consequently violated and threatened with dissolution.

Such harrowing encounters are central to Lord Clonroy's problematic and fissured textualization of his experiences. His powers of representation are inadequate for the invasions and minatory prospects outside the walls of his property, and outside the attempts at making meaning within his narrative. Clonroy's private reflections in the pages of his diary, then, are a further nested Gothic narrative within McCabe's larger pattern of Gothic horror. There is a documented threat of usurpation and invasion at a physical level, a menace that provokes panic amid fear of death. Just as important, his intermittent textual efforts to effect a clearer vision of past, contemporary, and possible future events are invaded by the crimes of the past: colonial occupation and its attendant administration of violence and dispossession. Clonroy's diary narrative is not only a further first-person fraction of the broader cycle offered by McCabe, but is also punctuated with what David Punter refers to as "knots" in the Gothic narrative, which demand "that we reject the narrative of cultural clearing and engage with a textual and psychic chiaroscuro where plain sight is continually menaced by flickerings from other worlds."[31] Of course, for Clonroy these

30. Stuart McLean's comments on this issue are suggestive; he argues that "the starving body, even as its fleshly substance dwindles, becomes an object charged with a disconcerting otherness. Victims of hunger resemble not the peacefully slumbering dead, but unquiet souls." McLean, p. 115.

31. David Punter, "Introduction: of Apparitions," in *Spectral Readings: Towards a Gothic Geography*, ed. David Punter and Glennis Byron (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), p. 3.

"flickerings" are from within and without the boundaries of his cloistered estate and its contested histories and present.

The fourth, and final, narrative in the collection is "The Mother," which is related from the perspective of the orphan Roisin Brady's mother, Mary Brady, who is confined to the "Idiot Ward" of the poorhouse. Like Lord Clonroy's account, "The Mother" is a mottled narrative woven from a variety of discursive registers. It moves between the language of folk religion, pagan superstition, and Catholicism; the tale is also peppered with Irish language, with many of its demotic colloquialisms. The terms of the narration are set by the narrator's physical incarceration in a ward for the mentally ill. Our reading of her emotional excesses and impassioned paroxysms, together with her litany of memories and accusations, is colored by the suspicion of her mental fragility. The form of this final narrative in the sequence is significantly determined by the experiences of trauma and the dissipation of hope. The mother figure of the short story sequence is a debased symbol of national unity; this Mother Ireland skirts the borders of sanity and insanity, is implicated by her surviving daughter in a double infanticide, and looks back on a family that has been sundered.

Opening the story with her prayerful plea to the Virgin Mary, the mother's cry from the idiot ward is remarkable, achieving a lucidity, even a near poetry in her language: "Reach me down comfort, O Virgin most powerful. Cover me with sleep and sleep and sleep till my eyes open at the feet of Christ" (*TP* 105). Her narrative is dominated by feelings of guilt, the experience of great trauma, and her fragmented, and often incoherent, efforts to shape or narrate her life. There is a persistent tension within this story—and for that matter, within *Tales From the Poorhouse* as a whole—between the form of narration and the events the respective narrators are striving to locate within those narrative forms. Form often betrays the speaker; memory proves equally elusive and unreliable. McCabe's alignment of hunger, femininity, and mental fracture in this final narrative sequence accords emphatically with what Margaret Kelleher has observed of the "affective power" on the reader of the starving female image *in extremis*; the maternal figure, in particular, produces a profoundly disturbing affect and creates "an ambivalence at the very heart of the maternal figure."[32] In McCabe's famine text, the mother is narrated by her daughter not as a cohesive and watchful maternal presence, but as menacing, self-centered, and vain. In "The Mother," the mother that can protect becomes the mother that must be protected against.

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32. Kelleher, *The Feminization of Famine*, p. 7.

Finally, we might look to the title McCabe gave to his collection of four stories: *Tales from the Poorhouse*. The crucial element here is the word "house." The poorhouse, as the concrete locus of McCabe's tales is, in the end, a symbolic space through which to read the literary and historical motivations and resonances of McCabe's work. In *The Poetics of Space*, Gaston Bachelard accents the centripetal force of the house. A house's solid contours provide a sanctuary for individual and familial memories, in which they can safely congregate; Bachelard suggests that the house "is imagined as a concentrated being. It appeals to our consciousness of centrality."[33] In McCabe's Gothic tales of Ireland's famine landscapes, houses in all of their forms provide neither security nor continuity; they become sites of contestation, violence, madness, starvation, abjection, and death. By selecting this particular title, McCabe appears to allegorize the imperiled national form in terms of the fatal space of the poorhouse. The poorhouse was the final refuge for the destitute and starving, yet it harbors little sense of sanctuary, and none of the comforting authority of the homely. The poorhouse appropriates the role of a "house," but provides a house bereft of stability. The poorhouse is more accurately considered a space of transience—a waiting room before death, and in the case of "The Mother," a place of temporary incarceration.

The poorhouses that punctuated the Irish landscape are more akin to scars or sites of wounds on the body politic than they are to houses. In addition, they end as ruins—ruins that betray the manifold traumas and divisions enacted across, and because of, that same terrain. In explicitly Gothic terms, McCabe's "poorhouse" assumes uncanny qualities; it becomes another location of the Gothic *unheimlich*.[34] In the poorhouse past, present, and future convene in a space outside of linear temporality. In Gothic fashion, the space of the poorhouse is a tear in the fabric of conventional narrative history. It reneges on the role of a rooted homeliness. In this sense the building becomes a resonant figuration in McCabe's narrative and historical project.

And yet, the poorhouse does not have to be a symbolic space of cultural death. It need not necessarily be the testimony of a culture's decline, but can be viewed, in Kevin Whelan's terms, as a "mausoleum of memory."[35] The edificial record of its function and existence that survives in poorhouse ruins will house the dead, but remembered, voices of its erstwhile inmates. The poorhouse—as well as the ruined cottages in McCabe's narrative—are not necessarily denuded

33. Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (1959; Boston: Beacon Press 1994), p. 17.

34. See especially Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

35. Kevin Whelan, "Reading the Ruins: The Presence of Absence in the Irish Landscape," in *Surveying Ireland's Past: Multidisciplinary Essays in Honour of Anngret Simms*, ed. Howard B. Clarke, Jacinta Prunty, and Mark Hennessy (Dublin: Geography Publications, 2004), p. 301.

of historical resonance toward the future. They partake of a memorial force that, as Whelan observes, is a political, even utopian cohesive within the memorial structures of the national community: "Ruins signified the right to a remembered presence, to visibility and voice, not silence and absence."[36]

McCabe's allegorization is, in fact, a fractured allegory, as the text is composed of four separate testimonies; yet, this splintered narrative serves to reinforce the subversive representational purchase of the allegorization itself. In *Tales from the Poorhouse*, McCabe mines partial narratives from the lost voices of Ireland's famine experience. The result is a powerful political commentary that disinters the forgotten dead.

OXFORD BROOKES UNIVERSITY
eflannery@brookes.ac.uk

35. Whelan, p. 311.