

‘Tendency-Wit: The Cultural Unconscious of the Celtic Tiger in the Writings of Paul Howard

Books, education, learning, these things have their place in the life of young men, of course. But not in yours. Because you are an élite ... Many of you will go on to play rugby for clubs and form new alliances. A good number of you will meet a fellow at your new club who will get you a highly paid, yet unfulfilling, job that requires you to wear a suit – perhaps in a bank or some other such financial institution – where you’ll open envelopes for fifty or sixty thousand pounds a year. Others will discover that the inability to spell the word lager is no hindrance to getting a job as a rep for a major brewing company if they happen to sponsor your team. Some of you will go on to manage your father’s business. (Howard 2004: 159-60)

These words were spoken by Father Denis Fehily, a character in *The Miseducation Years* by Paul Howard, one of a series of books featuring the adventures of an upper-middle class character called Ross O’Carroll-Kelly. Fehily is the headmaster of the fictional Castlerock College, an exclusive private Catholic school on the (affluent) south side of Dublin, and he makes it very clear that he is speaking to members of a socio-cultural elite. He appears in a number of the books in the series, all of which are supposedly dictated by the fictional main character, Ross, to the author, Paul Howard. This pseudo-confessional mode is relevant in the context of this reading of the books as evocative of the Celtic Tiger.

There are eight books in the series. *The Miseducation Years* (Howard 2004) describes Ross’s last two years at Castlerock College and his Leinster Senior Cup victory. *The Teenage Dirtbag Years* (Howard 2003a) sees Ross in his first year in a sports management course in UCD. *The Orange Mocha-Chip Frappuccino Years* (Howard 2003b) shows us Ross leaving home and working for his friend J.P.’s father as an estate agent. *PS, I Scored The Bridesmaids* (Howard 2005) deals with his marriage to his long-term ‘portner’, Sorcha. *Should Have Got Off at Sydney Parade* (Howard 2006a) deals with the birth of Ross and Sorcha’s daughter, Honor, and Ross’s participation in his new nightclub, Lillie’s Bordello; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nightdress* (Howard 2006b) tells of Ross’s discovery that he has an eight year-old son called Ronan, living in the North side; *This Champagne*

Mojito is the Last Thing I Own (Howard 2008a) deals with his fall from grace as his father goes to prison and Ross is forced to take up paid work, while Sorcha finally leaves him. There are numerous intertextual references throughout the books, including the titles, with reference *The Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, *Teenage Dirtbag*, *Adrian Mole: The Cappuccino Years*, *PS, I Love You* and *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* respectively. The latest book in the series is called *Mr S and the Secrets of Andorra's Box*, and deals with his new job as the rugby coach of the Andorran national team and also with his attempts to cope with separation from Sorcha and Honor. The latest book, *NAMA Mia* (Howard 2011), conflates the National Asset Management Agency and the Abba song 'Mama Mia'.

The characters speak in a specific idiolect. The writing is phonetic, as the spelling attempts to mirror the Southside Dublin accent that is spoken by practically all of the main characters. Thus the vowel changes stress the pronunciation so we get 'orm' for 'arm' and 'hort' for 'heart', as well as the rhyming slang: 'jo' is a taxi ('jo maxi' - an Irish television programme); 'chicken's neck' is a cheque; 'jack' is the story (jackanory), and 'top tens', which stands for a woman's breasts (top ten hits) (Howard 2008b). Allied to this is the punctuation of almost every fourth sentence with 'roysh', and acronyms like 'TMI' (too much information), and one begins to get the feel for the discourse of these books. Through this phonetic spelling, he is able to isolate this different form of language by showing how the vowel sounds of normative English have been shifted in the language of these people.

The humour is pervasive and works on a number of levels, with some stock comic characters. Rugby dominates the books, with Ross's full name being Ross Kyle Gibson McBride O'Carroll-Kelly, a name encompassing some of the greatest Irish rugby players (Jackie Kyle, Mike Gibson and Willie John McBride). Ross is sexist, a snob, politically incorrect, extremely vain, insensitive to the feelings of others, easily duped and self-obsessed – but Howard makes us actually like him by taking the reader into Ross's confidence.

