

Patrick McCabe: “Romantic Ireland’s Dead and Gone”

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Patrick McCabe is unique among contemporary Irish fiction writers. John Banville, in his blurb for *Winterwood*, the author’s most recent novel, calls him “a true original”, and he is quite right to do so. McCabe came to prominence as a writer in 1992 with the publication of his extraordinarily arresting novel *The Butcher Boy*, which he adapted for the stage under the title of *Frank Pig Says Hello* and which was turned into a well-received film by Neil Jordan. *The Butcher Boy* marked his third published attempt at serious fiction, after *Music on Clinton Street* (1986) and *Carn* (1989). Two of the thematic concerns that he has explored in these and other works are especially noteworthy. One is the effect of the modern world on rural Ireland, or, put differently, social changes in Ireland since the 1960s; the other is the fathoming of abnormal mental states, which McCabe achieves with uncanny brilliance. The incontestable strongpoint of his narrative art is the immediacy and intensity of the narrative voices employed in the majority of his books, for example in *The Butcher Boy*, *The Dead School* (1995), *Breakfast on Pluto* (1998), *Emerald Germs of Ireland* (2001) and now *Winterwood*.

Almost single-handedly, McCabe has invigorated the Anglo-Irish Gothic tradition in fiction, which dates back to Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Bram Stoker *et al.*, and which during the first half of the twentieth century had, relatively speaking, fallen into disuse – a tradition said by Declan Kiberd to have “encouraged a besieged Protestant elite to dramatize its fears and phobias in a climate of inexorable political decline” (383). This is a rather incontestable contention and it doesn’t apply to McCabe, who is not a member of that elite at all. He has, furthermore, added priceless specimens to the plenteous array of unreliable narrators who have haunted twentieth-century fiction in particular, and who were first made the object of serious narratorial consideration by Wayne C. Booth in *Rhetoric of Fiction* (1961).

McCabe’s *œuvre* to date is too extensive to be treated in full within the space available here. Thus, preference must be given to some of his books at the expense of others. Already in *Music on Clinton Street*, McCabe skilfully contrasts the past and the present, while at the same time evoking powerful portraits of rural Ireland throughout the century. Basically a state-of-Ireland novel, *Music on Clinton Street* aims to examine a society in violent and bewildering transition, of the conflict of the static old order and the influx of transatlantic culture which transformed Ireland in the 1960s and 1970s. A

comparable interest informs *Winterwood*, significantly enough. *Carn* charts a couple of years in the history of the market town Carn, “half a mile from the Irish border”, focusing upon a handful of characters whose lives become intertwined. Josie Keenan, for instance, comes back after years of serving in bars and pleasing men on the flat of her back in England, whither she escaped after a man had made her pregnant; hallucinatory voices drive her to attempt suicide; however, the water is too cold and she fails to drown herself; later she is raped by a barman and finally burns to death in a house set on fire by an IRA man. One has to search long and hard in contemporary writing to find lives delineated with such empathy and in such a striking manner as in *Carn*. The narrative style is extremely impressive and the effect is sheer delight. Carn’s history is seen as a process of eternal recurrence – an Irish eternal recurrence, with violence and murder playing a disproportionate role.

The Butcher Boy has Francie Brady, now in an asylum for the criminally insane, tell of events that happened “twenty or thirty or forty years ago”, when he got involved with the Nugents, in particular Mrs Nugent, who called the Brady family “pigs”. Francie is the son of an alcoholic father and a mother who is in and out of the local mental hospital, “the garage” in Francie’s terms. The Nugents are ordinary, respectable people, or so it would seem; it is only in the narrator’s increasingly unhinged mind that they develop into despicable and punishable ogres. Francie’s only friend is Joe Purcell, whom he met one day when hacking at the ice on a big puddle with a lolly stick. One of the mean tricks the Nugents play on Francie, according to his warped reasoning, is that they wean Joe away from him and foster a relationship between Joe and their son, Philip. All Francie longs for is to go on living in a make-believe world of cowboys and hide-outs in the woods with Joe. But Joe, in the meantime, has grown up. He has discovered music and is a boarder at an expensive school in Bundoran, the very town where Francie’s parents spent their honeymoon in a guest-house in which his father used to sing “I dreamt that I dwelt in Marble halls”. All the alleged acts of humiliation and injustice take on excruciating proportions in Francie’s schizophrenic and paranoid mind, and in order that these haunting ghosts be laid to rest, Francie knows he must take the captive bolt pistol to Mrs Nugent. The heinous deed and its aftermath are played out against the backdrop of the Cuban Missile Crisis and much local ballyhoo about an apparition of Our Lady. The use of such socio-cultural details, possibly in order to lend wider frame of reference (Irish-town-life-in-the-sixties fashion) to the Francie story, jar the reader a bit; or rather they fail to make full sense.