Generically, the style is that of the first person fallible narrator, and the technique of all of the books is to use the voice of the narrator to undercut himself. One can see traces of the work of Brett Easton Ellis, specifically in terms of the attitudes of a financial elite to those outside that elite world.

Howard's work is immensely popular, and has not been the subject of a lot of academic criticism, being strongly aligned to popular culture as opposed to high culture. As Pierre Bourdieu has noted, 'taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier' (Bourdieu, 1984: 6), so possibly his critique of the Celtic Tiger is a little too close to the bone for those academics and reviewers who were part of the entire process. I would argue that the whole idea of high culture is one in need of interrogation. In the first place, any system or structure is not monadic in that it exists and operates differentially—for there to be a system of high culture there must be one of low culture (and the adjective "low" is the technically correct term in this context - as it is the binary opposite of "high" - but it has been attenuated for the purposes of political correctness into "popular"). As Bourdieu has noted, each position in the field of high culture, or in a particular canonical system, 'receives its distinctive value from its negative relationship with the co-existent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determine it by delimiting it' (Bourdieu, 1993: 30).

As is argued elsewhere in this book, high cultural representations of the Celtic Tiger have been quite rare, and Howard's work is one of the very few sustained representations of this period in fiction. I would suggest that is through such fictional representations that the real of this period can be accessed. Humour, according to Sigmund Freud, can be 'purposive', and he goes on to define this purposivity in terms of its 'tendency' to run 'the risk of ruffling people who do not wish to hear it' (Freud 1922: 128). Howard's work is an example of such tendency wit. Even the rhyming slang has an exclusionary quality to it, as those who are part of the elite group are aware of the rhyming significations, while those who are not part of this

group are not. In all of these books, it is very much a case of the elite talking to itself, with little room left for interaction with any other social class. Freud has noted that crises or trauma are often not signified in ordinary social discourse, they are often:

We designate that form by the term 'repression'. It is characterized by the fact that it excludes from consciousness certain former emotions and their products. We shall learn that tendency-wit itself is capable of liberating pleasure from sources that have undergone repression. (Freud 1922: 205-06)

I would suggest that the trauma of the whole financial collapse, the plummeting of property prices and the catastrophic level of debt in Ireland, was so intense that a collective emotional repression has taken place, which explains why there have been so few systemic consequences of this whole affair in Ireland. The inability to confront what has happened through discussion that might have led to understanding, and the ensuing imperative towards repetition of previous actions, has been the on-going trope of the Irish response to the crisis. Governments have repeated poor decisions of previous governments; bankers and auditors, who were unable to see what was happening, remain in power and still offer guidance despite their bad advice; the culture of secrecy, borrowed from the private-sector obsession with not allowing competitors access to information, is still operative, and perhaps most worryingly, the mistakes made by Japan in a parallel situation, which resulted in a moribund economy for some ten years, are being repeated in Ireland. For Freud, compulsive action is 'a repetition of what is forbidden' (Freud 1918: 86), and he sums it up in the terms 'fixation to the trauma' and 'repetition-compulsion'. He gives the examples of a man who has had a long forgotten mother-fixation in his childhood, but who will later 'seek for a woman on whom he can be dependent, who will feed and keep him', and of a girl who 'was seduced in early childhood' who may in later life 'orient her later sexual life towards provoking such assaults over and over again' (Freud 1939: 122). Such compulsive repetitions serve to mask our access to the root cause of the problem, to what I term the 'real'.

I am using this term in the sense coined by the French thinker Jacques Lacan, who notes that most of our dealings with others are conducted through language, or what he terms the symbolic order of meaning, where words signify according to accepted cultural codes. Due to legal and societal constrictions and strictures, information is very often not fully signified in the symbolic order. For Lacan, the ‘real’ refers to the world beyond language, to that which cannot be symbolised in language, it is ‘what resists symbolisation absolutely’ (Lacan 1991: 66); it is therefore that which is ‘without fissure’ (Lacan 1988: 97). It hints at what lies beneath the symbolic order, things that have an effect, but that cannot be said: ‘when discourse runs up against something, falters, and can go no further ... that’s the real’ (Lacan 1990: xxiii), and we saw this in the example cited in the introduction of the minutes of a meeting, the symbolic order, never accessing the real emotions of the actual meeting.

There has been a lot written about the period in terms of political and economic studies, but there has been no attempt to understand the underlying factors that allowed Ireland to feel that it had somehow inverted and destroyed the global economic models and that growth would be on-going. No-one has been charged with fraud or malfeasance; no-one lost their job or pension because of incompetence; and a certain socio-cultural elite (colloquially termed ‘the golden circle’) has remained insulated from the effects of the recession and the budgetary austerity. I would argue that this is due to what can be termed societal repression, as we have been very reluctant to face the ‘real’ of this crisis, and I will further argue that it is through Howard’s tendency-wit that we have some chance of understanding the cause of the failure of the Celtic Tiger.

To exemplify what I mean by the real in this context, I would like to look at the events of September 29th, 2008, the chief executives of Allied Irish Bank and Bank of Ireland looked for a bank guarantee from the Taoiseach Brian Cowen and the Finance Minister and a small group of advisers and higher civil servants. This guarantee was based on the idea that

the banks had a liquidity issue; hence it was granted. All deposits were guaranteed unconditionally, and this was sanctioned by an incorporeal cabinet meeting in the small hours of that morning, where the remainder of the cabinet were contacted by phone and confronted with a *fait accompli*. What this meant, in actuality, was that the taxpayers, the private citizens, the ordinary people of Ireland, under the guise of their own relatively small savings accounts of up to 100,000 being protected, in fact were now burdened with the debts of the banks, debts which, it would soon become clear, were cataclysmic.

The fact that senior bankers at best did not know the true state of the liquidity of their institutions on the night of September 29th, when they met the then Minister of Finance Brian Lenihan, and at worst blatantly lied about the state of the banks. They spoke of a liquidity crisis when in fact what was at issue was a solvency crisis. Regulation was non-existent, a point made in a report by Klaus Regling and Max Watson: ‘It appears clear, however, that bank governance and risk management were weak – in some cases disastrously so’ (Regling 2010: 6). Given the genre involved here, that of government report, and the generally nuanced and carefully-chosen symbolic tenor of such discourse, this is a damning indictment of the structures of management in private banks, specifically Allied Irish Bank, Bank of Ireland, and Anglo-Irish Bank. This final bank was the cause of much of the problem due to its reckless lending, which resulted in a €1.5 billion bail-out for it and full guarantees for all bondholders, secured and unsecured, in all banks. The result was national bankruptcy, the need for a financial bailout from Europe, and a rise in unemployment to some 400,000 people. Four to five years later, the Irish public sphere is still shell-shocked. In the light of this behaviour, Alain Badiou’s gnomic remark that ‘the State does not think’ (Badiou 2005: 87) becomes clearer. By this he means that the state seldom has a philosophy; instead it has a pragmatic system through which it enacts the necessary performatives which make it a state. The symbolic order of the state, unwilling to face the traumatic consequences of this

catastrophe, resorts to repetition, but Lacan says that ‘what is refused in the symbolic order re-emerges in the real’ (Lacan 1993: 13).

In terms of accessing the real of what has happened in Irish society over the period of the Celtic Tiger, we do not say that the bankers involved in the infamous bank guarantee are liars and cheats who have conspired through stupidity and greed to destroy an economy. Howard, however, cuts to the quick as, when it is revealed that there is ‘a hundred grand missing’ from Ross and Sorcha’s current account, it is Ross who says ‘I, er...well, I bought a couple of apartments. In Bulgaria’ (Howard 2008a: 219). Here the casual ease with which property, the ultimate commodity fetish of a certain class of people in the Celtic Tiger, is bought encapsulates more than any government report, the real of this time.