The Butcher Boy offers a deeply moving, wholly devastating account of loneliness, jealousy, evil and madness. It is utterly astonishing how McCabe has succeeded in penetrating the deranged mind of his psychopathic narrator. What at first seems the rather innocent logic of a difficult, emotionally crippled child surreptitiously develops into the fiendish, feverish ravings of a maniac. One of the main questions that the narrative raises is this: why does Francie Brady’s mind disintegrate? Does Francie become a psychopath, does he go insane, for hereditary reasons? After all, his mother is

in and out of “the garage”, being psychologically unstable. Or does McCabe put the blame for Francie’s decline on social causes? McCabe seems to come down in favour of certain social causes in small-town Ireland in the 1960s. During the difficult period, or in the no-man’s land between adolescence and manhood, Francie failed to discover his identity, failed to find his own voice. As a result, his world, to some extent, degenerated into ceaseless role-playing – local roles, such as the Bogman and Francie Brady Not a Bad Bastard Any More, and more exotic roles gleaned from popular culture, such as Algernon Carruthers and various Hollywood heroes. He quotes all, but is none of these characters. Francie tries to make all the disparate voices battling in his head conform to some kind of coherent narrative that will explain how things got so bad. But all he is able to attain is a phantasmagoric jumble of nightmarish impressions towards the end of the novel, reminiscent of the ‘Nighttown’ section in *Ulysses*. And so he takes the captive bolt pistol, or “the humane killer”, as the doc in the institution for the criminally insane calls it, to Mrs Nugent and kills her.

The Butcher Boy is less impressive as a so-called state-of-Ireland narrative, as some critics, for instance Gerry Smyth, are inclined to view it. Smyth discusses the book together with Roddy Doyle’s novels and Dermot Bolger’s *The Journey Home* as socio-cultural analyses of Ireland in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Social issues are no doubt addressed in *The Butcher Boy*, but the account is ill-equipped to diagnose social wrongs in small-town Ireland during the 1960 and 1970s for the simple reason that all that is offered is filtered through the bewildered, sick mind of a fiendishly unreliable narrator.

The Dead School is about two schoolmasters, Raphael Bell and Malachy Dudgeon, and how the twain met in St Anthony’s School, Dublin, where Raphael was headmaster, in the 1970s. Two themes that run throughout the novel are the changing of traditional values during the time in question and the dying of love. Raphael grew up as a model child, head altar boy, top scholar dripping over himself with brains in St Patrick’s Teacher Training College, Drumcondra. His father was killed by the Black and Tans, “God Save Ireland!”. He is offered the post as headmaster of St Anthony’s and marries the beautiful Nessa Conroy, “Macushla!” Their son is stillborn. Malachy is less fortunate. His youth was overshadowed by the fact that his mother carried on an affair with a cowman; his father knew and in the end drowned himself. Love went into the grave for Malachy. On top of that, he was bullied by older boys from early on. Then he strikes up a relationship with a woman, Marion, who has had an abortion. In his job at St Anthony’s, he proves a sorry failure, not measuring up to Bell’s standards.

There are two things about *The Dead School* that are most impressive. One is the narrative voice, which tells the intertwining stories of Malachy and Raphael with exceptional vividness and immediacy. The other is the manner in which McCabe manages to render the process of Bell’s growing insanity after he has handed in his resignation and imagines he is still teaching in the dead school of his own house, as well as the way in which the set-upon Malachy succumbs to drink and drugs in London. All this happens

in the excellent last third of the book. Good Old Ireland, the Ireland as represented by “The Walton Programme” on radio, with its heritage of the “songs our fathers loved”, is gone for ever. One of the reasons for Bell’s decline is that he feels he is fighting a losing battle against the likes of one Terry Krash and his radio and TV shows on which the quality of brass is brazenly discussed. Additionally, there are women such as Marion who have had abortions and carry condoms around with them and try to impose their newfangled ideas on the running of his school. Romantic Ireland is dead and gone, indeed.

Breakfast on Pluto shares a number of features with the earlier *The Butcher Boy*. The most conspicuous of these is the narrative voice, which, in its idiosyncrasy and immediacy, recalls Francie Brady’s voice. Moreover, Patrick ‘Pussy’ Braden, resplendent in housecoat and headscarf, sits in Kilburn, writing his story “The Life and Times of Patrick Braden”, for Dr Terence, his elusive psychiatrist, bringing to light the truth behind his life in 1970s Ireland and the chaos of his days in a country, Ireland, and a city, London, filled with violence and tragedy. Like Francie, Patrick essentially recounts the events in his life to establish sense and meaning. The root cause of the slings and arrows of Pussy’s outrageous fortune is lack of love and a failing sense of belonging or home.