We do not point to the stupidity of the sovereign taking on the private debt of speculators and capitalists. Instead, the symbolic order chooses its words far more carefully. So in a reply to a government committee, the chief executive of the National Asset Management Agency, which was set up to manage grossly over-valued property whose mortgage debts could not be paid, said that: ‘the information given by banks did not turn out to be the reality’:

McDonagh chose his words carefully. He did not call the banks liars or cheats – he said that ‘a lack of awareness and denial ... was prevalent’ – but the implication was clear: Ireland’s bankers, who remain in business because the State saved them from collapse, have lied to the government and its agencies from the very beginning of this financial crisis and they have kept lying all the way through. (Ruddock 2010)

The real of the situation is only addressed by the reporter, Alan Ruddock, who sees it as implied. The real questions arising – why are the Irish people paying for the bankers folly?; why are people who lied to the government and NAMA not in jail?; why are many of the same people on the boards of the banks, on whose watch these events took place, still on the same boards four years later?; why has it taken so long to bring charges of fraud against a very small number of banking executives?; why has our society been so passive in its

acceptance of all of this, and why has there been no understanding of how all of this happened? – have not been addressed.

I would suggest that this is because the ‘real’ of the situation has never been accessed. It is resistant to explanation, but there are ways that it can be accessed ‘in the symbolic order, the empty spaces are as signifying as the full ones’ (Lacan 2006: 327), and there are instances where:

the signifier—which has fallen silent in the subject—first makes a glimmer of signification spring forth at the surface of the real, and then causes the real to become illuminated with a flash projected from below its underpinning of nothingness. (Lacan 2006: 468)

I think that the novels by Paul Howard are just such a glimmer of signification. The lack of regulation that was so formally referred to in the Regling and Watson report, and also in the comments by Brendan McDonagh, speak to a sense of an elite at work in the Irish financial and political spheres. What was lacking was any sense of responsibility to the future and to the Irish state. The responsibility of the bankers on the night of the bank guarantee was to themselves and to their organisation; the same was true of the developers and of the government, who gave a guarantee which included all bondholders and all creditors. Their responsibility was to the elite figures of global capital as opposed to the people who elected them. Private debt, incurred by venture capitalists and senior debt and bondholders has been transferred to the public, and the present Fine Gael-Labour Government, who decried this guarantee in opposition, promptly renewed it in government: another example of repetition compulsion. There is a strong sense of an elite ensuring that errors of other members of that elite are borne by the rest of the population, and there is no major difference between either government in terms of action (or one might say inaction) on ensuring that people who ventured their capital in the hopes of profit, should now take responsibility for their losses: the colloquial terms for this being ‘burning the bondholders’. Again, this sense of disbelief

that such a catastrophe can happen is captured in a scene where Ross discovers that his father, Charles, is about to go bankrupt:

My body just goes totally numb – and we’re talking totally. It’s in my old man’s name – my BMW Z4, my beautiful, black BMW Z4...
Hennessy nods, like he understands what I’m going through here. Then he goes, ‘I have to ask you for the keys. I’m supposed to surrender them today...’
As I’m handing them over, all I can think to say is, ‘Dude, what the fuck am I going to do for, like, money?’ and Hennessy’s like, ‘I’m sorry if this sounds a touch old-fashioned, but have you considered working?’
I sink back into the seat and go, ‘Fuck, things really are that bad.’ (Howard 2008a: 220)

Work, like responsibility, or a sense of ownership of debt, is very much for other people, who are seen as like exhibits or a different form of life. Thus why Ross visits his father in Mountjoy Jail, he speaks of the people he sees like beings from another planet. Mountjoy is ‘like the Ilac Centre, but with fucking bors on the windows. We’re talking Adidas everything and Lizzy Duke Bling and it hums of, I don’t know, defeat – defeat and desperation and Lynx’ (Howard, 2007: 5). These are the people who belong in prison, not the likes of Charles, or Sean Fitzpatrick, or the CEOs of banks who lied to the government about the liquidity and solvency of their banks. In a radio interview on RTE before the details of Anglo Irish bank were released, Fitzpatrick stated that ‘Anglo-Irish Bank is a very well-capitalised bank’ (www.youtube.com/watch?v=kD6jobUqyjg), and on 29th September 2008 Merrill Lynch, advisors to the Irish government said that ‘all the Irish banks were well-capitalised’ (<http://www.rte.ie/news/2010/0716/banks.html>). Yet these people were all being paid huge salaries for their expertise, yet have suffered no consequences for the appalling nature of that advice and financial stewardship.

Such a level of societal dysfunction is frightening, as generally there is a sense that people who are in charge of political and financial systems are paid their very large salaries because they are competent; to face the fact that they are not, and that the people who might

replace them are similarly incompetent, is a truly appalling vista, and this is why it is repressed. In terms of repression, Freud has made the point that:

Owing to the repression brought about by civilization many primary pleasures are now disapproved by the censor and lost. But the human psyche finds renunciation very difficult; hence we discover that tendency-wit furnishes us with a means to make the renunciation retrogressive and thus to regain what has been lost. When we laugh over a delicately obscene witticism, we laugh at the identical thing which causes laughter in the ill-bred man when he hears a coarse, obscene joke. (Freud 1922: 147)

Humour, then, according to Freud, is one way of accessing the real which has been masked by repetition and avoidance. In terms of the real of the situation, we are back in the dressing room of *The Miseducation Years*, where the notion of elite who will be forever cossetted from the consequences of their actions is vividly set out across the series. It is often through fiction that the real is accessed, and ‘the true aims at the real’ (Lacan 1998: 91), and I would argue that it is by looking at events through the fictive lens that aspects of the real will become clear. Before we look at the fiction, it is salutary to look at the fact that, before he resigned, and keeping in mind the questionable financial practices that were to be found in Anglo-Irish bank, the CEO, Sean Fitzpatrick, called, in 2008, for the government to ‘cut services, cut wages, and increase “competitiveness”’ (Kerrigan 2010). In other words, despite the fact that his bank would soon be a causal factor in the collapse of the Irish economy, he was suggesting that the best possible reaction to any financial downturn would be to punish those on lower incomes.

Ironically, or perhaps not, this is exactly what the government did, introducing swinging budget cuts in the Irish economy in successive budgets, while ensuring that the banks were fully capitalised and paying back all of the senior and junior bondholders. While not overtly stated, what happened here is precisely the sense of loyalty to an elite group that was spelled out by Father Fehily at the beginning of this chapter. This is the real parallel of Paul Howard’s fictive universe, where the focus is on the affluent inhabitants of Dublin 4,

who speak a very different language to the ordinary Irish people, and whose loyalty is very much to their own class as opposed to the general public sphere. Through a very distinct use of a phonetic spelling, Howard is able to catch this through the different idiolect spoken by these affluent southsiders.

The harsh-sounding ‘ar’ sound is softened to become ‘or’. Thus, harsh becomes horsh. Arts is Orts. The bar is the bor. The car is the cor. The *Star* is a newspaper read by poor people. (Howard 2008a: 71)

While this is humorous in terms of delineating a specific upper middle class accent, it is another signifier of an elite group with its own identifying matrices. The accent, of course, is one such matrix. The insertion of phatic markers in speech is another: so many of Ross’s sentences are concluded with the term ‘roysh’, which is a phonetic version of ‘right’, a term which is often used as a modifier, but which also acts as a badge of identity of the elite cited at the beginning of this chapter. Ross is a prototype of this community; he has been brought up in affluence, and is devastated when his father loses everything after being convicted of tax-fraud: ‘the money, the cars, the boat, the golf-club membership, the apartments in Villamoura, the box at Leopardstown’ (Howard 2008a: 219). He is a synecdoche of a social class of privately-educated, affluent, and responsible only to its own idea of itself. His attitude to money is very much that of a certain social elite in the days of the Celtic Tiger:

I call into the old pair’s gaff, though I really don’t know why I focking bothered. Actually, I do. My cor insurance is due, roysh, and there’s no way I’m paying three Ks out of my own pocket for it. But I still called to see them, roysh, yet all the old man wants to know about is, like, how Sorcha is and how’s that grandchild of theirs coming along. (Howard 2006a: 25)

Ross sees his parents, despite his low opinion of them, as an unending source of money. He only puts up with his father’s conversation here in order to get him to write a cheque for him, and is appalled that his father has changed the combination of the family safe. We find out that this is because:

‘€5,000 went missing from that very safe a month ago.’ I’m like, ‘It didn’t go missing. I took it,’ and he stops mid-dial, suddenly looking all worried, puts the phone down and goes, ‘You took it? But why?’ and I’m there, ‘Does it matter?’ and he’s like, ‘Oh, I, em, suppose not.’ (Howard 2006a: 27)

It transpires that Fionnuala, Ross’s mother, had blamed their Italian cleaning girl, Maria, for stealing the money and she was subsequently sacked, with Charles making some comments on the ‘Italians and their lack of moral fibre. Changing sides in wars and so forth...’ (Howard 2006a: 27).

The interesting response from both father and son to this treatment of an innocent person is paradigmatic of the attitude that has seldom been voiced in the literature of the Celtic Tiger. Ross is thinking about his need for a new phone, as he has had his present one for ‘three months now’ (Howard 2006a: 27), while Charles is equally cavalier:

‘still, hey ho, I’m sure she’d have stolen something eventually,’ and he picks up the phone again and dials a number as he’s saying this, roysh, he whips open his drawer, pulls out his chequebook and writes me a chicken’s neck for four Ks, no questions asked, after leaving me standing there, listening to his crap for, like, twenty minutes. So I grab it off him, give him the finger and, like, get the fock out of there. (Howard 2006a: 28)

This tendency-wit cuts to the real of the social unconscious of the Celtic Tiger. Banks who have been bailed out by the taxpayer have routinely flouted the pay cap as senior executives are given packages beyond the €500,000 limit set by the government. However, the same government is hiring advisers whose own salaries breach the government-imposed pay cap of €90,000. In a recent cost-cutting move, the Irish health service executive (HSE) suggested cutting home help and home-carer allowances, while consultants earn salaries of some €220,000. Rather than burning the bondholders, the current government are merely repeating the golden circle system of their predecessors, cutting the weak and the vulnerable and hoping that things will get better. The attitude of the recession-proof elite here is best encapsulated by the ‘hey ho’ of Charles, as opposed to a number of government reports,

expert groups, position papers and policy documents. Howard describes the real of this cultural elite in a mock-travel guide to south Dublin:

Bathed by the warm currents of the Gulf Stream and the North Atlantic Drift, South Dublin has a hot, humid climate, not unlike that of the Cayman Islands, with whom Southsiders share a natural affinity. Add in the 365 days of guaranteed sunshine per year and it's not difficult to see why houses here are changing hands for the equivalent of the GNP of a small, backward country, such as Albania, Chad... or the rest of Ireland. South Dublin is still technically part of the Irish Republic, although to all intents and purposes it is a sovereign state unto itself, with its own language, rituals and customs. Prosperity has accelerated the progress towards full secession, which, it is predicted, could take place before the year 2020. South Dublin is not only the cradle of the Celtic Tiger, it is also a land rich in cultural diversity, where barristers live next door to stockbrokers, where judges live next live next door to stockbrokers, where judges live next door to businessmen and where heart surgeons live side by side with brain surgeons (Howard 2008b: 11)