Sweetie-pie Patrick’s predicament unfolds against the background of political and sectarian violence, especially early 1970s IRA violence. Thus the jubilee commemoration in 1966 of the 1916 Rising is evoked. On another occasion, thirteen people are reported shot dead by the parachute regiment in Derry. We are reminded of Bloody Sunday, of course. A boy afflicted with Down’s Syndrome is shot during the Northern Ireland troubles. Patrick’s friend Irwin Kerr, who becomes an IRA activist, is murdered for allegedly having turned informer. Charlie, who loves him, suffers a breakdown as a consequence and takes to drink. A soon-to-be-married man is abducted, tortured and eventually killed by terrorists. A bomb goes off in a restaurant and another one in a disco pub. Discord, hatred – the opposite of love, as Leopold Bloom knew – violence and alienation loom large. Even the helpful psychiatrist, Dr Terence, eventually betrays Patrick by disappearing from the scene. And in the midst of all, Patrick ‘Pussy’ Braden is hankering after a family, love, and affection and searching for familial security.

Patrick’s account in his “Life and Times...” is a cry for help, affection and love as well as a document of alienation. In compositional terms, its short chapters hopscotch about somewhat, but then Dr Terence told Patrick to write it all down “[j]ust as it comes to you”. The music of the 1960s and 1970s – including Don Partridge’s song “Breakfast on Pluto”, which was a UK chart hit in 1969 – with which the book is seasoned, adds some local colour, for what that is worth. Above all, it contributes to that world of fantasy and make-believe into which Pussy Braden escapes from his unbearable, ashen existence.¹

Redmond Hatch, in *Winterwood*, tries to win a strange sort of freedom from a world that has uncannily got on top of him, or so he makes out, in the wood of the title,

as cold and unaccommodating as the term suggests. The novel is rather difficult to review, since so much depends for its effect upon each individual reader's discovering the ramifications of the plot for themselves. Going into too much detail would end in giving too much away, thus killing the joy of immersing oneself in what is no doubt a superb narrative performance. So let us confine ourselves to simply remarking this much: when Redmond Hatch, in the autumn of 1981, returns home to Slievenageeha to do an article on folklore and changing ways in Ireland for his paper, the *Leinster News*, he falls under the spell of Ned Strange, "Auld Pappie – the wild and woolly rascal from the hills" (p. 5), a fiddler and an inexhaustible font of old-time stories. He is, in short, an embodiment of the authentic spirit of heritage and tradition, of Romantic Ireland. The mothers send their children to Ned – "he is so terrific with the kids" – to be coached in music and folklore. Step by step it transpires (or so it would seem, for the accounts are quite contradictory and whether we can trust Redmond is all but certain) that Ned killed the woman he loved because she was having an affair with another man. He also killed a boy, "the bestest friend of Ned", for which he was arrested; during the arrest he hanged himself in a shower cubicle. Redmond is torn between loathing and sympathy for Ned. For a time, he even feels physically haunted by Ned's ghost. Meantime Redmond gets married himself and has a daughter, but before long he catches his wife in bed with another man. The marriage dissolves, and Redmond assumes a new identity and leads a new successful life in Dublin with a gorgeous American woman. That is to say: he does so after taking his child to winterwood. Later his wife will follow. The idea of winterwood, where the snow princess lives, was derived by Redmond and his daughter from TV shows for children, such as *My Little Pony* and *The Snowman*, which the girl loved.

All this and a good deal more develops against the backdrop of a changing Ireland. From Ned, Redmond learns about a proposed motorway near Slievenageeha. The Temple Bar area is developing into the epicentre of Dublin's hedonistic empire. George Bush reigns supreme in the White House. Lidl has conquered the market in Ireland. Such details are there to suggest that the world is in a state of flux – constantly changing; an old, almost ancient, way of life may appear to be vanishing in front of our very eyes. But the anarchic impulses of men and women do stay the same. "Things now is the same as a thousand year ago", Ned Strange has it, and so the novel suggests.

Something seems not quite right with the chronology of events in the second half of the book. But then Redmond Hatch jumps about in his account and is a devil of an unreliable narrator. What McCabe achieves admirably is the way in which the Ned skein and the Redmond skein are stealthily intertwined in order for *Winterwood* to make its trenchant point. Not least because of that, Patrick McCabe is unique.

Note

- 1 Eccentricity is all very fine, but there are limits, and McCabe went over them in his collection of stories *Mondo Desperado* and his penultimate novel, *Emerald Germs of Ireland*. The former

offers whimsical goings-on in Barntrosa, a whacky Irish backwater rife with bitter shut-ins, nefarious schoolboys, cheeky prostitutes, lesbian nurses and Declan Coyningham with an air hose inserted „snugly between his sad but acceptant buttocks”. One story stands out, „the Valley of the Flying Jennets”, about the monsters in the hills, in which McCabe is little short of out-Poeing Poe. The story, in *Emerald Germs*, of Pat McNab, forty-five years old, would-be ‚Cleaner’ or ‚Regulator’ and possibly serial killer, which covers Pat’s post-matricide years is so over the top that over the top is not the term.

Works Cited

McCabe, Patrick, *Winterwood*. London: Picador, 2006.

Kiberd, Declan, *Irish Classics*. London: Granta, 2000.