Here the satire offers access to the 'real' of the socio-cultural elite in Ireland. This sense of entitlement that is never made overt in state or organisational documents is clear here. Like the earlier comment about the *The Star* being a 'newspaper read by poor people' (Howard 2008a: 71), there is a sense that a social contract has been torn up is reinforced in terms of South Dublin being seen as a sovereign state in itself. Any sense of a community is non-existent and this has been clear in the utterances of the elite. Sean Fitzpatrick, widely seen as one of the architects of the financial meltdown, when asked about how Ireland could cope better with recession, 'called on the Government to reduce corporation tax and tackle the "sacred cow" of universal child benefit, State pensions and medical cards for the over-70s' (O'Brien 2008). Fitzpatrick clearly lost his sense of irony along with everything else in the debacle of Anglo-Irish Bank, but his comments offer a rare glimpse into the mindset of the people at the very top of the Irish financial system. Like Ross and Charles, it is always someone else's fault, and someone else should take the blame and the pain. That someone whose reckless financial practices had contributed to ruin the country and ultimately bring about a loss of sovereignty should seek to claw back the "sacred cow" of child benefit and remove benefits from single mothers, reinforces my point. The same can be said of the

recently mooted cut to home care services while consultants' fees remain untouched, or the complete inability of this, and previous governments, to levy any form of wealth tax. While golden circles gambled money and lost, it is the people at the bottom of the *socius* who bear the brunt of the suffering, though, of course, this is never stated in government documents, which always talk about sharing the burden equally. The mantra 'we all partied' during the Celtic Tiger is used to make people feel that austerity is the correct policy, though it is those in poorer areas who bear the brunt of these policies.

In this respect, the fictive social comments of Charles O'Carroll-Kelly enunciate the real through their tendency-wit:

'On teenage mothers – they should be forcibly sterilized to ensure they don't produce any further burdens on the State,' and of course that gets a big laugh, even from me, because we all remember him saying that.

'On the National Lottery – an ingenious way of giving poor people dole money and then taking it back from them again. On heroin – God's way of culling the package holiday classes...

'On the hospital crisis – if these so-called patients can afford cigarettes, scratch-cards and Sky Television, they can afford private health insurance. What's wrong with sleeping on a hospital trolley anyway? Think of it as a bed with wheels...'

'On Travellers – I don't know why they call them Travellers. The ones on the Sandyford Road have been there for fourteen years. They never travel anywhere.'

'On the Hill of Tara – why is something worth keeping just because it's old? If I'd adopted the same attitude to my Lexus GS 430, well, then I would never have driven the Lexus IS 300. And you can quote me on that...' (Howard 2008a: 21)

In terms of tendency-wit, there would seem to be very little difference between the fictive Charles, and the all too real Sean Fitzpatrick. Charles gives voice to a real that is generally occluded in the symbolic order of the cultural elite; he is voicing an aspect of the real of the Celtic Tiger *mentalité*, namely the 'withering away of the Hegelian-Durkheimian view of the state as a collective authority with a responsibility to act as the collective will and consciousness, and a duty to make decisions in keeping with the general interest and contribute to promoting greater solidarity' (Bourdieu, 2005: 11).

Freud has noted that ‘the realm of jokes has no boundaries’ (Freud 1920: 199), and it is in humour that the repressed ‘Real’ of the Celtic Tiger can be made to return. Like dreams, jokes use the same techniques of condensation, indirect representation, and displacement. But unlike dreams, which are unintelligible, asocial, and opaque in terms of motivation, joking is highly social, quickly understood, and explicitly exposes the underlying thought in defiance of accepted modes of conscious expression. The real of the Celtic Tiger was a fracturing of the social contract and a sense of class-based elites who were free from the consequences of their actions. In a country where home help is cut while consultants are paid obscene levels of salary; where governments repeat the errors of the past and break their own austerity-driven pay ceilings; where the real is better expressed by the opening words of Fr Denis Fehily than by any of these compulsive repetitions.

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